

The Assumption of the Virgin Mary – Memorial for Fr. Norm Dickson, S.J

Homily – August 15, 2021

(Revelation 11: 19, 12: 1-6, 10, I Corinthians 15: 20-27, Luke 1: 39-56)

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

We celebrate this summer feast in honor of Mary, the very best of our human race, who placed her trust completely in God and so shared in her Son’s victory over the grave and was assumed bodily into heaven. For us in the northern hemisphere, this is the best time of the year. We’ve feasted earlier in June on luscious strawberries. In July, tasted the sweet and sour cherries harvested from the orchards. And now the best – it is time for sweet corn ripe in the fields, and slicing tomatoes plump on the vine just in time for the parish picnic.

It is a feast of joy to honor Mary’s “yes” to God as we hear in the gospel her great song of praise again, that proclaims a great revolution in which the world’s values are turned upside down, the mighty and the rich are brought low, the meek, the poor and the lowly are raised up. And as the first among believers, Mary, the sinless one, who was the first to accept Jesus into her life, was the first to share in his victory over the grave in her own body.

While this is a joyous celebration, there is a tinge of sadness in it much like Jesus’ own Ascension into heaven. As Jesus ascended into heaven in glory, the disciples felt a sense of loss. He disappeared from their sight, forcing a change they had not anticipated. Gradually they would come to experience his presence in new and powerful ways through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In the Eastern Church, the celebration of Mary’s Assumption is very ancient and is also called “The Dormition of Mary,” the falling asleep of Mary. The many icons that depict the scene show the disciples gathered around Mary’s death bed in sorrow, grieving the loss of the Mother of God, the Mother of the Church. In Jerusalem right outside the gates of the Old City, there is a German Benedictine Abbey Church that dominates the skyline, the Dormition Abbey. There pilgrims kneel in the crypt chapel around a marble image of Mary asleep in death before her glorious Assumption. It honors the very human need to grieve losses, to ponder the central truth of our faith, that we must first die with Christ, if we are to rise with him.

Today we honor the memory of Fr. Norm Dickson, the beloved pastor of St. Mary's and St. Al's for over ten years, who died ten months ago from recurring cancer. We remember him with gratitude and joy, with our summer picnic and the sharing of memories. But there is some sadness as well because there wasn't a chance to say goodbyes because of COVID restrictions. Here is what Bob Bowersox, our Director of Parish Life, relates about Fr. Norm's departure from the parishes:

"The final two weekends when he was unable to say Mass, he said he sat in the rectory and watched in the parking lot, he said he felt empty and out of sorts as he belonged in Church saying Mass. In our final conversation as he left, we hugged, and he thanked me for everything and said he really appreciated everything. He really wanted to celebrate Mass in the parishes and address everyone to let them know what was happening but I'm sure he would not have said goodbye. When we came to that point in the conversation, I told him we'd be praying for him and that we would see him soon. He agreed as he got into the car with his fellow Jesuit who was driving him."

Fr. Norm wasn't a man to give into lots of emotion, but I wonder what he would have said if he had been given the chance. Now we know that he was a good Jesuit, a man of letters, always quoting the latest book he was reading in his homilies. In fact, his books are laid out on tables in the hallway for the taking, in the Jesuit tradition. (They take the vow of poverty, and when a Jesuit dies, all his possessions are laid out on tables in a common room for everyone else to take.) Fr. Norm's books are mostly commentaries on sacred scripture, including in German, some Hebrew and Greek, and books on Ignatian spirituality that the Northern Michigan Friends of the Jesuits, who are with us here today, would appreciate.

A book not on the tables that Fr. Norm may have been familiar with and would have appreciated is Dr. Ira Byock's book, *"Dying Well: Four Things that Matter Most."* (Penguin Books, 1998) These four things are words that if not spoken as a loved one is departing this world, can still give expression to those who survive as a loved one is remembered and honored.

The first thing we need to say, according to Dr. Byock, is: THANK YOU. Fr. Norm, a great storyteller, would probably tell again the story of how he came to be your pastor. Here is Bob Bowersox again:

“I’m sure he would have recounted how he came to the Diocese with the intention of being stationed in Empire so he could stay at the Jesuit residence in Omena. The bishop told him he was needed in Kalkaska and Fife Lake and he visited the parishes and decided to accept. He often said that was one of his best decisions. He really found a home in the parishes, loved the people and the life in the parishes. It also worked out great for Omena.”

You became his home, and in his final days, even though his health was failing, he wanted to be with you, even though his ability to minister was diminished. He reluctantly was taken to Columbiere in Clarkston on the advice of his doctors and nurses. “Thank You” for your love and support would certainly be on his lips.

The second thing that Dr. Byock says needs to be expressed is: I’M SORRY. Every pastor, no matter how loving, knows that you cannot please everyone. A parish is like a big family – there is always some kind of conflict or issues. Besides being a loving pastor, Fr. Norm was a prophet, fearlessly preaching the Social Gospel of the Church, especially about war and peace. I understand that his favorite passage in the Old Testament was Isaiah’s great vision of peace: “They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks ... they will never again train for war.” (Isaiah 2:4)

Undoubtedly, Fr. Norm’s five years in the Sudan, Africa and three years in Kenya deepened his passion for peace. He helped found a Catholic High School in Wau, Sudan in 1982, only to have it closed by the violence of the second Sudanese civil war. He hated war, having seen violence and bloodshed face to face. His love for the poor was the inspiration for God’s Garden in the field behind St. Mary’s which provides fresh vegetables for the local food pantries. Fr. Norm’s obituary quoted him as saying: “... the garden did more to pull the people together than anything I ever said from the pulpit.”

Fr. Norm ruffled feathers at times, but this also attracted people to his preaching here. He’d say, “I’m sorry” if you were hurt, but he would perhaps agree with the bishop who ordained me who was fond of ending the Mass by saying: “Go in peace, and may the Gospel disturb you!” At confirmations he would say: “Go in peace, and may the Holy Spirit disturb you!”

The third thing Dr. Byock says we need to say to one another in our goodbyes is: I LOVE YOU. Fr. Norm was from the generation of men who did not gush with sentimental words like “I love you.” But he would show it. He’d listen to you, he’d ask “how are you?” He’d mentor people in spiritual direction and in 12 Step programs. He buried your dead, baptized your children, married off your young people, and celebrated the Word and Sacrament with you at this altar countless times. You showed your love for him in your respect and in occasional gifts at Christmas that he quickly spent and turned into sumptuous Christmas and New Year’s meals for his beloved Jesuit brothers in Omena.

And in a quirky new rite in the Roman Catholic Liturgy of the Mass which is not in the missal at the altar (I checked!), he showed his love by stepping down into the aisle after the homily to honor you. He invited guests to stand and asked them where they were from. He honored your wedding anniversaries and birthdays with the clashing of cymbals by the altar servers.

Lastly, Dr. Byock says that we have to say: GOODBYE. When we say “goodbye,” it is really a blessing. It comes from the Old English, “God be with ye,” or in French, “Adieu” or in Spanish, “Adios.” Undoubtedly, Fr. Norm would have prayerfully imparted his priestly blessing to all of us with love.

And so, in honor of the Blessed Mother on her feast day, I am now going to ask the altar server to give her a cymbal clash. She is our mother, so we better give her a second clash! And now in memory and love for Fr. Norm, another loud cymbal clash! AMEN.

Fr. Mike Verschaeve