

HOMILY

TWENTY-FIFTH EPISCOPAL ANNIVERSARY

OF

MOST REVEREND HAROLD ROBERT PERRY, S.V.D., D.D.

BY

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A few years ago a friend of mine told me that he was very leery of anniversary celebrations, especially anniversary celebrations commemorating long years of service in the priesthood. He was about to celebrate fifty years in the priesthood and twenty-five years in the episcopacy. He gave orders to the homilist that he would not stand for anyone getting up and telling a bunch of lies about all the great things he did. Then he reflected and said, "on the other hand, I don't want them to tell the truth either."

For several weeks, I, too, have been reflecting on what I would say today about my Friend Bishop Harold Perry since I really do not have any recollection about any lies, I am obliged to tell the truth especially since Bishop did not give me any orders. My reflections were really recollections about Bishop Perry. They go way back to 1947 when I first met the man, the priest who had affectionately been given the name "pewee" by his fellow seminarians.

I had heard so much about "pewee" even before I met him and in my mind I had subconsciously placed him as a role model for myself. In recollecting, like in reading a good book or watching a good movie, one wants to get to the really good parts. My thoughts raced on to arrive at 1965. By that time in his priesthood Harold Perry had become the most prominent African American priest in this country.

He had served with great distinction as an associate pastor in St. Martinville, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Lafayette. He was the founding pastor of St. Joseph's in Broussard. On one of my frequent visits to him, he had now become my spiritual director and mentor, he showed me a letter from Rome appointing him rector of St. Augustine's seminary in Bay St Louis his alma mater. He was sad and troubled. He had just completed a beautiful church and rectory and was happy among his people who loved him dearly. Now he was being asked to go back to the seminary to take over a very difficult assignment. He felt totally devastated.

As one friend to another, I encouraged him to accept this assignment, which I considered a definite signal from Rome that the African American priests, who just a few years ago were denied the opportunity to exercise ministry in most dioceses, were now being considered for important positions in the Society of the Divine Word. The Society of the Divine Word was sending another message to the hierarchy, priests, religious and laity in this country that educating young African Americans was not simply a tokenism but merely the beginning of a saga of successful, effective service in the church and to the church, which has continued to this very day.

In quick succession after being the first African American rector of any major seminary in the United States, Harold Perry was named the first ever major Superior, provincial, of any major religious community in the U.S., having jurisdiction over every state south of the Mason and Dixon line and eleven western states. His authority approached that of diocesan Bishops within his Province.

In October of 1966, Bishop Carlos Lewis, another St. Augustine's alumnus, had been named auxiliary Bishop to the Archbishop of Panama (since 1951, eight alumni of St.

Augustine's have been named Bishops). Father Harold Perry was delegated to represent the southern province at his ordination in Rome. Little did he realize that his visit to Rome would have another purpose as well. Just as he was about to return to the United States, he met Carlo Cardinal Confonieri, head of the congregation for the appointment of Bishops, who told him informally, "do you know that you have been named a Bishop?" Needless to say, Father Perry was shocked. The official announcement was made on October 4, 1965. The drama at that moment was highlighted by the fact that Pope Paul VI, who named Bishop Perry, was in the United States and the Second session of Vatican II was in session. Hence, Bishops from around the world heard the news in Rome and as if by design the word traveled around the world.

Bishop Perry agreed to postpone his ordination until Vatican II ended and all the Bishops would be back in the U.S. to celebrate his consecration. Bishop Perry recounts an incident which took place on his first appearance at the Council. He simply went and sat by Cardinal Cody, who, incidentally had asked for Bishop Perry. He was unceremoniously removed from that seat and placed with lesser luminaries. With a twinkle in his eye and his ever ready smile, he said: ... "this was not the first time I was told to go to the back of the bus."

There are many ways in which great men and women carry the burden of lives in ministry. We read about such persons occasionally, we live with such persons and our lives are greatly influenced by such men and women. I have always been impressed with St. Paul's plaintive description of his trials and tribulations in ministry. He shares those heartaches with the Corinthians. St. Paul writes:

"I have been in prison more times (than the other apostles). I have been given thirty-nine lashes by the Jews: three times I was whipped by the Romans and once I was stoned. I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in dangers in the cities, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas and from false friends." (II Cor. 11, 23-27)

I am not aware that Bishop Perry ever wrote a letter describing his tribulations, of which there have been many. He rarely, if ever, mentioned, for example, the scene that greeted him on January 6, 1966, as he emerged from the cathedral rectory on his way to his Episcopal ordination. As I walked beside him he seemed to be unaware, unafraid, and certainly not angry or bitter, as protestors held high their sign decrying the selection of a black man for the office of Bishop. Their signs were crude and cruel. Television Cameras were grinding away and reporters from national magazines and the local press were moving in for the kill. Harold Perry seemed oblivious of all of this. I am sure that his thoughts were elsewhere...they were on the greater burdens and greater responsibilities that would soon be his as a Bishop in the Roman Catholic church...the first black Bishop in modern times...the first black Bishop to be universally recognized as such.

