

“A Reason for Your Hope”

Homily for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Cycle A for Christ the King Catholic Church in Richland Washington on the 50th Ordination Anniversary of Father Thomas Champoux of the Diocese of Yakima

Acts 8:5-8; 1 Peter 3:15-18; John 14:15-21

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! Peter proposes these powerful words as a compass for the spiritual life of the early Church: “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope...”

Give “...a reason for your hope....” When I hear those words I can’t help but recall a few snap-shot memories Fr. Tom Champoux has shared from his 50 years of priestly ministry.

The first snap-shot is about his father. Growing up in Yakima, Father Champoux recalled his own father going out towards Tropic – west of Yakima – to people who were really poor – often the “okie” migrant workers, African-Americans or the newly arriving “bracero” families from Mexico. He’d provide medical care for those who couldn’t pay.

More broadly we have a large number of immediate and extended family here tonight who have been so instrumental in Fr. Thomas Champoux’s life. I know from my more casual conversations with him that you are not simply a snap-shot but a huge photo of love and care for him as he is for you. I am so grateful for the many ways you’ve walked with him these many years and made of him a Eucharistic offering for all of us. So I want to acknowledge – not only Fr. Tom Champoux’s father but also his whole family here tonight. Would you kindly stand!

The second snapshot is someone both Fr. Tom Champoux and I also know but that many of you may not know: that of Tom Kobayashi in Seattle. Father Champoux met Tom while still a seminarian many years ago. Tom Kobayashi’s claim to fame is this: He is the oldest and longest serving member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in the United States.

What makes Tom so extraordinary is that when – during World War II – he and his family were deported along with thousands of other American citizens of Japanese ancestry to Camp Minidoka in Central Idaho, Tom Kobayashi kept the charism of the St. Vincent de Paul Society alive in that relocation camp. Their chapter of the St. Vincent de Paul Society had no money and had no material goods to distribute. But Tom started catechetical classes.

From his internment camp on December 31st 1942 Tom wrote: “The brothers [members of the society] are doing their best work now and the result can be seen in the number of the non-Catholics receiving instruction. Our brothers can look back on the last nine months spent in the assembly and relocation centers and say that much has been accomplished. May the New Year increase our flock a hundredfold. Pray for us.”

I might add that when I was pastor in the south end of Seattle, I had parishioners of Japanese ancestry who were brought into the Catholic Church by Tom Kobayashi when they were quite young and living at Camp Minidoka.

Tom Kobayashi was one of those extraordinary early missionaries in social ministry and outreach. I raise this because before there was a Catholic Charities here in Yakima, our diocese was served by a Yakima Bureau with both the old Seattle Diocesan Council of Women as well as the St. Vincent de Paul Society taking the lead with a great network of missionary volunteers in serving the poor, the refugees and those families in crisis. These groups formed a kind of missionary nucleus that later developed into both our Seattle and – when the Diocese of Yakima was formed – our Yakima Catholic Charities network of agencies we have today.

Although the Yakima Diocese is not in the top 25 percent of dioceses by size, our Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Yakima *is* in the top 25 percent by size here in the United States. Catholic Charities here in Central Washington has a footprint and reach far out of proportion to the size of the diocese with 210,000 visits by clients each year. That’s about the same number of Catholics we have here in the Diocese of Yakima.

For every Catholic in the Diocese of Yakima someone is being served. Sometimes that’s done mainly through parish and community networks such as PREPARES for pregnant women and sometimes that is through private and government partnerships where we are asked to take on projects that non-Church agencies can not do alone. In so many ways, the ministry Father Champoux both as the agency director of a number of years, and now, as chair of our Catholic Charities Board of Trustees underscores our Church’s deep desire to give those in need “...a reason for hope...” so in that light I’d like to ask all the Catholic Charities folks to stand!

The final snapshot memory is here at Christ the King. A couple of months ago I was here for a presentation on our upcoming Cornerstone Conference which takes place next October in Tacoma. It brings together our Catholic teachings on the gift of life from the moment of conception, with our wider Church teachings on sustaining the gift of life at every stage through acts of justice and mercy. A gentleman came up to me and recalled that he’d dropped a bundle of papers on the street. A car pulled over and the parishioner was stunned to discover that it was Father Champoux collecting the blown papers.

I think this snapshot is emblematic of Father Thomas Champoux's ministry here at Christ the King. The budget here at the parish and its school is larger than the budget for the Diocese of Yakima. However the robustness of this parish and its school is tied directly to the fact that Father Thomas Champoux keenly and sensitively grasps that life has a way of blowing us apart. Hard things happen. People face challenges beyond their emotional capacity. They need God. They need God's grace. They need God's grace embodied in concrete acts of charity and kindness. Father Tom Champoux has embodied this for you and you – the parishioners of Christ the King – by bringing him your challenges have shaped and formed him as a priest who gives you "...a reason for your hope..." So parishioners please stand and let us thank you for forming and shaping Father Champoux into the pastor that bring us all hope.

"Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope..."

Those words of St. Peter might give some context for this final point in the homily which comes – not from me – but from the successor to St. Peter – our Holy Father Pope Francis in his message to all of us here in the Diocese of Yakima dated this last January 23, 2017. Listen carefully:

Sumus Pontifex Fransiscus inter suos Cappellanos adlegit Reverendum Dominum Thomam Clemenem Champoux e Diocesi Yakimensi quod quidem eidem Reverendo Domino opportune significatur.

In light of this communication from our Holy Father Pope Francis may I be the first to congratulate you on the 50th anniversary of your priestly ordination with the new title our Holy Father Pope Francis has given you: MONSIGNOR THOMAS CHAMPOUX. Congratulation MONSIGNOR Champoux on your 50th anniversary of your priestly ordination!