

JUBILEE MASS OF THANKSGIVING

DIVINE WORD SEMINARY

BAY ST. LOUIS, MS

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“HE CAME TO NAZARETH WHERE HE HAD BEEN REARED AND ENTERING THE SYNAGOGUE ON THE SABBATH AS HE WAS IN THE HABIT OF DOING, HE STOOD UP TO DO THE READING. WHEN THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH WAS HANDED TO HIM, HE UNROLLED THE SCROLL AND FOUND THE PASSAGE WHERE IT WAS WRITTEN: ‘THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE THE LORD HAS ANOINTED ME’..... ROLLING UP THE SCROLL HE GAVE IT BACK TO THE ASSISTANT AND SAT DOWN..... HE BEGAN BY SAYING TO THEM, ‘TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE PASSAGE IS FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING.’” (LUKE 4: 16-17, 20-21)

Jubilarians, Brothers,

As one who is celebrating the 50th anniversary of priesthood, the quote of Jesus from the prophet Isaiah is significant and meaningful:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me (upon us), because the Lord has anointed me (us). These words are with me as we celebrate with our

jubilarians. We celebrate 60 and 50 years of dedicated service to the Lord as priest-servants of the Lord, 65 and 25 years in vowed living within the charism of the Divine Word missionaries. We celebrate 65 and 60, 50 and 25 years of assignments and appointments in service to the Lord within and outside of this religious community we call Society of the Divine Word, 65 and 60, 50 and 25 years of worship, of praise, of prayers, of calling on God's holy name for and with people, 65 and 60, 50 and 25 years of ministry and work, touching the lives of countless people through the sacraments and spiritual direction, through preaching and teaching, through education and formation! These years of priestly service and religious living are worth a celebration!! And, so, we salute and honor our jubilarians (Father Jerome LeDoux, Father Ray Jones –in absentia, Bishop Dominic Carmon, Father Don Murrin, Father Agustinus Seran and Father Francis Damoah).

One of the fascinating aspects of a silver or golden jubilee celebration is that we honor the jubilarians by looking back over the past years. We consider all the years spent in work and we say: **“Look at all the great things they have done and are doing!He was a missionary in ^{WEWAK} ~~Papua~~, New Guinea!He spent years working in the African American parishes in Chicago and St. Louis!He served in the Southern Province all of his religious life:... pastoring in parishes,.....or teaching in the seminary ...or institutes of higher**

studies..... Look at the buildings he built!..... Look at the programs he created..... Look at all the articles he has written or the talks he has given!..... He came from overseas to serve our people!”

All of these things we say, and more than I know about, but it is also a time when even jubilarians start looking back. And sometimes we hear such words as **“Years ago..... In my time..... I remember when.....”** These words are not bad in themselves because we need the experiences of the past to help us towards our future. But, in our present day, when so many things are happening both with the world and in the Church, we still need shepherds who are still guiding the flock to the greener pastures of life!

There is a story told of a great Shakespearean actor who would go around and fill auditoriums with people who were anxious to hear him recite famous Shakespearean passages. One night, as he gave his usual excellent performance, the people stood to give a standing ovation. As an encore, he read for them the 23rd psalm. The audience stood again and applauded.

As the place was quieting down, an elderly gentlewoman stood up at the back of the auditorium, started walking down the center aisle, waving to the orator on the platform. She walked right up to the orator and said to him: **“Sir, would you mind if I read that psalm?”** The orator was caught by surprise, but he said: **“Go ahead.”**

The elderly woman reached into her purse, pulled out her prayer book, and began to pray: **“Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In meadows of green grass, he lets me lie. To the waters of repose he leads me; there he revives my soul.”** She went on and prayed the entire psalm.

When she had finished, it was so quiet in the auditorium that one could hear a gentle sob and a murmur of prayer here and there. The peoples' hearts were deeply touched.

The orator was astonished and said to the little woman: **“I don't understand what you have done. I don't understand the reaction of the crowd. You didn't read that half as well as I did. You didn't read it with the right intonation, the right meter, etc. How do you account for the different reaction?”**

The woman looked at the orator and said: **“Well, if you really want to know; you know the psalm and I know the shepherd.”**

I guess we all want to be like this little woman. We all long to know the shepherd. And yet, most of the time we can look at our lives and can identify with the great Shakespearean actor. The Lord has given us talents. The Lord has given us gifts for which we are grateful. The Lord has anointed us, but if we do not know the Lord, the Shepherd, and if the Shepherd is not the source of power and strength, then these talents and these gifts have no power to bring

others to know the love of God; and our lives as religious and as disciples of Jesus have little effect on other people in bringing them to the Lord.