I am sure that the peace and joy which flooded his soul that day were the same which he experienced on January 6, 1966. Harold Perry knew in his heart of hearts that the racial epithets so blatantly displayed by the protestors were no match for the pride and love of hundreds of thousands of black Catholics and others, who saw him as a symbol of great

things to come. After all, we had never experienced anything like this in the history of the Catholic church.

Archbishop Vagnozzi, the apostolic delegate to the United States, who ordained Bishop Perry, noted in his address that: "the consecration of Bishop Perry was not an honor bestowed upon the negro race, so much as it was a contribution of the Negro people to the catholic church".

Pope John Paul echoed those words here in New Orleans when he told us that while we African Americans need the church the church needs us.

As I reflect on the life and times of my friend, Bishop Perry, I become ever more a firmer believer in the loving concern of a provident God for each of us and for special groups of persons and places in this world.

Harold Perry did not become great when he became a Bishop. He became a Bishop because he was a great person. He was born into a catholic family which has produced greatness. It was a gentle loving, caring family, where each member was affirmed and grew in awareness of their dignity, their talents and their responsibilities to each other, to god and society. Dr. Frank Perry, Mrs. Lafayette White (Thelma), Mrs. Clyde Kennedy (Verlie), Dr. James Perry and the three deceased members, Mr. Frank Perry, Mrs. Josephine Perry and Dr. Fred Perry were known as the black catholic America's first family, a title so richly deserved. I would be remiss, if I did not mention our own Fr. Jerome LeDoux, who has made such an impact on the Catholic Church in this country by his lectures, his writings, radio and television messages, he follows ever so faithfully in the tradition of that family.

How would I describe my friend and mentor? I would suggest that a description of Bishop Perry would be this. He is a gentle, caring, loving and forgiving person. But these are the qualities that any Christian should have ... they are ... but some Christians incarnate these qualities in very special and dramatic ways.

At the last supper Jesus suggested to his disciples that these qualities were indispensable for those who would be his followers and who would lead his people. "And now", Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:34-35)

In First Corinthians, St. Paul expands the concept and describes for us the quality of that love of which Jesus spoke at the last supper. "love," writes St. Paul, "is patient and kind. It is not jealous or conceited or proud: love does not keep a record of wrongs: love is not happy with evil: but is happy with truth. Love never gives up and its faith, hope and patience never fail." (I Cor: 1.3, 4-7)

Being a gentle, loving, patient, caring person, does not mean that such a person is out of touch with the realities of life and living. Bishop Perry has always been in touch with the

realities that surround us, both in society and in the church. When he was interviewed by a reporter some time after his ordination as a Bishop, an attempt was made to get him to place himself on a pedestal with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his own quiet, candid, charming way, Bishop Perry made it quite clear that he was not a Catholic Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He had a clear vision of what lay before him. He knew what his assets and limitations were. He was very much aware that he could pursue the same goals as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but within a different kind of institution and using different strategies. Bishop Perry, like most of us, knows now and knew then that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. come to us once in a lifetime. You and I know that Bishop Perry come to us once in a lifetime.

As an associate pastor and as a pastor in Louisiana and Arkansas, Father Perry ministered to his people, with special concern for the little people ... the young, the elderly, the infirm, the poor and the neglected. He has always let people know that he cares for them. No matter what problems are brought to him, he lets people know that they have a basic worth and dignity which far surpass the problems with which they are faced and that they are indeed God's children and loved by that God.

The parish church in Broussard, Louisiana stands as a beautiful symbol of bishop Perry's efforts and determination to affirm his people in their dignity and worth. The church itself is a beautiful structure ... nothing that could be construed as just good enough for black folks.

The climax of his efforts is dramatized in a remarkable manner at the entrance of St. Joseph's Church in Broussard. Bishop Perry, then Father Perry, commissioned a stone sculpture of the holy family, which was placed over the entrance of the church. The features of the subjects, especially those of the baby Jesus are definitely those of an African American. This caused a lot of discussion and some consternation for some people.

