

Bishop Rice Homily
CMSWR
September 22, 2018
Old Cathedral

I offer a special word of thanks to you Mother McGreevy for the invitation to be a part of the National Assembly of the CMSWR. I would like to take a little liberty and change the theme from “leading with the heart of Mary” to “leadership with the heart of Mary.” And, with today’s gospel we can gain insight into just what such leadership requires.

A priest friend of mine, who belongs to a religious community, served as Provincial for two terms. As he came to the end of his second term, with a merging of provinces looming over their future, he wanted to reflect on the state of leadership in the church today. Not so much the role of the provincial superior but more so the local superior, local leadership. He is old enough to recall his experiences of provincials demanding “blind obedience” to the local superior or the provincial superior. And, at the same time, as a reaction to that experience of blind obedience the other extreme is the superior having no relevance at all.

There is an authority that comes with leadership, an authority that comes from the Gospel. It’s not about “blind” obedience, it is not a power trip to beat up members, there is no room for a narcissistic attitude of “Look what I can do.” No, based on the Gospel, those in leadership are called to speak the truth in love and call others to the truth. Ultimately, authentic leadership in the church leads all of its members to the foot of the cross. How appropriate that today’s gospel be Mary at the foot of the cross. It was her fidelity to Jesus that brought her to the foot of the Cross. And, In leadership, the person in leadership stands at the foot of the cross and invites the community to stand at the foot of the cross with him or her.

Leadership is not about being a nice person. Leadership is not about popularity. Leadership is about living and speaking the truth in love to community members even when that truth is hard to hear. Is it an easy job? No. Is it a critical, even an essential job? Absolutely! A strong Provincial with strong local superiors brings the members of the community with them to the foot of the cross.

I would propose to all of you that the current crisis in the church stems from a lack of leadership. How often to the month of September, and I am mindful of the Feast of St. Gregory and the various Scriptures, have we been told of the hypocrisy of those who have the role of leaders but do not exercise it authentically. I say that to my own shame for the times when I did not have the energy to deal with a situation and just put it off till later. Putting it off till later only magnifies the situation and makes it worse. And when that happens, those members looking for leadership, i.e., truth in love, or those who would benefit from leadership, go away disappointed. This can lead to worse problems.

On a variety of levels there can be the “blink syndrome.” What is that? Well, you see me doing something which isn’t exactly correct and you acknowledge it with a “blink of the eye.” Then,

when I see you doing some not exactly correct, I give you the “blink of the eye.” As a result, each gets what they want. And, as a result, they begin to live religious life not according to the Common Rule, but on their own terms. Neither has to worry that the local Superior or the Provincial Superior will say anything to either of them. In a sense, with the void in leadership, the members have “gotten away” with the infraction of the Rule of Life, “no harm, no foul.”

But is that really true, “no harm, no foul?” Absolutely not! First, the mission suffers. Little fissures begin to appear in community, at first unnoticed, but as time goes on they become gaping pits to fall into. There is a lack of unity in the mission: what the community is about, your sacred purpose, your vision, your charism has become compromised. What is it that has compromised the charism? Good old-fashioned selfishness!

And even more devastating – the person who “got away with it” with the local superior or the Provincial Superior, well, that person missed an opportunity to die to self and be a more authentic witness to the Evangelical Councils of poverty, chastity and obedience. That person was not brought to the foot of the Cross where there is no selfishness, only total self-giving.

The role of the superior, ultimately, is to bring the members or the community to the foot of the Cross. I have often said that to be at the foot of the Cross is a privilege, an honor. These days of crisis in the Church, a crisis of leadership, remind the entire Church of the consequences of neglecting leadership. Neglecting leadership throws the Cross to the side of the road. Neglecting leadership neglects the truth in love.

Mary at the foot of the Cross – knows her purpose, totally focused on the sacrifice of her Son.
Mary at the foot of the Cross – is courageous, unwavering in her fidelity.
Mary at the foot of the Cross – is an encounter with divine love, total love, unconditional, life giving

I offer a quote from Pope Paul VI: “Authority in the church is a service, not an honor... When one has an office, one should every carry it out with firmness and courage, neither being depressed nor crawling. All evasion - whether out of laziness or exhaustion - goes against the Holy Spirit. One should therefore learn how to give orders and how to put up with the unsuccessful results of one’s efforts.” And, may I add, at the end of the day, have a good laugh at yourself.

We have a religious order in the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau in Carthage, MO, called the Congregation of the Mother of the Redeemer. In their statues the outgoing Provincial steps down from office on September 14, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. I would imagine on that day he looks back on his years of service and recognizes all the issues he had to deal with through the lens of the Cross of Christ. And, the in-coming Provincial begins his role of service the next day, September 15, Our Lady of Sorrows, hopefully realizing that whatever he must deal with, he is never alone: Our Lady is with him at the foot of the Cross. What wisdom! Does it need any explanation?

There is a prayer I offer every morning, in honor of the Blessed Mother. The beginning of that prayer refers to Mary as the “Spouse of the Holy Spirit.” May that same Holy Spirit give strength, courage and conviction to all in leadership to gather their members, with Mary, at the foot of the Cross.