

Two proud Jewish grandmothers were watching their 2 respective grandsons and wondering what the two boys would grow up to become. The one said, "You know, there is an old custom that you put out three items – a bible, a bag of money, and a bottle of whiskey – and whichever one the kid goes to first will indicate what his life will be about. If the kid goes for the bible, he will be a rabbi, if he goes for the bag of money, he will be a banker, and if he goes for the bottle of whiskey, he's not going to turn out very well."

They agreed to try it, placing the three items on the floor. They then put the first child down to watch what he would choose. The first child immediately went for the bag of money. "Ah," the grandmothers sighed together, "we've got a banker."

Then they put the second child down with the three items. The boy was really quick – he grabbed the bible, scooped up the bag of money and reached out to grab the bottle of whiskey. "O vey," the one cried, "we've got a Catholic priest!"

Thank you for coming to celebrate a mass of thanksgiving – to God who calls all of us, to God for placing us together at this moment in our life's faith journey, and to pause to note how good God is to us in giving us the gift of our Catholic faith. One footnote before I begin – I chose the first reading from Jeremiah for my ordination mass. Jeremiah's protest "I know not how to speak; I am too young." Well I KNOW I'm not so young anymore – but the fact is that in the ways of God I will always be young, still a novice, forever learning. So I thought it still applies! Footnote aside, you'll be surprised to know that I have three points.

First, a word about baptism. You have heard me say that the church has been having a 5 decades long conversation about baptism ever since the Second Vatican Council, which concluded in 1965. Prior to the council, most people thought of a vocation as something that belonged to priests and nuns alone. They also thought that being a priest or nun was better than being a lay person – and being a bishop or cardinal was even better yet. So during the Council, a reporter asked the Belgian Cardinal Suenens what was the greatest day in the Pope's life; he was expecting to hear the Cardinal say that it was the day that he was elected pope. Suenens responded simply: "The greatest day in the life of the pope was the day he was baptized."

We're all here today – not because I became a priest – but because I was baptized – and so were you. Our vocations are all birthed in baptism. In baptism we are set apart, given a new name, and given a share in the Body of Christ. "In baptism," William Willimon writes, "we are initiated, crowned, chosen, embraced, washed, adopted, gifted, killed, reborn, and thereby sent forth. We are identified as one of God's own, then assigned our place and our job within the kingdom of God."

And with baptism a new power is at work within us – the power of the resurrection. Resurrection didn't just happen back there, back then, 2000 years ago in a garden. Resurrection bursts the seams of our lives right now, and we discover who we are and whose we are. God never meant for there to be only one resurrection but many resurrections, resurrections enough to bring all of us alive with the kind of life Christ has. The angel of God's glory points this out to us from the tomb: "He is not here – he is going before you – you will see Him." We will see Him in beauty so incandescent that it will bring tears to our eyes and our knees will feel weak with the astonishing wonder of it all, and then kneeling in joy and gratitude we will find new strength and true steadiness. We will see Him in the gaudy ugliness of unfairness and injustice, and sick to our stomach, just when we think we must turn away because we can look no more, we will hear His voice calling

us to join Him in repairing this world, and in His call we will find power we have never known and never expected.

We will see the Risen Lord on the day of our greatest triumph, when everything that could be won has been won, and on that day we discover that there is yet one more thing that must be done, and that is the finding of an altar, a place of sacrifice where we can take our best achievements and fashion them into a holy offering.

We will see Him on the worst day of our life, when abandoned by all, bereft of friendship, when all is lost, we will know His unwavering, unflinching companionship; and on that day when even health and breath and heartbeat refuse to sustain us, we will discover that He will not deny us. We will open our eyes to see Him and opening our eyes we will see ourselves and know ourselves for the first time – hidden in Christ, part of His Body -- in our Baptism. ALL of us. No exceptions. (help from Patrick J. Wilson, LECTONARY HOMILETICS, April-May 2011, p. 36-37)

Second, a word about vocation. I remember when I was in seminary and talking to my spiritual director and whining about not being worthy to become a priest. Jaime was wise and had a wicked sense of humor. He was the one who told me that “Pasta was divine love made edible.” So in the midst of my whining, he said very matter-of-factly: “Look, John, if God can make penicillin from moldy bread, he can make something out of you. Forget about worthiness. Nobody is worthy.”

