

## 18th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME—B (August 2, 2009)

Fr. Jerry Kopacek

First, I want to remind you that Archbishop Kucera, former and retired archbishop of Dubuque, will be speaking at the Cellar in downtown Waterloo this Wed., August 5, at 7 p.m. as part of the “Summer at the Cellar” series. He will be addressing the question of the place of God in our modern world. The archbishop is a very gifted speaker; I would invite you to attend. He will stay here at St. Ed’s that night and then will be main celebrant at our regular 7:30 Mass the next morning (Thurs.). We will be honored to have Archbishop Kucera here; I would also invite and encourage you to attend that Mass if you can.

In the gospel last week, we heard the beginning of chapter 6 of John’s gospel: how Jesus multiplied a few loaves of bread into enough to feed thousands of people. In today’s passage from John 6, the conversation turns from that miracle involving bread to Jesus as the bread of life. We will hear more from this chapter over the next three weeks as Jesus teaches and explains more and more deeply what he means by calling himself the Bread of Life. We will also see how Jesus’ discourse becomes ever more explicitly a teaching about the Eucharist—feeding on his flesh and drinking his blood.

Teaching and the Eucharist: two of the most important facets of Jesus life and mission during his time on earth, and the Church continues to give special attention and importance to those same tasks. Many of the saints gave particular priority there as well; I would like to focus on one of those saints today—St. John Vianney. He was the pastor for many years of a small rural parish in France in the mid-1800’s; he died there in 1859. Why focus on this saint in particular today? For one thing, his feast day is this coming Tuesday, Aug. 4. And as it happens, there will not be Mass on Tuesday morning because of a funeral here that day (for Annette Schwake). So I’m glad for this chance to share some of this saint’s story with you today. In addition, this year is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death; because of that, Pope Benedict issued a letter earlier this year to mark that anniversary. In the same letter he spoke more about his hopes for the special “year for Priests” that he announced earlier. And since St. John Vianney is the patron saint of parish priests, the connection is a natural one.

I must confess to feeling a certain awkwardness in speaking about this “Year for Priests”—it runs the risk of sounding like I’m tooting my own horn. One member of this parish who will be nameless but whose initials are John McCoy (oops....) has had some fun with me about this whole thing. I told him that next year, Pope Benedict should declare a “Year for Lawyers”. Actually, that’s not a bad idea—that would cover my past life while this “Year for Priests” covers my present life! In all seriousness, Pope Benedict in his letter says that this year is intended “to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world.” Far from tooting our priestly horns, that is a real challenge—one that cannot be accomplished by our own efforts, but instead depends completely on the grace of God. Ordination to the priesthood is indeed a great gift and privilege, but it does not erase our own weaknesses, sinfulness or selfishness. Priests need and depend on the grace, mercy and strength of God no less than anyone else, and probably more so. To that end, I thank you most sincerely for your prayers for me and for all priests—we need them and truly rely on them. Thank you especially for your willingness to join in the ‘prayer for priests’ before the Masses during this year—it is greatly appreciated.

At the end of that prayer is the invocation: “St. John Vianney, pray for us.” So let’s return to this saint who Pope Benedict offers for our reflection. John Vianney was born in 1786 and grew up at a time when the Catholic faith and Church in France faced many serious challenges, born internal and external. The French Revolution had attempted to destroy the Church, but a certain worldliness and lukewarmness in certain elements of the Church did not help matters at all. Our future saint grew up in a pious family, and

his own strong faith led him to the seminary which was a real challenge for him since academic studies were not his strong suit. He was finally ordained and was assigned to the parish in Ars, a village of about 230 people, and he remained there till his death 41 years later. The spiritual condition of the parish was very poor when he arrived, so he dedicated his efforts to the conversion and spiritual revival of his people. To that end, he gave special focus and energy to their education in their Catholic Christian faith—the basics about who he called “the good God” and his love and desire for our salvation through Jesus his Son. In a special way, John Vianney led his parishioners back to the sacraments as particularly powerful encounters with Jesus Christ. He himself had a deep love for the Eucharist and a genuine devotion to Jesus Real Presence.

But John Vianney was perhaps most renowned for his ministry in the sacrament of penance. As his reputation for wisdom and holiness spread throughout France and the rest of Europe, people would come to him for this sacrament from near and far; he would spend some 14-16 hours every day hearing confessions. That is not an exaggeration; it is well attested. And his confessional did not have a soft, comfortable chair, heat in the winter or air-conditioning in the hot summers. It is also said that St. John Vianney had the gift of reading souls—he knew the sins a particular person had committed before that person confessed them. In case you are wondering, I do not have that gift... He dedicated so much time to confession precisely because he wanted people to know the truth and the power of God’s infinite love and mercy. At one point he said: “The good Lord knows everything. Even before you confess, he already knows that you will sin again, yet he still forgives you. How great is the love of God!” How great indeed.

No wonder the Church honors St. John Vianney as the patron saint of parish priests; no wonder Pope Benedict focuses on him in this year dedicated to priests. In many ways, of course, church and parish conditions have changed greatly since his time—the size of parishes, number of priests and their new kinds of responsibilities, and so on. But his zeal for souls for Jesus’ sake and his desire and work for the sanctification and growth in holiness for his people are just as relevant, timely and important as examples for priests today as they have ever been.

In the gospel today, Jesus said that the work of God that all of us are called to do is to ‘believe in the one he sent.’ Jesus Christ is the One sent by God; Jesus is the irreplaceable foundation, the cornerstone of the priesthood, not to mention our hope for eternal life. We each need the grace of God, we each need the prayerful help of each other. Know that we priests pray daily for every one of you, the holy people of God. Know also our deep and sincere gratitude and appreciation for your prayers for us. Believe me, we need them and we rely on them. To the degree that we priests mess up (and we most certainly do mess up!), we can only rely on God’s mercy, your forgiveness, and your prayers for the ongoing conversion we need so that we may be the priests Christ calls us to be. St. John Vianney, please pray for us all.