

Funeral of Father Joe Kern



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Bishop Coyne: thank you for leading us today in this Mass of Resurrection for our brother, Father Joe. We welcome you to the Terre Haute Deanery and are grateful for your ministry among us. Please convey to Archbishop Buechlein our thanks and continued prayers for his improved health. He had a great affection and respect for Father Joe; I am sure he holds him in prayer along with us this day.

My brother priests: thank you for being here today to pray with and for our brother, Joe. He loved us greatly as his brothers; he embraced us with fraternal affection, evidenced by his faithful, joyful attendance with us at almost every clergy gathering --- from convocation, priesthood day, ordination, Chrism Mass, to priest support group. Many of us, older and younger, were touched by his keen interest in us; and those of us who served with him in deanery or parish know full well of his dedication to the people whom we serve and his willingness to serve us by attending to the pastoral needs of our people when we could not.

Bob, Joanne, Sister Rose, Marie (?); nephews, nieces and family: thank you for your love of Father Joe, your care and prayers for him in the 53+ years of his service to God's people. You recognized him for what he was: a servant of the people of God first and foremost; yet even so, you loved him and cherished what time you had with him. We know you will miss him.

People of the Terre Haute Deanery and others here from the Archdiocese, St. Meinrad Archabbey and Seminary, and places unknown to me: thank you for your presence as we, with sadness and joy, together commend Father Joe to God's eternal love and mercy. How he touched our lives as priest, pastor, dean, boss, puppeteer, energizer bunny, 100 year old hobbit, Yoda, Singing Sam, and hugger extraordinaire is the stuff of story shared and memory cherished deep within. We can commend him to the God of love and mercy because he taught us well how to do so!

I have begun this reflection with "thanks" because we are in the midst of the banquet of thanksgiving, Eucharist, which nourishes us and makes us who we are in Christ. Providentially, we are only 3 days into our Easter season, the pinnacle for us in this life of the paschal mystery. Thus our thanksgiving is suffused with joy and hope – for Christ has died, he is risen, and he will come again!

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It is that Christ whom Peter proclaimed in our first reading. He stood in the house of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion and a “God-fearing man” who embraced faith and sought understanding. His invitation to Peter to come and ‘proclaim’ the person of Christ was founded in a thirst for greater closeness to the God whom he honored. His invitation brought about a tectonic conversion of Gospel focus for Peter!

Reluctant to go because this man was a “foreigner”, a “Gentile” with whom Peter would not have interacted according to his religious understanding, he found himself persuaded by divine dream and human messenger. Upon arrival, Peter erupts into this proclamation of the Gospel now irretrievably open to all people.

- There is to be no discrimination any more.
- Those who thirst are to be bathed in the Good News of the Christ who served among his own, was crucified by the world, but who rose again to banish the power of death and erase the cultural-religious barriers which divide.

We see here the universality of the paschal mystery and the power of the mercy of God beyond human understanding. We of Gentile origin should never let go of the truth which lies here.

Our reading from Romans opens with a bald statement: none of us lives for oneself, none of us dies for oneself... We are the Lord's. Our service in this life is rooted in our being so possessed. This passage falls in the 4-chapter section Paul devotes to the duties of Christians.

The 4 chapters come after the great theological discourses

- on the need for salvation from sin,
- how one is justified by faith in Christ,
- how the Christian life is rooted in this justification,
- and what God's plan is for the salvation of both Jew and Gentile.

What we have heard today

- is a practical application of the power of God in Christ, the one who redeemed and sanctified, binding us in baptism to his death and resurrection.
- It is that same Christ who revealed that “nothing can separate us from the love of God”. God is so passionate for us that we are always his, in spite of our sin and willfulness.

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- Our “reaction” to this gift, as Paul asserts, is selfless service and a non-judgmental application of this service. How we do this, Paul says, will be our joy before the judgment of God.

The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, the fulfiller of the covenant law. So soon in his ministry, Jesus stands upon the mountain, gathers the people, and begins with what we know as the Beatitudes.

The very first is telling: blessed are the poor in spirit. That is, blessed are they who recognize and embrace their dependence upon God, their smallness before God -- yet at the same moment the wonder of God’s embrace as beloved creature sought out by God again and again in the spirit of the prophets.

All the other beatitudes seem to cascade from there –

- mourning and comfort,
- meekness and inheritance,
- hunger for right relationship and satisfaction,
- mercy given and mercy received,
- open heart and seeing the face of God,
- peacemaking and God’s children.
- And finally, the irony of persecution, insult and evil laid upon a believer whose fruit (dying of the seed to new life) is the kingdom of heaven.

All these lead inevitably to salt and light, and an expansion of the covenant where “You have heard it said... but I say,,,” urges and challenges us to live in the way which is not only evidence of poverty of spirit and all the other “blessings”, but then point so clearly to Chapter 25 – I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink --- bringing us clearly back to the message of service!

Sisters and brothers, these powerful words from our faith ancestors were the very stuff of Father Joe’s life and ministry. We have been hearing it and reflecting upon it since the days of his stroke in November through to last evening’s Vigil. More than that, we have witnessed it in how he lived all the days of his life, but especially these last months.

Which returns us, does it not, to thankfulness. We are grateful for the life of Father Joe. We are all the better for it – yet we remain challenged by his humility and kindness which urges us to greater fidelity to our own life in Christ.

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- Yes, in our priesthood-of-the-baptized and the priesthood-of-the-ordained, we are to proclaim the oneness of humanity in Christ's paschal mystery offered to all.
- We are to live lives of service reflective of God's embrace of each person -- warts, defects, beauty and gifts.
- We are to be forgiving just as our God is forgiving, for his judgment more than not leads to eternal joy.
- We are to work beyond competition and parochialism, pursuing collaboration and unity.
- And we are to recognize that the great mystery of Christ would change us from self-centered people to a God-centered people whose poverty of spirit in Christ can change our world – at least, our small part of our world.

Finally (note: I had a homiletics professor tell me never to end with “finally”, for he said that if you have to tell folks the end is coming, either you couldn't come up with a decent transition to ending or you were just using a word to tell you to stop! – I'm going to do it anyway!)

FINALLY, as we continue our prayer in this Eucharist, may we do so in the spirit of the words Father Joe carefully outlined in red in his Bible, words from Psalm 108:2-6.

**My heart is ready, O God;
I will sing, sing your praise.
Awake, my soul;
awake, lyre and harp,
I will awake the dawn.**

**I will thank you, Lord, among the peoples,
among the nations I will praise you,
for your love reaches to the heavens
and your truth to the skies.**

**O God, arise above the heavens;
may your glory shine on earth!**