

Ministering Out of Poverty

2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13

Psalm 32

Galatians 2:16, 19-21

Luke 7:36-50

Years ago, I started a tradition. On a weekend near the anniversary of ordination to the priesthood, I preach on what God has been doing in my priesthood in the past year. I'm sure these sermons mean more to me than to the people who hear them, because this tradition gives me an opportunity to go through my prayer journals and reflect on the common themes, trying to recognize what God has been doing in my priesthood. I began going back through my journals before I left for the Italy pilgrimage, but I had an experience in Italy that seemed to sum up what God has been doing in my life in the past year.

The experience took place in Lanciano, Italy, at the site of oldest and arguably most well-known Eucharistic miracle in the history of the Church. The miracle occurred in the 8th century when a priest doubted the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist while he was celebrating Mass. After the consecration during the Eucharistic Prayer, the Host changed into literal flesh and the wine turned into literal blood. The miraculous Host is still very distinct today despite being more than 12 centuries old.

The thing that struck me the most about the Eucharistic miracle at Lanciano was the void in the Host. Compared to the pristine pieces of unleavened bread that we use for the Eucharist today, the Eucharistic miracle looks very incomplete, like there's a huge hole in it.



As I spent time looking at the miraculous Host, I felt like the Lord was trying to teach me something. In the days that followed, I took that feeling to prayer and it seemed like the Lord was inviting me once again into poverty, into emptiness. That Eucharistic Host spoke to me of Christ's own radical poverty and emptiness, which is spoken of in Sacred Scripture.

For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

-2 Corinthians 8:9

Though [Christ] was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

-Philippians 2:6-8

Throughout the past year, God has invited me in many different ways to embrace the spiritual poverty and emptiness of Jesus Christ. What is this poverty and emptiness? It is our willingness to let go of our own wills, desires, hopes, dreams, and ambitions and surrender everything to God. It is our choice to silence our own egos and pride for the sake of humility. Christ did this—He surrendered everything in order to live His Father’s will and He invites each of His followers to do the same.

God has given me numerous opportunities this past year to experience my own poverty and emptiness. Some of those opportunities include doing Hispanic ministry, which I’ve mentioned before to you. Every time I celebrate Mass in Spanish, I am aware of my utter incompetence and inadequacy. Yet, it is a place of tremendous grace and blessing.

Another opportunity has been celebrating funerals. There have been several particular funerals this year when I was deeply conscious of my poverty and emptiness. I was particularly aware of my inability to comfort the grieving families and take away their pain. God gave me some wonderful opportunities to simply be present with the family and to share in their grief and sit with that poverty and emptiness.

Throughout this year, I have lost more of my hearing. This has been another wonderful opportunity to pray as Job did, “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD!” (Job 1:21b). In all of the situations in our lives when God invites us to reverence our poverty and emptiness, we find two important ironies. The first has to do with our identity and the second has to do with our disposition.

The spiritual poverty and emptiness of our Christian journey does not mean beating ourselves up because we are “inadequate,” but rather, it means receiving our worth from who we are rather than from what we do. Each time I feel unprepared or incompetent in doing the ministry the Lord has called me to do, He is inviting me to remember that my priesthood is about *being* a man of prayer and love more than it is about *doing* great things. There is a real irony in the fact that our complete surrender to God in poverty and emptiness actually increases our authentic worth rather than diminishing it!

Another irony is the fact that poverty and emptiness leads to greater joy. Most of us unconsciously believe that joy is found in being competent, perfect, prepared, etc. Yet, true joy comes with being at peace with whatever happens, even when things don’t go the way we would desire them or expect them to go. I had a wonderful experience of this on the Eucharistic pilgrimage. We went to Siena to see the Eucharistic miracle there, but our tour guide did not seem to understand why we were there and instead told us all about the horse races of Siena. When we finally did get to the church where the Eucharistic miracle was, the tour guide did not tell us about the miracle and, through a strange set of faux pas, we ended up getting kicked out of the church! At first I was angry, but God reminded me of the importance of finding joy in our poverty and emptiness. Once again, “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD!”

As I celebrate this weekend my eleventh year of priesthood, I am grateful for and humbled by the fact that God loves me and has chosen to share the priesthood of His Son with me. I am also grateful for all of your prayers and support, without which I could not be a priest. I encourage all of us to take some time in prayer this week to reflect on the poverty and emptiness that we have been experiencing in our lives and to see how God wants to use it to deepen our awareness of who we really are and find greater joy!

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Take some time in prayer thinking about the poverty and emptiness in your life. List in your prayer journal the hopes, desires, expectations, and dreams that have failed to be realized in your life. Ask God to show you how He is using this poverty and emptiness to make you more like Christ and how He wants to use them to increase your joy.