It was widely discussed. Even the local bishop was in on the discussions. A nationally known writer did an article in America magazine on the topic. No one seemed to really understand what the real message was and still is...except that one day an elderly black woman gazed intently at the group and said in Creole to her companion: " il somme comme nous " "he looks like us." Yes, the truth had finally come out and was articulated by a simple black woman who theologized so profoundly. She saw herself in Jesus and Jesus in her ... and in all of us.

That is exactly what God the Father wanted to have happen when Jesus became a human person. That is what Jesus wanted when he advised us that whatever we do to and for one another we do for him. In the case of the black Catholics in Broussard, Louisiana, it was Father Perry who had presented the message.

While Bishop Perry chose not to become a militant black leader in the church and in

society...he has exercised a powerful influence and effectiveness in combating racism in the church and in society. He never remained silent in the face of injustice and bigotry, which are the illegitimate children of the illegitimate parents...namely racism and ignorance.

His talks around the nation and in places like Germany, Australia and New Zealand echoed his thirst for justice and peace and especially racial harmony. He had experienced the hurt and humiliation in so many places and at so many times. Though he spoke with intensity and conviction, he spoke also with a gentleness that rebuked the bitterness and bigotry of his contemporaries ... both black and white. In his deliberations with his black sisters and brothers, his was the voice of moderation and reconciliation. With the wider community he was a symbol of integrity and goodness.

As you and I have known all along ... he paid a great price for the manner in which he responded to social justice issues. Yet, I must confess that no one encouraged me more in my efforts in the field of social activism than Bishop Perry.

Bishop Perry's ministry has been one of clearing the land, tilling the soil, planting the seed, protecting the tender sprouts ... so that you and I and generations yet unborn can experience and enjoy gathering a bountiful harvest.

There would not be the twelve other African American bishops had Harold Perry not been the priest, the bishop and model that he is. Did you know that of the thirteen African American bishops, six are from the state of Louisiana? Did you know that the diocese of Lafayette produced five African American bishops. The city of Lake Charles, two? Did you know that ten are from the deep south? But for the gift of bishop Perry we may have never been born into the ranks of the episcopacy I have come to believe in the efficacy of suffering and the salvific role it plays in the lives of individuals and through the lives of individuals for others.

As effective as Bishop Perry has been in his twenty-five years as a Bishop and forty-six years in the priesthood we may actually be experiencing his most effective ministry at this period of his life when he demonstrates for us the patient, faithful, hopeful model of suffering he does so characteristically quietly, resignedly and lovingly. He has given his all and yet he wants to give us more.

In Bishop Perry's name, Archbishop Hannan, I thank you for accepting Bishop Perry as one of your own and for the encouragement and support you have given him throughout Twenty-five years of his episcopacy.

I thank the priests, religious and laity of the archdiocese who have given respect and love to bishop Perry. But I am sure all of you must know that you have received so much more from him than you have given.

A very special thanks goes to the Ladies and Knights of Peter claver for honoring bishop Perry by accepting him as their national Episcopal chaplain. Bishop Perry's ministry and that of the Knights and Ladies are inseparable. Thanks to the Sisters of the

Blessed Sacrament and the Holy Ghost Fathers for planting the mustard seed which has become a mighty plant in which so much of us found shelter and comfort. Thanks to the Sisters of the Holy Family who in the past several years have given Bishop Perry a home filled with loving care.

The Society of the Divine Word thanks God for placing Bishop Perry in our midst as one of his greatest gifts to us. To Archbishop Schulte and all of you who have made this celebration possible ... thanks.

Most of all, thanks to Bishop Perry's sisters and brothers who shared their brother in so generous a fashion with each and all of us.

Bishop Perry, we thank you for who you are and for what you have helped us to become. You said yes to God on so many occasions ... and like Mary, you did not always know the consequences of your fiat...you only knew that if God asked you...it had to be something salvific for individuals and groups of persons.

Bishop Perry, we ask your forgiveness now for not always marching to the beat and the cadence you provided for us. Bishop Perry, we love you...because in so many ways and on so many occasions you have taught us what it means to be loveable.

This anniversary celebration, Bishop Perry, is a celebration of thanks to God, your family, the Society of the Divine Word and all the people who have had the privilege of knowing you and being the beneficiaries of your ministries.

I would like to close with a quotation from the last paragraph of the Pastoral "Brothers and Sisters to us". That paragraph, Bishop Perry, embodies what your life has been all about and what you have tried to teach us.

"For we are children of the age to come, when the first shall be last and the last shall be first, when blessed are they who serve Christ the Lord in all his sisters and brothers, especially those who are poor and suffer injustice"