We all have a vocation, whether we realize it or not. My favorite definition of vocation is “Where the world’s deep need meets your deep gladness.” To discover what we are meant to do – that it is what will make us really happy – and what we want to do with it for the sake of the rest of the world is the very apex of life. Deciding what we must do to be happy ourselves-- so that we can be a gift to the world around us --is the central question of life. It is a question that deserves serious reflection, that requires a long look into our heart, and that brings with it the happiness of a life that has meaning and purpose.

What we do best is what we are meant to do in life. That is our talent. I have a big mouth and I’m fearless in public. So I ended up torturing people from a pulpit every weekend for the last 40 years. You are just my latest victims! Sometimes our talent has to do with ideas, sometimes it’s skills, sometimes it’s people. But whatever it is, we are born to find our gifts so we can then give them away. “If you are talented, Mehmet Ildan wrote, “don’t sit in the darkness, light a candle so that others can see you.”

The fact is that the gift within us, the one that emerges out of the center of the self, the one we were born with and which has led us from scrap to scrap of itself all our born days, is our destiny, our call. That special talent, that favorite pursuit, that most fulfilling experience, is the sum total of the real self. Some people say it’s a ‘call,’ meaning an invitation to become what we were meant to be. Other people call it a ‘vocation,’ meaning an answer to the beckoning of the God who gave us a gift so that we ourselves could give it away to those who need it. Swami Raj said, “Talent – that’s God’s finger on the shoulder.” Jesus called it “not hiding your light under a bushel basket.” (Adapted from Chittister, FOLLOWING THE PATH, p. 100-102)

Third and finally, for me, I love this Catholic thing that we have been given. Yes, it is maddeningly, eternally, screwed up, but so am I. It has a multitude of great saints – both famous --and those known to God alone -- but it also embraces sinners like you and me. It challenges us to be the best version of ourselves, even when we don’t feel like it. And it’s downright funny. In fact, one writer quips that the Catholic Church actually has 5 marks, not 4 – One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, and Funny! Just think about the election of a Pope. There have only been 266 of them in all of history. It’s the most exclusive club in the entire world. We live in this

super high tech world! And it all comes down to a chimney for goodness sake! There is something marvelously surreal about an institution that announces the pope's death via an e-mail to news agencies, and a couple of weeks later announces the election of his successor with a smoke signal! (adapted from John Thavis, THE VATICAN DIARIES). This piece from Fr. Bill Baush helps give me perspective -- and hopefully a sense of humor about my life: "If a priest preaches over 10 minutes, he's longwinded./ If his sermon is short, he didn't prepare./ If the parish funds are high, he's a businessman./ If he mentions money; he's money mad./ If he has friends in the parish, he's exclusive./ If he doesn't, he's snobbish./ If he has fairs and bazaars, he's bleeding the people./ If he doesn't, there's no life in the parish./ If he takes time in confession to help and advise, he takes too long./ If he doesn't, he doesn't care./ If he celebrates the liturgy in a quiet voice, he's a bore./ If he puts feeling into it, he's an actor./ If he starts Mass on time, his watch is fast./ If he starts late, he's holding up the people./ If he tries to lead the people in music, he's showing off./ If he doesn't, he doesn't care what Mass is like./ If he decorates the church, he's wasting money./ If he doesn't, he's letting it run down./ If he's young, he's not experienced. If he's old, he ought to retire./ If he dies, there was nobody like him and there will never be his equal again! (YELLOW BRICK ROAD, p. 121) I had a quote on my door in one parish that said: "The two most important qualities of a pastor today are an impenetrable epidermis and a sharp sense of the ridiculous!" And it helps -- a LOT -- if you have a sense of humor! Because we ARE funny! So I like to remember Karl Rahner's comments about priesthood: "Loaded with more grace upon our shoulders than we can carry." It's been a life of grace. Infinitely more than I could have asked for -- or even imagined.

