

HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL MASS OF FATHER RON LEWINSKI

“Fellow Travelers on the Road to Emmaus”

St. Mary of the Annunciation – Mundelein, Illinois

Wednesday, July 26, 2017

Fr. Andrew Liaugminas

Sadness. Shock. Loss. These words, and many more, could well describe the emotions we’re feeling today. Yet, even these words seem to pale in comparison with the weight of grief we’re bearing. We’re together, but grieving always feels so very personal. We’re walking forward, but perhaps we only see a few feet ahead.

Emotions like these, which have become so close to us over these past few days, put us right in stride with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Their world was utterly upside down. Jerusalem was supposed to be God’s dwelling on earth, the “true pole of the earth” (Ps. 47:2), where the Messiah was expected to reign and to restore Israel. And yet, the One whom they believed to be Messiah and Redeemer came to Jerusalem, only to die. Unsure of everything else, they take to the road. And that’s where we meet them today: on the way.

Ron would be the first to point out that there is something very *ecclesial* about this: being on the way with Christ. All of us have, in one way or another, walked with Ron along the way. Perhaps he walked with you as your brother, your uncle, your Shepherd, or as your dear friend. Perhaps he walked with you as your mentor, your colleague, or your fellow-traveler. How many times did our fellow traveler open the Scripture and break the Bread for us? How many times did our hearts burn within us as we walked with him along the Way? Let us listen again to the wisdom of our fellow-traveler.

Preaching on this passage, Ron once observed that the fundamental problem of the two disciples in today’s Gospel was that they got “stuck on the death of Christ” and failed to comprehend that “the One walking with them is the One they seek...a living Person: the Person of Christ. Who is the way, the truth and the life”. If they had recognized this, Ron added, they would have seen the prophecies being fulfilled in their very midst. Then their journey, rather than being a lifeless passage, would become a Paschal pilgrimage with the Savior. Rather than saying, “*we had hoped* that he would be the one to redeem us”, as they said in today’s Gospel, they would say, with Job in our First Reading, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust!”

Throughout his life, Ron lived out of the conviction that his Redeemer lives. If you were to ask him, Ron would tell you that he became a missionary of this message on March 3rd, 1946, the day of his Baptism at Assumption BVM Parish. There, in that holy corner of West Pullman, Ron died to this world and was reborn in Christ. From that point on, he lived a truly *ecclesial* existence that sprung from the waters of his Baptism. The “love and vibrancy” he experienced in his parish “sparked something inside [of him] that attracted [him] to the priesthood”, and

during his seminary studies, his heart was “burning within him” as he studied the writings of the Church Fathers on the liturgy and learned about the practices of the early Church.

In fact, so often did Ron share his zeal for the sacrament of Baptism that his classmates jokingly called him, “Ron the Baptist”! In this, they presaged Ron’s future ministry and work on the RCIA; writing books on the Rite that are still used in parishes from Chicago to Singapore, and teaching it to many, including Pope St. John Paul II when he came to Chicago—the first time a Pope has celebrated the RCIA in the modern era. One of Ron’s core insights on Baptism was that “with every Baptism, there’s an anointing; and with every anointing, a missionary is born”. This revolutionizes the way many look at Baptism. “I sometimes think”, Ron would say, “that instead of issuing baptismal certificates on the day of Christening, we ought to be issuing job descriptions for anointed disciples!”

While Ron would take this message to all corners of the world—from Alaska to Germany, from UAE to Japan, Malaysia, and beyond—his conviction was always personal and local. If baptism makes us “anointed disciples” with a missionary calling, then we should not think of our parishes as having a mission, but ‘the mission as having a Parish’. And what passion he had for forming disciples in the Parish context, for sharing people’s lives, and for mentoring future Priests to do the same.

This is the Ron I came to know when—as a First-Year seminarian at Mundelein Seminary—I was assigned to him as my teaching Pastor and to St. Mary’s for my First Year Field Ed. As Ron invited me to work with him on initiatives both in the Parish and beyond, I witnessed firsthand how he fostered mature Christian discipleship, and how truly “the mission has a Parish” here. Quickly, I came to see my time here not as a Field Ed requirement, but as a training ground to learn from a master. Ron rapidly became a close mentor, and this parish community, a home; and with this, I invited Ron to vest me as a Priest at my Ordination. It was under Ron’s tutelage here that I celebrated my first Baptism the day after my Diaconate Ordination, and my First Mass the day after my Priestly Ordination. I owe an eternal debt of gratitude to Ron for these, and all the other ways that he has ignited my heart about the gift of the Priesthood and for his friendship.

While together we dug ditches and climbed glaciers, preparing this homily, my thoughts kept on going back to the memories of our common celebrations of the Triduum. Ron so loved the Triduum and unpacked its riches for us to appreciate as well. Concerned that young people were losing touch with the meaning of sacramental language and the beauty of the Triduum, one time Ron had the idea of holding a “Triduum Pep. Rally” here at St. Mary’s! Maybe some of you were even there for it. Well, it was not just the kids who were getting into it, the Pep Rally reignited the adults’ appreciation for the Triduum as well!

