

The Chrismal Mass
The Renewal of Ordination Vows
Luke 4:16-21

a homily given by The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill
at Saint John's Cathedral, Denver,
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"But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

—*Luke 4:30*

"Too much religion."

That's what I said, firmly, clearly, with great conviction, and with no small amount of irritation. "Too much religion." And I said it of all places in Jerusalem, the Holy City, just outside the doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

I was traveling at the time with a group of high school students. We were on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They had prepared a liturgy with prayers, reflections, and the appropriate readings from scripture, and we had walked the Via Dolorosa like so many other groups had done before us, stopping along the way, marking the Stations of the Cross, as we followed in the footsteps of Jesus.

It was not without incident, however. For along the way we had been taunted relentlessly by school children. Other passersby by simply spat on the ground in our direction in disgust. The Calvary Chapel was a veritable Eucharistic assembly line as one group followed so closely upon the heels of another that the altar was being literally cleared and set at the same time while people cued up to put their hand through a hole in a piece of plexiglass in order to touch the rock on which Jesus was crucified. Guards angrily told us not to pray even in a whisper at the last Station of the Cross, fearful that we would disturb a gathering of bishops in the main part of the church. And as we departed under the watchful eyes of security cameras and guards bearing machine guns, I watched a woman, on her knees, bent over a well-worn stone near the doors, caressing the stone, weeping copiously over it, kissing it repeatedly, and rocking back and forth in some kind of despair and agony (or ecstasy, I couldn't tell which). It was, I thought, a religious experience of a "different" sort. And having seen any number of strange displays of religious behavior already on the same trip, it was, all of it, the proverbial straw that broke this camel's back. And that's when I said it, right when Tom Shaw came up to me expectantly, eager to know my reaction to this my first visit to this great religious shrine. He said, raising his eyebrows and with the slightest of grins on his face, "Well, what do you think?" And that's when I said it, without thinking, without hesitation, and with no small amount of irritation.

"Too much religion." I said it plainly but forcefully. I wasn't particularly angry, rather just disappointed and saddened. I thought that all of it simply missed the mark: failed to make apparent the absolute goodness, the unbounded Love, that is God.

It is always sad to observe the many and varied ways in which religious faith is co-opted and used to rationalize and to justify and glorify our own agendas. There is always the temptation before us that we mistake the vehicles of faith for faith itself and thereby lose track not only of God but of ourselves in the process. Religious affiliation, theological preference, length of tenure, number of books read, degrees earned, work experience or skill sets acquired—none of it provides any particular safeguard or immunity. The false-self, it seems, is more than happy to play itself out in any venue it is given. Liberal or conservative, progressive or orthodox, Christian, Muslim, or Jew—whatever self-selected, or otherwise imposed, label we wear, the temptation is always there that we subvert the purposes of the divine will to a will of our own making. And the more engaged or the more involved we become with the Church, I dare say, the greater the risk.

It is an inescapable truth, both a wonderful and wonderfully frustrating truth, that puts every one of us on the same very level playing field. This truth: that God insists that we accept God on God's terms.

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus says to the people in the synagogue in Nazareth.¹ And they are pleased and amazed at the graciousness of his words. And at the same moment, somehow in the course of trying to take in Jesus' words, somehow in the course of trying to appropriate the experience of Jesus, they miss the mark. They fail to see the divine presence, the Word incarnate, the wonderfully life-giving and freeing Good News, among them. They get it completely and they don't get it at all and all at the same time. As it is in our own lives, it is not entirely clear quite how it happens, but happen it does. Amazement turns to rage and rage turns to violence and here, at the very beginning of Luke's gospel, before his ministry has even begun to gain much traction, Jesus, the very Light of God that is shining into the world, is driven out. And then this cryptic and cautionary phrase from Luke: “But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”²

There it is, at the very beginning of our relationship with Jesus just as it is at the end. God insists that we accept God on God's terms. Which is why this season (with its invitation to simplicity) and this Holy Week (with its invitation to walk in the self-emptying way of the cross) is not only important but necessary.