Reminisce with me for a while! On January 6, 1967, seven of us were ordained – anointed – on this very ground by Archbishop Philip Hannan of New Orleans. Because of the number, we were ordained in the new seminary gym – which is now a parking lot! We were excited that we were reaching the goal for which we had studied, had been formed and shaped – some of us beginning with 4 years in the minor seminary here in Bay St. Louis, 2 years of novitiate and 2 years of junior college in Conesus, NY, then 2 years of philosophy in Techny, IL and then 4 years of theology here in Bay St. Louis, where the retreat center is now located.

We were ordained and anointed at a time when the Church was facing challenges and changes, especially the conciliar renewals of the Second Vatican Council. We celebrated Mass with a mixture of Latin and English. We began facing the people for our Eucharistic liturgies. The implementation of the document on the Modern Church had an impact on our priestly life. There were challenging times for our priestly ministry – a time of exhilaration, of challenges, and at times confusion. Some asked: which was the correct route to go? What was the true vision of the Council? How was the vision to be made

practical for ordinary people? Some took gigantic leaps; others moved slowly.

And our Society was in this mix as well – with its Chapters to decide to whom would we proclaim the Word? How were we to insert the vision of the 2nd Vatican Council into our religious life and into our missions? We in the USA were accustomed to going out overseas to proclaim the Word. That’s what real missionaries did! We did not realize that the time was fast coming when we would be missioned to, and others would be coming from well-established churches and SVD communities to proclaim the Word here!

On that day of January 6, 1967, we were missionaries – sent to bring the Gospel to places in need of the Word of God – Mexico, Italy, the Southern Province and the Western Province. We were sent with our mission cross and with the prayer: **“May the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief vanish before the light of the Word and the Spirit of grace.”** I believe it has since changed.

But, has it? **“And rolling up the scroll, he (Jesus) gave it back to the assistant....** “and proceeded to tell the people that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him because HE had been anointed! He had been anointed! And why? **“.....to bring glad tidings to the poor... to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to**

let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Luke 4: 18-19).

Has this not been the work and ministry of our jubilarians for the past 65 and 50 and 25 years? Isn't this the mission of all of us as Divine Word missionaries – priests and brothers – in our missions today? Years ago, we spoke about the pagans and heathens, about tribes and “those” people, about race and slavery; today we speak about religious liberty, cultural diversity, immigration, violence and war.

Called to bring glad tidings to the lowly, how much bad news is heard more than good news today! Called to heal the broken-hearted, how much misery there is today! Called to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, how many still do not realize that they are captives or prisoners today! Called to announce a year of favor from the Lord, to announce that our God is a God of mercy and forgiveness, the voices are drowned out by anger!

But, despite the deep current of despair, the loneliness, isolation, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, or the sense of uselessness that fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world, we try to build communities of faith. We try to bring a spirituality that is God-centered. We try to

be prophetic witnesses in a sometimes unholy land, as we try to carve new wineskins for the new wine of our day!

We continue to proclaim the Good News, the Word of the living God. Because God's Word can heal the broken-hearted, can free the oppressed, can comfort the sorrowful. The Spirit of God has been with us because we have been anointed to carry God's Word everywhere: to believers and non-believers, to the alienated and the unchurched, to all who long for God. The Word of God has been the breath of our life, the groundwork of our speech, the rationale of our living. And we have done all these things not on our own, but as anointed disciples of the Lord, as committed members of the Society of the Divine Word.

Brother Jubilarians, we thank you for your dedicated years of service to Church and Society. We thank you for bringing glad tidings to the many whose lives you have touched over the years. We thank you for nurturing the growth of the Church by baptizing and nourishing with the Sacraments of life, healing the broken-hearted, sick and wounded and forgiving the sinners with the Sacraments of life, by blessing and anointing with the Sacraments of life. We thank you for being the prophetic witnesses by your lives, your words, and your examples. We thank you for being the face of Jesus to the poor and forgotten in and to our world. And most of all, we thank you for

being the giants on whose shoulders the Church and the members of the Society can continue to grow!

H Perry Stebbins, S.V.B.