

Blessed

Homily for the Funeral Mass of Father Chuy Ramírez of the Diocese of Yakima

Matthew 5:1-12a

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"Dichoso" is the first word of our Gospel from St. Matthew we just proclaimed. That word might be the interpretative key for understanding the life and ministry of our brother, Father Chuy Ramírez as a priest for the Diocese of Yakima.

During an interview on Radio KDNA this last Monday, news director Francisco Rios reminded me that Father Chuy was very key in developing bilingual liturgies as a newly ordained priest. How ironic that this first word in our Gospel today is so divergent in its English and Spanish translation from the original Greek text. "μακάριος" or "Makarios" is the original Greek word. It refers to a blessing that is spoken. English speakers would hear this opening word from the Gospel of St. Matthew rendered as "blessed" but Spanish speakers here the word "dichoso." "Dichoso" captures the underlying meaning of the original Greek text that blessings exist because someone speaks the word of blessing.

"Dichoso." That word captures the personality of Father Chuy Ramírez. He was all about speaking words of blessing. I first met Father Chuy when I was a seminarian. I was in my first year of theology as a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Seattle at the Theological College of the Catholic University of America. He was in his final year of theology as a seminarian for the Diocese of Yakima. I do not remember many seminarians from fourth theology. But I do remember Fr. Chuy as a seminarian. He was at my door seeking help with his theology papers since he struggled with English. Many of us felt sorry for him so we helped him with his academic work. But he also readily helped all of us with our Spanish too. Sometimes a little too much!

"Dichoso." Fr. Chuy could speak a word of blessing to every seminarian because Fr. Chuy knew every seminarian. He knew every one of the one-hundred and sixty names. He knew their stories. He knew their backgrounds. He knew their personal histories. He made a point of speaking to first year seminarians in the hallway, on the sidewalk on our way to classes, in the dining room and in the television room. Sometimes he would break the silence of the chapel bursting with a word of "blessing." Indeed, Father Chuy did not have an unspoken thought.

As a Seattle priest for sixteen years, I had lost track of Fr. Chuy. But then I became Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle. Fr. Chuy and I ended up together at a Mass with Bishop Sevilla. I do not recall the occasion. But we exchanged phone numbers. Suddenly I had messages from people in need on my personal cell phone. Father Chuy had helped a transient person who was in Harborview hospital. I was supposed to find resources for him to get back to Eastern Washington. I had no idea my personal cell phone number would become an instrument of evangelization for Father Chuy and his friends. Father Chuy was quite specific who he believed should receive a word of blessing. He expected us to live out the full meaning of this opening word in today's Gospel from St. Matthew. "Dichoso."

When I became Bishop of Yakima, I got to know the very same Fr. Chuy. He was always enthused to pray for his sick parishioners. He would know their ailments and illnesses. He wanted to calibrate and aim his prayer to the specific need of the person before him. Sometimes he invited parishioners to do the same.

As a result, parishioners could be surprised to learn how many of their fellow parishioners learned details of their physical ailments. But Fr. Chuy wanted everyone to be as specific in their prayers as he was. It never occurred to Father Chuy that his sick parishioners might not want everyone to know about their illnesses. Rather, Father Chuy wanted everyone to live the full meaning of "dichoso" and speak a prayer of blessing in the face of sickness.

In many ways, Father Chuy faced his own illness and his approaching death the very same way. Shortly after his diagnosis, I could see that he was very weak. I imparted absolution and the apostolic blessing upon him. He focused on every spoken word of blessing. The day of his death. Father Alexandro Trejo and Fr. Chuy's sister Martha prayed together with him. Martha commented to me that he died as a priest should die -- in prayer.

These details of Father Chuy in life and in death underscore the crucial nature of these beatitudes we heard proclaimed in our Gospel from St. Matthew. Moral theologian, Father Servais Pinckaers suggests that this fifth chapter of St. Matthew is the interpretive key that unlocks the entire Gospel of St. Matthew. Indeed, after Pope Saint John Paul II commissioned the writing of a new catechism in 1985, Father Pinckaers was given the task of drafting the third part of the catechism titled "The Life of Christ." In contrast to previous catechisms, Father Pinckaers began the moral teachings from the life of Christ, not with the Ten Commandments like previous catechisms, but with the nine beatitudes. Of course, each of the nine beatitudes begins with the word "Dichoso."

Imitating Jesus, our mission is to speak words of blessing: to the poor, the meek, to those who mourn, those who hunger, those desiring mercy, purity of heart, those who seeking peace and those who are persecuted. This blessing spoken in the darkness of human suffering and struggle is at the core of our identity as followers of Jesus.

In his scholarly writings, Father Pinckaers suggests that Martin Luther made a fundamental error in his thought during what today we know as the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther emphasized the Ten Commandments over the Beatitudes because he believed that only a spiritual elite could really live and assimilate the Beatitudes of Jesus. Yet as Catholics we believe that the Beatitudes of Jesus lie at the heart of the moral and spiritual life. Today we note that our Catechism of the Catholic Church begins the moral teaching of the Church with the Beatitudes of Jesus. It is through the lens of the Beatitude of Jesus that we read and assimilate the Ten Commandments.

It seems to me we can best read these last thirty-four years of Father Chuy Ramírez as a priest for the Diocese of Yakima as one long extended blessing, where God spoke words of blessing to him and he spoke words of blessing to us. We give thanks to God for many words of blessing we received through the priesthood of Father Chuy Ramírez. We give thanks for the great blessing for his sister Martha with us today, as well as his extended family here and in Mexico. We give thanks for the fraternity shown by Father Alexandro Trejo as well as his many brother priests who visited him these last few weeks. We give thanks for the hospital workers, the hospice workers as well as the army of parishioners who provided so much love and support these final weeks of Father Chuy's life. How fitting that we celebrate this final Eucharist, that great act of thanksgiving, for we have seen the dying and rising of Jesus present in the life of Father Chuy. May we become the Beatitude of Jesus we consume at this altar. May we resolve to live that word "dichoso" more fervently in our lives as Christians.