

Courage of Priesthood

Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time on the 60th Anniversary Celebration of Fr. Robert Himes
at St. Henry Catholic Church, Grand Coulee, Washington
Genesis 3:9-15; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! “We look not to what is seen, but what is unseen for what is seen is transitory and what is unseen is eternal.” It seems to me that these words of St. Paul written for the early Christian community and Corinth might be words that summarize 60 years of priestly ministry for our honored Father Robert Himes. Sixty years ago, Father Robert Himes was ordained into the eternal ministerial priesthood of Jesus Christ for a transitory world.

How transitory? Permit me to remind you of the world of 1958. In 1958 the average house cost about \$12,750. The average monthly rent: \$92. Average yearly wages: \$4,600. Gas: \$.25 per gallon! 1958 also saw the launch of Explorer 1 – the first United States satellite. In 1958, the United States was deep into a “Cold War” between the United States and the Soviet Union. Considerable concern grew after the Soviet Union launched the first satellite – before the United States – in 1957. Demands grew for more math and science in the schools. With the upcoming construction of a huge dam on the Volga River, national politics and growing shortages of electrical power meant for more plans and more construction of more power houses and generators. In 1958, Grand Coulee was a growing town with a population larger than today. Indeed, our own construction of this church here in Grand Coulee coincided with the construction of the power plants.

This is why – in the midst of change – “We look not to what is seen, but what is unseen for what is seen is transitory and what is unseen is eternal.” When St. Paul wrote these words, he wrote them to a very small Christian community. The city, itself, boasted a population of about 200,000 free men and another 700,000 slaves. It was a major seaport and trade center. Yet, scripture scholar Wayne Meeks in one of his early works, “The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul,” suggests that the early Christian community at Corinth was very small. The Christians in Corinth at the time of St. Paul numbered about the same as the number of Catholics here in Grand Coulee and Coulee City. Indeed, Wayne Meeks’ research suggests a Christian community of fewer than 200 people.

That research by Dr. Wayne Meeks suggests not only the importance of the ministry Father Robert Himes has shared over these many years in serving smaller and more outlying rural communities, but the importance that you – the parishioners here in the upper Coulee – have for the wider, larger and more populated areas of the Church. You are leaven. You are not only leaven for each other. You are leaven for the wider community. You are leaven for the larger Church. Your smallness forces you to consider how to cut to the essential in living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Your smallness pushes you to focus – not on the transitory – but on the eternal.

“We look not to what is seen, but what is unseen for what is seen is transitory and what is unseen is eternal.” In speaking these words, St. Paul wants to uplift the small Christian community at Corinth so that – though small in number – they can leaven the surrounding city with the timeless gift that is Jesus Christ.

This is why the Church deliberately opens our second reading from Second Corinthians with a clear and direct teaching from St. Paul to the Corinthians on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ: “Brothers and sisters: Since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, *I believed, therefore I spoke*, we too believe and therefore we speak, knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in his presence.”

That phrase of St. Paul, “I believed, therefore I spoke,” seems lifted from Psalm 116, a psalm of thanksgiving prayed during a time of need and affliction. What St. Paul is suggesting to the Corinthian community is that being small in the midst of a secular Greek world and being afflicted in the midst of a Roman occupation is the very stuff of the resurrection. In leaving us this record, the Church suggests that what’s true for the community of Corinth is true for us too.

Sixty years ago, when Fr. Himes was ordained, the diocese was new, young and overwhelmingly English speaking with a strong mixture of German-speaking rural parishioners with English-speaking children. There was but a small scattering of “braceros” from Mexico stemming from the Second World War helping us get the crops in. Today it’s new and young in a different way. The Diocese of Yakima is overwhelming Hispanic with the average age of a Catholic being 23 years old. We are very young on the Hispanic side. But we are elderly and declining in population on the English-speaking side. This can feel to us as a kind of affliction and death. The cultural shifts, the language mixtures, the social and political climate in which this is now taking place can heighten this sense of affliction. But the overall growth and the coming of age of a new generation of young and more bilingual Catholics points to the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and gives witness to the words of Pope St. John Paul the Second who spoke of the Church as “eternally young.”

Indeed, this reference to the resurrection by St. Paul points us straight to the Eucharist. As paragraph 1000 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes, the Eucharist is a “foretaste” of the resurrection. For sixty years, Fr. Robert Himes has dedicated himself to this reality. Day by day and Sunday after Sunday he celebrates the Eucharist, providing an eternal anchor in a transitory world. Gathering the sufferings and struggles of his parishioners, Fr. Himes places these on the paten alongside the bread and the wine, offering them to God as our sacrifice of praise for the promise that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In giving of himself to the reality of the Eucharist, as a priest Fr. Himes points us back to these words of St. Paul: “We look not to what is seen, but what is unseen for what is seen is transitory and what is unseen is eternal.”

Sixty years is a long time to be a priest. Note that St. Paul also seems to suggest the wear and tear of ministry to the Gospel when he notes: “Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for

the glory of God. Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.”

Fr. Himes, this is what your parishioners have seen in you. This is what former students from Carroll High School and former parishioners from across the Diocese of Yakima see in you every time I post your picture on Facebook. They comment on you, on what you taught, on what you gave and how you pointed them to the eternal. Even as your body ages and your mind may fade you do not grow discouraged in the charge of the Gospel God has given you to the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ. You allow your inner self to be renewed even in the midst of outer afflictions. Your fidelity and your constant presence here is what so many have so appreciated in you. It is the way your life points all of us to the life of Christ.

The world of 1958, the world into which you were ordained sixty years ago is certainly not the world of today. But know how grateful we all are for the way you enter into our lives as a humble servant-priest. Know of how grateful we all are for the way you have helped us live the words of St. Paul in our scriptures today: May all of, “...look not to what is seen, but what is unseen for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal.” Peace be with you! Congratulations on sixty years of priestly ministry.