

"Rest"

Homily of July 20, 2003

by Fr. Michael Dibble

Our Lord, today, says, "Take a rest..... Take a rest." And then he compares us to sheep that he feels pity for because sometimes we feel we are without a shepherd. And, he is the shepherd. So, take a rest, R...E...S...T.

Reprieved. If he is our shepherd, we have been reprieved. We can be Enthusiastic. We can be Smart. And we can be Tranquil. We start off with reprieved. You have been reprieved, in a way, because I have taped a little wrist watch to this lectern. And I just wrote down, with this red pen, a certain time to stop. And I have an ally in the audience who will signal me, very discreetly, that the time is up. And, since such an eager helper has been already employed, there is no need for some of you eagerly to send forth flares or firecrackers. The watch and the helper will help me. So, reprieved!

Only way, as you know by now, I can do any of these materials from the gospel are by examples. Remember I told you, a couple of weeks ago, about the guy who came home from IBM and just sat on the floor, Monday morning, "I can't do that anymore."..... And he got better. Another man, back in New York City, a Wall Street man, had several kids and the morning was always rushed, getting to work, would go into the bathroom and shut the door and he would sit on the rim of the tub. And I picked him because his prayer was, "Lead me, Good Shepherd." Not pietistic.... solid, spiritual, biblical sanity. "Lead me, Good Shepherd." You don't have to feel wonderful. Most of the time we say it when we feel awful. We're tired. "Lead me, Good Shepherd." It paid off. It paid off.

Now, when I studied with Father Raymond Brown, (He's a great American scholar of the Bible, respected in the whole world.) and in '92 I took a course with him and he said that Our Lord, when he talked about sheep, was talking about Oriental sheep, the sheep that he was familiar with, in the Middle East. And when an Oriental sheep gets lost, it doesn't keep wandering, as some of us do, they sit down and they lie down. They rest and they bleat until they are rescued. Have you ever seen that beautiful picture of Our Lord, the Good Shepherd? He has a sheep around his neck. Well, according to Raymond Brown, the Oriental shepherd, such as Our Lord knew, had big, big robes, and the robes had cavernous, capacious pockets. So the sheep would be tucked into the pocket, and carried home in Cadillac style. Sheep without a shepherd.... We've got a shepherd. If you didn't believe that, you wouldn't be here this morning. I keep saying that because it is good to remember. Why would you drag yourself out on a hot Sunday to hear some priest babbling, unless..... dogged faith? All right, I believe it, at least cerebrally. You don't have to feel it emotionally.

And the last thing about hanging onto the shepherd, or trying to hold on to the pocket...

I love movies, as I have often mentioned. And I love Hitchcock the most because I love spooky stuff. Most of his movies are excellent, and he was a Catholic. Hitchcock lived and died a Catholic, went to Mass on location all the time, educated by the Jesuits in the golden days when someone like Sartre, the great atheist, could say, "The Jesuits in Europe are the best educators in Europe." And Hitchcock was educated all by Jesuits.

A year before he died, he was interviewed in London, and he was talking about not giving the audience a rest, not giving them a reprieve, not doing it. He said, "There are two ways to shoot a scene in a British movie. You can shoot shock or suspense. Most directors prefer shock. You have two people on the Champs d'Elysees, sipping their pernod, and a couple of seconds you are watching the screen and, in a couple of seconds, everything blows up. The two people are blown sky high. That is shock! Shock is easy and banal.

But, if you want suspense, you have them sitting on the Champs d'Elysees sipping pernod but you bring the camera down so that the audience can see that under the table there is a bomb ticking and the audience is told when the bomb shall go off. And then the camera comes back to the two people chatting, and the bomb is ticking as they are chatting, and the audience is saying, "Aaugh..... out, out.... that table....." Suspense! And then (This stuff never gets reported but it is interesting to me as a movie maven and a Catholic.) Hitchcock then went on to say, "You know, the good Lord frequently keeps us in a state of suspense, praying and waiting under stress." And the interviewer said, "Why?" And Hitchcock said, "I don't know why he permits this kind of suspense. I know that, in the end, it all works out." And finally, we can rest. Any answered prayer in your life was that reprieve.

OK. Number two, enthusiastic... Three scenes of enthusiasm for sheep who have got a shepherd. On Wall Street, one day in 1997, a man knocked on the door in the rectory. I opened the door. I said, "Yes?" He said, "I want to be a Catholic." And I, always the straight man, said, "Why?" And he said, "There are so many people back there," pointing to this big edifice, this office building, "There are so many people back there that hate you Catholics, tear you apart, don't like the Pope, don't like priests, don't like anything about religion. But they are so detestable, that you must be doing something right. I hate them so much that I think I would like to find out why they hate you." He is a Catholic now, and I hope he is a little gentler with his colleagues. Great enthusiasm, from all the wrong reasons, but leading to faith.

The second one was a lady, a young woman, who gave the best religion class in my religion class in twenty-seven years. I taught English and Religion to seniors. And every year, we would have the Right to Life group come, discussing abortion, the tragedy of abortion. And they were excellent. And some of the doctors who were the fathers of some of the kids would come, excellent, powerful adult approach, not scary,

just solid Catholic teaching. But this girl came to me after several years. She was a graduate. She said, "Can I talk to the senior kids so that I see the whole senior class by the end of the week, and not just the girls, but the guys, separately, but I want to talk to all of them." I said, "Yes, but what do you wish to speak about?" She said, "Father, I had that tragedy. I had an abortion. And the guys you have had coming here, the doctors and the specialists, they have been fine. But I would like to talk to them. Please let me." So, I said, "Yes." It was the most enthusiastic religion class in almost three decades. In all the other times, the seniors were respectful and attentive. With her, they were literally projecting forward because she told them about her own self. And I will never forget she ended by saying this, "Kids, been there. Done that.... Don't!" Got a phone call on Tuesday from a graduate who, years later, remembers the gesture this young lady said, "Been there. Done that.... Don't!" She's married. She has kids herself, and she volunteers to help people who have been through the tragedy, who are suffering and who need to be healed. Not scolded and eviscerated.... healed! Most enthusiastic religion class, and I didn't do a thing. She did.