I will never forget the first Maundy Thursday service I attended—1974, Trinity Church, Fort Worth, Texas. I knew it had something to do with the last supper. I had heard that the altar would be stripped. I had been told that the service would end in silence, that the church would remain open for prayer all night, and that it all had something to do with keeping watch with Jesus in the garden. But even so, it caught me completely by surprise.

At the end of the service, the lights were dimmed, and in complete silence two of the clergy began to remove things from the altar—slowly, deliberately, reverently, just

¹ Luke 4:21

² Luke 4:30

one thing at a time. First the communion vessels—paten and chalice, burse and veil, purificators and corporal, each silently taken away to the sacristy. Then came the candles and the candelabra. Then the fair linen on the altar. Then the lining under the fair linen. Then the superfrontal. Then the frontal. Each of them carefully rolled up or folded. I didn't know frankly that there were so many layers of things on an altar. I sat in silence watching. And each time I thought they were done, it seemed that there was yet one more thing to be taken away until there was nothing left but the bare stone of the altar. But even then there was more. They started taking the cushions from the seats, the kneelers from the altar rail, the chairs in the sanctuary—each of them carried away in the same silent rhythm. It seemed relentless. They took away the books—the prayer books and the missal. They even took away the bible itself. Surely, I thought, they must be done. It seemed, in a sense, to be almost too much. Then came the aumbry—the doors left wide open, the curtains removed, the sacrament gone; it was simply empty, vacant, like a house robbed it seemed. And even then there was more to be taken away. One of the clergy came back out with a ladder—a ladder of all things; something you would buy at Home Depot. It was so pedestrian. He set it up unceremoniously and climbed up to the sanctuary light. I thought he was simply going to blow it out, which he did, but then he reached up, took hold of the chain, unhooked it, and took it away. Even the light was taken away.

It was finished. The service had ended, and people began to shuffle silently out of the church. But I could not move. The doors were wide open. A warm Texas breeze was blowing ever so gently into the Church. I could hear the traffic on South University Boulevard passing by. There was, I knew, a whole world out there through those doors, and yet I could not move. I could not move. I didn't have the language for it at the time. Indeed it was then, and still is, beyond words. It was as if my heart, like the altar, had been stripped too, all the clutter and accumulation silently, deliberately, reverently stripped so that I, like the sanctuary, was left empty. And in that space there was in some inexplicable yet wonderful way, Jesus—only Jesus, God alone, pure unbounded Love, and there was no place else to be.

Would that these glimpses, these grace-filled foretastes of the heavenly banquet, last longer. But this, I believe, is what God does with us. This, I believe, is the activity of the Holy Spirit working within us, indeed working within the Church itself—always interceding, as Paul puts it, with “sighs too deep for words”³—silently, deliberately, relentless, reverently, stripping away the clutter and accumulation that we all too easily place upon the altars of our hearts; stripping away those things that we mistake for God but are not God; clearing it out, removing it from within us and among us, so that we might come to see, to really see God for who God is.

Which brings me to the cross that is the heart of this Holy Week, the cross that is itself the promise of new life. It's a good place for us to be as we clergy renew our life's vows and are thereby put in mind of the things to which we give our hearts, our selves, our souls, our bodies. What do you see? What do you see when you look at the cross? Just Jesus. Jesus alone. Absolutely stripped. Nothing else. His face bloodied and beaten

³ Romans 8:26

by a sinful and broken humanity, to be sure. But more. The very image and likeness of God fully revealed: skin and bone, flesh and blood, the fullness of our humanity, heart, mind, body, soul, given up, given over, poured out completely, given fully for the other, the fulfillment of the Law, pure unbounded Love.

That, my sisters and brothers, is not too much religion. It is the Way.

—*Amen.*