Here are two particular quotes from C.S. Lewis that I have found to be a guiding light in my own understanding of the importance of church. He wrote: "Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither." And "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important."

But it ultimately comes down to the beautiful words of Jesus in the gospel. We are the salt of the earth in a culture that is often tasteless and crass. And we are the light of the world in a world that is often cold and dark.

I conclude with a piece from Bryan Doyle called 'reasons that I am Catholic:'

I believe that a carpenter's son named Jesus indeed cracked time in half, entered this world in the guise of a squalling infant, said his piece, was slaughtered for his pains, and cracked time again on his way home. I have no real basis for this belief, and neither do you. We either believe the man or we do not, and I do, for reasons I know and do not know.

Some of those reasons I can articulate. I was born into a Catholic family, and early learned to love the smoke and poetry and incantation of the Roman rite. My friends were Catholic, and we were as bound by our common faith as we were by our exuberant youth, European forebears, and itchy masculinity. Catholicism was the faith of my Gaelic forebears, whom I greatly respect in absentia. It was the faith of my grandmother, who shriveled and died before my eyes when I was 12 years old, and whose funeral Mass taught me the enormous power of ritual, the skeleton that sustains us when we are weak. And Catholicism was the faith of my alma mater, where I stuttered into manhood, and of three of my professional employers.

But I believe in Christ for muddier reasons. Sometimes I desperately need to lean on a god wiser and gentler than myself. Sometimes I desperately need to believe that when I die, I will not be sentenced to Fimbul, the hell winter, where there is only the cold voice of Nothing, but rather I will be at peace and draped in Light. Sometimes I am nudged toward belief by the incredible persistence and eerie genius of the tale: the

encompassing love of the mother, the wordless strength of the Father, the Lord of All Worlds – cast ashore on this one as a mewling child in dirty straw. Sometimes it is an intuitive yes as the light fails and the world is lit from below. And sometimes I simply cast my lot with the sheer bravura of such a patently brazen lie. That a man could die and live again is ridiculous; even a child knows that death is the end.

Or is it?

I do not want to be sure about that. I want to meet my quiet father-in-law, a man I never knew, and thank him for the lovely miracle of his last daughter. I want to meet my brother Jimmy, who died in his carriage on a bright April day in 1947. I want to meet William Blake, Dexter Gordon, Crazy Horse, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rosemary Clooney. I want to kiss my grandmother again on her leathery cheek. I would like to see my friend Dennis Green, age 23, who died on a humid highway in Florida while I was writing these words. I would like to meet this fellow Christ, who haunts the edges of my dreams, who flits from tree to tree in the forest through which I make my way. I would like to live forever, and hold my wife and daughter and twin sons in my arms until the end of time, and daily read the immense poem of Death into Life, and grin at the whirl and swirl of its endless unfolding, until the end of Until.

So I am a Catholic for many reasons.....Catholic is my language, Catholic is the coat I wear, Catholic is the house in which I live.

It is a house that needs cleaning, a house in which savagery and cowardice have thrived, where evil has a room with a view, where foolishness and greed have prominent places at the table. But it is also a house where hope lives, and hope is the greatest of mercies, the most enduring of gifts, the most nutritious of foods. Hope is what we drink from the odd story of the carpenter's odd stepson. When we eat his body and drink his blood in the ludicrous miracle of the mass, we hope in him, and with him, forever and ever, world without end, amen, amen, amen. (LEAPING, p. 79-81)