And the third is a guy who went to Princeton, and he was sick to death of Catholicism, "Twelve years of Catholic education!" I'm kidding! He got to Princeton and in October he wrote, "I began to notice something was missing." I'm encapsulating this and rushing it. "But, I know that something is missing," he wrote. "Finally I figured it out. There is no cross in any of the classrooms. There is no cross in any of the kids' dorms. so, I am tacking up a cross over my desk, and it's scary 'cause the guy in the room with me hates religion." After twelve years of Catholic religion that he was choking and surfeited and bored, subliminally he said, "Where's the cross?" He's a very, very devout Catholic now, enthusiasm at last for something hardly noticed. But subliminally, he was enthused.

And now, we are up to smart, fifty percent finished. Last year, I was pushing a book, maybe aggravatingly, called *More Than a Carpenter*, which was a defense, scholarly historical defense of Jesus' existence, his miracles, what he said, and his resurrection, real scholarly, first-rate book, which Borders tells me is selling like hotcakes. And I have no share, no percentage. I don't. This year, it's a much thicker book but don't be scared. If something is interesting, you don't care if it is a long movie, if it is interesting. And if a book is interesting, you are not annoyed. This is called *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. And it's about three of the most dynamic people in the Catholic Church. We have reached "S," smart.... smart people who read themselves into the Church, who are respected throughout the world as intellectuals, as well as spiritually. ... Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor and Dorothy Day. And it's the history of America during forty years. "I hate history!" You won't hate history if you read this book. It's better than video. It just leaps off the page! And here you get these three brainy, smart, going-through-doubts and suffering and pain and coming out smart. You don't have to be ashamed. You can be intellectual, and still be Catholic. The life you save may be your own! That's smart.

And the second smart thing that I had to get smart about was in 1958, when I was in the library in the seminary and I was in the spiritual section. I picked out a book about suffering, written by some Frenchman in the eighteenth century. I went to the back of the book and I found “penance,” little masochist that I was. I got to the section and I found this (a translation from the French), “Do not smack away wasps, bees, mosquitos, or gnats. Allow them to sting you because they are winged warriors of divine wrath!” I ran up the stairs and I showed it to the Spiritual Director that evening. I said, “Read this!” And he turned to me, a very wise, kind man, and he said, “Michael, what do you think of this passage, that you’ve highlighted in a library book?” I said, “I think he wants us to become spiritual giants!” (I used to wear pebbles in my shoes, that whole routine.) He put down the book with a weary sigh and said, “Michael, I seriously doubt you shall become a spiritual giant reading material like this. I can guarantee you will become an intellectual midget.” Direct quote! And then he used the phrase that I have been stealing for centuries since. He said, “Some of this stuff are the biggest pockets of untapped natural gas ever seen on Planet Earth!” He said, “If you want to do penance, put up with the bores and the boors in life, the bullies who won’t like you because of your faith, or won’t like you because of you, putting up with them patiently. dealing with them intelligently.”... Smart... But put away that book, and don’t let the wasps attack. Smack ‘em away!

And the last is tranquil... tranquil... peaceful. The most tranquil bunch of people I ever saw in my life were a group of Trappist monks in Spencer, Massachusetts. On a hot day like this (It was a weekday.) and these Trappist monks, every one of them a veteran of the Korean War (We are talking way back in the ‘50’s now.) and these guys, about seven Trappist monks who take the vow of silence, as you know, were baling hay... baling hay, and they were laughing with a joyousness, a kind of ingenious delight in the work and their shared tranquility. But they were working hard and sweating out there in the field. It was the most tranquil bunch, and yet there they were, hard at work. And I got one of those rushes like sometimes you get... a kind of aaahh! I went back the following year at exactly the same day in July. I was in college and I thought, “OK. Let me see Trappist monks and get the rush again.” You can’t force a spiritual rush. That’s adolescent thinking and I am not cutting on teens. But you can’t. But I remember it to this day. Tranquility can mean, if he is Our Shepherd and he is guiding us, that even busy, under stress we can have a certain underpinning of peace.

Last metaphor: Lady in the hospital once said to me, a lot of physical pain she was in. She said, “You know, I believe in Our Lord.” (She had said that in a kind of little girl way.) “And, despite the pain, I am kind of like a cork, a cork from a wine bottle, and it’s just the cork and it’s on a stormy sea. And the cork is tossed. It’s swished and it’s swished by the waves and if the cork could talk it would say, “I am scared. What is going on?” But, she said, and she said it better than I, “...but the cork stays afloat.” That ‘s what my belief in Our Lord does. The cork stays afloat and the sea dies down

eventually.

OK, now, if I were one of you out there, going through a bad time, I would say, “Enough with the metaphors. I believe Jesus is my Shepherd. I believe that my faith is like a cork that will keep me from sinking, but to continue these metaphors, I would just as soon Jesus put me in the pocket and take me safely home. And if I am a cork, I want to be washed up on some nice clean sunny American beach. I need to rest. And, speaking of rest, my little watch is saying to me (They are tiny little jewel neon messages.) “OK, priest. Time’s up. Give it a rest!”