One of the warmest memories I have of the Triduum liturgy itself with Ron is the celebration of our Lord’s Last Supper and the Priesthood. Standing just feet from the baptismal font Ron designed to call to mind tomb and womb, at the start of Mass, Ron would always revel in singing the Holy Thursday entrance antiphon: “We

should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered” (Gal. 6:14). For Ron, the antiphon was an anthem. Literally, the sung version of this antiphon used in countless Parishes across the world was composed by Steven Janco in honor of Ron Lewinski: “We should glory in the Cross...”

This love of the Paschal Mystery flows out of a baptismal spirituality, echoed in our Second Reading today: “Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” St. Paul does not relent on his conviction: “We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him”, and thus, having died with Christ at Baptism, “we believe that we shall also live with him”. And how right it is to glory in this fact.

With this, let’s return for one last time to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and to Ron’s insight that the fundamental problem of these two disciples was that they failed to comprehend that “the One Who is walking with them is the One they seek...a living Person: the Person of Christ”. The disciples *were* hoping that Christ would enter into his glory, indeed. But since suffering and death had no place in their vision, their hope died on Calvary. So erroneous was their vision of sharing in Christ’s glory that when the glorified Christ himself does appear to them, they mistake him for a Stranger. The Lord gently re-orientes their understanding starting with one simple, yet direct question: “*Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer all these things and so enter into his glory?*” (Lk. 24:26). And *precisely because of **who** he is*, his sufferings and his glory open up to include everyone incorporated into his Body, the Church. And all those “anointed” in the Anointed One, from the waters of Baptism on, share in Christ’s suffering with the hope that they might share in his Resurrection. Hence, living our baptismal calling includes totality of one’s life, one’s gifts, one’s joys and one’s sufferings—as *Gaudium et Spes* states at the outset—and doing this precisely *through* the Church: through liturgical praise, through the fulfillment of one’s vocation, through works of mercy and evangelization.

This liturgical, scriptural, sacramental, and deeply pastoral vision of the Church was at the core of Ron’s pastoral life, homilies, and writings. And he lived it out in many roles throughout his lifetime: as Director of the Office for Divine Worship in the Archdiocese of Chicago, in speaking engagements in far-off places like Australia, South Africa, Singapore and Malaysia, as a Pastor who helped re-found St. Mary of the Annunciation into a community of 1,800+ households. His parish experiences fed his imagination and led to new ideas that evolved into workshops, lectures, articles and creating new pastoral models. Closely observing Catholic education him led to help found the first Archdiocesan Catholic Middle School, Frassati Catholic Academy. His pastoral and administrative experiences led to his work with Parish Transformation, and more recently, Renew My Church and the Office of Parish Vitality and Mission. This involvement gave him the opportunity to help others with lessons he learned, but which he knew he would

never have enough time to implement. Your presence here is a testament to the width and breadth of his ministry and God's work through him.

So, how does one sum this all up? The last time I saw Ron in person was in Rome. I was finishing my doctoral studies and he came over for a pilgrimage with Deacon Howard Fisher and his wife, Marianne. We arranged to celebrate Mass together in the crypt of St. Peter's Basilica, just steps from the tomb of the Apostle. Ron presided at Mass, and in his homily, preached about the importance of faith: faith that carries us through the difficult times of life. At the end of Mass, we processed back to the Sacristy of St. Peter's to devest. Now, you have to have your espresso *before* going to St. Peter's because you really never know you're going to meet. Sure enough, as Ron and I were devesting in the Sacristy there, I looked to my left and saw a distinguished gentleman staring at me. Fortunately, I did have my *espresso* earlier that morning, and so I recalled that this gentleman on my left was the Vatican Monsignor who oversaw the liturgies for Cardinal Cupich's Consistory events in Rome. After saying hello, I wanted to introduce him to Ron, a fellow lover of the liturgy. But as I started the introduction, I quickly realized how incapable I was of summarizing Ron's role: "Monsignor, here's Fr. Ron Lewinski, Co-Director of the Department of Parish Vitality and Mission of the Archdiocese of Chicago." But as I was attempting to communicate this, I felt that my words were communicating only a fraction of what Ron does and stands for. Ron must have sensed this. Afterwards he told me, "Andrew, what I usually say in these situations is that I'm a servant of the Cardinal and of the Church".

Let's let that self-chosen title, which animated his ministry for 45 years, remain as Ron's epitaph. The Gospel concludes with Christ revealing his glory in the reading of Scripture and the Breaking of the Bread (Lk. 24:25-35). As we gather today to do the same sacramental actions, remembering the sacrifice of Christ that conquered death and opened for us the light of glory, let us pray for the soul of our dear brother, Ron. Each of us has stories about how he walked with us and showed us Christ's presence in our pilgrimage of life. May Christ's presence among us today in Word and Sacrament heal our sorrow and strengthen our hope. In prayer, let us accompany our brother Ron as he makes his final procession down this aisle, passed the font to the grave, in his continued pilgrimage to the Father. Let us pray that this servant may now take his seat at the Father's Table, hearing the Master at last say to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into your Master's joy" (Mt. 25:23)—a verse that Ron used to love to quote.

And as Ron told me before I celebrated my first Funeral Liturgy, "Ultimately, you don't need to say too much in a funeral homily, the Funeral Liturgy says it all." Listen to the words of this liturgy. Listen to the hope, the promise. Come to Christ and let us commend our brother, Ron, to the Lord.