Oct. 13 & 14, 2018 All Saints Parish, Syracuse, NY 28th Sunday of Ordinary Time Fr. Frederick D. Daley

Conversion

As I was attempting to prepare today’s homily – trying to focus on the powerful Gospel story of the young rich man’s encounter with Jesus – I kept getting distracted by three current events:

1) The shocking, scandalous process leading up to the lifetime appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court;

2) The ongoing revelations of the scandalous clerical sexual abuse and cover-up in our Church;

3) and on Wednesday, the shooting of a 12-year-old boy at the entrance to a convenience store in the middle of the day on John Street, on the north side – in the heart of the neighborhood in which most of our Congolese sisters and brothers live – having lived in hell in refugee camps, fleeing from war in one part of the world, and moving into another war-zone on the city streets of the wealthiest nation in the world.

Sisters and brothers, the present state of our Church and Nation could easily lead one to conclude that all is hopeless…

What does the present moment say to us as baptized disciples of Jesus? I have found today’s Gospel and today’s canonization of Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador in Rome by Pope Francis, a teachable moment for myself and perhaps they may be helpful for you too.

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The selection in 1977 of Oscar Romero as Archbishop of San Salvador delighted that Country’s wealthy and powerful as much is it disappointed the activist clergy and laity of the Archdiocese who were working, in the midst of great danger against an oppressive government, to meet the needs of the poor and bring about justice.

Known as a pious and relatively conservative Bishop, there was nothing in Romero’s background to suggest that he was a person to challenge the *status quo* or to rock the boat. He was a safe choice. No one could have predicted that in three short years he would be renowned as the outstanding embodiment of the prophetic Church: a voice for the voiceless. Nor could one foresee that he would be denounced by his fellow bishops, earn the hatred of the rich and powerful of El Salvador and generate such enmity that he would be targeted for assassination… the first bishop to be slain on the altar since Thomas Beckett in the 12th century.

Sisters and brothers, in some ways we could say he was like the rich young man: he had done all the right things, followed the Commandments – living a good life as a cleric in the Chancery Office. What changed him?

Oscar Romero encountered Jesus in a new way when he was appointed Bishop of the rural, poverty-stricken Diocese of Santiago de Maria. Jesus looked at him with love through the faces of the farmworkers: men, women and children – massacred by the National Guard for simply protesting for basic human rights. The poor and the broken brought about a conversion – a transformation – in Oscar Romero’s life. This profound conversion was crystallized when he became Archbishop of El Salvador, when his close friend, Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande, was assassinated as a result of his commitment to social justice.

This profound transformation – conversion – astonished his friends *and* his foes. From a once timid and conventional cleric, there emerged a fearless and outspoken champion of justice.

In 1980, weeks before his death, Romero sent a letter to President Jimmy Carter, appealing for a halt to further US military assistance to the Salvadoran government “thus avoiding greater bloodshed in this suffering country.”

On March 23, 1980 – the day before his death – he appealed directly to the military, calling on them to refuse illegal orders:

“…*we are your people*, the peasants you kill are *your own* brothers and sisters.

 When you hear the voice of the man commanding you to kill, remember instead,

 the voice of God: “*Thou shalt not kill”*! In the name of God, in the name of our

 tormented people – whose cries rise up to heaven – I *beseech* you, I *beg* you, I

 *command you: stop the repression!”*

That was it; he crossed the line-in-the-sand.

The next day as he was saying Mass in the Chapel of the Carmelite Sisters’ cancer hospital, where he lived, a single rifle shot was fired from the rear of the Chapel. Romero was struck in the heart and died within minutes. He was immediately acclaimed by the people of El Salvador and throughout Latin America, as a true martyr and saint. Today the whole Church affirms that acclamation at his canonization by Pope Francis in Rome.

In an interview two weeks before he died, Bishop Romero said:

“I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that as a Christian,

I do not believe in death, but in the Resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again

in the Salvadoran people… a Bishop will die, but the Church of God – The People –

will never die.”

Sisters and brothers, our Church is in crisis, our Nation is in crisis… . Like the rich young man, like Bishop Oscar Romero, Jesus is looking at us, as disciples, with love – and is inviting us to a deeper conversion, a deeper transformation… The *status quo*, business-as-usual, is no longer working. And: like the rich young man, we have a choice.

It seems to me that key to that transformation in our Church and Nation, is to see the face of Christ in the faces of the poor and marginalized, the immigrant, the refugee, victims of sexual abuse, racism, sexism, homophobia, victims of global inequality…

Like St. Francis saw Jesus in the face of the leper;

Like Dorothy Day saw… in the faces of the homeless and destitute in the Bowery in New York;

Like Mother Theresa saw… in the faces of the dying in the ghettos of Calcutta;

Like Msgr. Brady saw… in the faces of African-Americans suffering from racism on the south side of our city;

Like the *Spotlight* reporters at the Boston Globe in 2002 saw… in the faces of God’s innocent children victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests and the scandalous cover-up by the bishops….

As Pope Francis reminds us over and over: if the Church is to have any credibility in the 21st century, if there is *any* hope for healing — we must become “…*a poor church for the poor*.”

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Sisters and brothers, our task as people of faith is to join together with other people of goodwill to re-create more equitable, open and inclusive systems and structures in our Church and our Nation and to call forth a transformation of power *from* the power of domination *to* the power of compassionate solidarity. New possibilities will emerge for *genuine empowerment* grounded in community.

When it all feels so hopeless, remember the terrible paradox of Christian faith that defies human definition of power: In the moment of absolute powerlessness, the complete self-emptying of Jesus on the cross, God has radically overturned all human notions of power. Out of death comes Resurrection!

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In conclusion, I’d like to share a few words from a recent editorial in the National Catholic Reporter (Aug 17, 2018) reflecting on the clergy sexual abuse and cover-up scandal:

“At this time it seems laity can do very little to affect changes needed to bring

about the solutions to the large issues that plague the Church now. That said, as

any community organizer would tell you, we have the power of the collective.

The next time you go to Mass and as you kneel in that silence that envelops the

church just before liturgy begins, utter a prayer for this battered and wounded body

we call the church. Pray for renewal and inspiration from the Holy Spirit, and pray

for reform of our broken system. Then glance to your left and your right. Kneeling

beside you are likely the strongest allies you have in rebuilding a church so badly in

need of reform.

This affects all of us – the people of God. It’s more than past time that we the laity

demand more of our church leaders.”

Amen!