

“No Despair”

Homily of January 22, 2006

by Fr. Michael Dibble

Our chemistry professor, Father Potter, would stand at the front of the laboratory, the chemistry lab, every time we had a lab. This was junior year of high school, 1951, and Father Potter would stand at the front of the lab and say, “Nil desperandum.... Nil desperandum.” That means, “No despair, don’t despair.” because we were surrounded by highly explosive chemicals and some of us he put way in the back of the lab I guess for safety’s sake. I can never forget Father Potter, “Nil desperandum.” Don’t despair. Let’s tackle this experiment.

When you read the Bible scholars about today’s gospel, the great Catholic biblical experts (There are at least six of them.), they say that basically Our Lord is saying, “No more despair.” He is saying to the Jewish people, “Let’s get going. You guys, let’s go. Come on. Let’s go. Let’s start this whole new coming of the Messiah. Nil desperandum.... You poor beaten-down Jewish tribespeople, beaten up by every pagan tribe for thousands of years.... What you have been waiting for has arrived, the gospel of God, Me.... Nil desperandum. No more despair.”

Now when you read these Bible scholars, it is refreshing because they have done more in the past thirty years than in the two thousand years before, translating from the Aramaic to the Greek, the Dead Sea Scrolls, giving new tra.... We know more about what Our Lord meant and said than we have in the whole history of the Church. I was reading these six books explaining today’s gospel. You know that opening phrase of “proclaiming the gospel of God?” There is an entire long column on the word “OF.” The gospel OF God, the different Greek inflections, what OF could mean.... It could mean the gospel about God, the gospel is God, the gospel.... They really know what they are talking about and it is seeing Jesus as fresh as paint. We know so much more about what he meant, what he was fighting against, what joy he brought. “Gospel” means “good news.” That’s what it means. Good news, not bad. And the hired hands.... They left their old man and the hired hands in the boat. Hired hands! They had money. If you had employees in the fishing business in those days, you had money. So those two guys were leaving a prosperous business and Zebedee is sitting there in the boat watching them go down with Jesus. Father Raymond Brown, one of the best Catholic scholars we ever had, (He died a few years ago in Menlo Park.) talked about this. And what personality Our Lord must have had! What personality! I mean Our Lord’s face, his eyes, his voice.... “Come on. Let’s go.” “....Oh, OK.” What incredible charism, an overused word, Jesus Christ had as a man. “Let’s go.”

Now, it is the middle of January and it’s the end of the best lists time. You know at the end of the year they have the “Best Ten.” Best Dressed Women, The Ten Best Movies, the Ten Best

Books of 2005.... So I made a list, because it is getting close to the end of January, of the best things of this parish. Yes, specifically, distinctly, Christ the King Parish, over the past year. The ten best list, for you and me, for all of us. This place, this locale, this church (And I came up with twenty-four, but don't get scared because I boiled it down to six, six that struck me at this particular moment in our lives.)

The first is a lady was coming to Mass last Sunday, which of course is the beginning of this year but you understand. And she was talking to herself very gently, not to me. She was walking in talking and she said, "This place has restored my faith." She wasn't being dramatic the way I always am. It was a simple declarative sentence. "This place has restored my faith." And I thought, "Me too!" I had not luckily lost my faith, but there is a warmth, a cordiality, a responsiveness around this place that I have never encountered in my life and it's on my list, last year and the whole six years I have been here. There is, and some of you are carrying crosses today that maybe nobody knows but you. But together there is an elation here that I have never found in my past forty-five years as a priest.

When I first moved here, I lived in the old convent for a year and (It was August.) I would walk around here and I would see "Oh, the church doors are open, at six o'clock at night! Seven o'clock at night, still open. Eight o'clock at night, p.m. the church doors are open. People are making a visit, as we used to say. Drop in and make a visit. Nine o'clock at night! In New York, they're bolting the door by five. They haul up the drawbridge. They release sharks into the moat. It's a geographical, accidental blessing that you and I share. But "Nil desperandum," hang on. Don't move.

There's a fella who visits here every summer. He's a former student. He's a writer. He doesn't come to see me. He doesn't . He comes to see this church. He visits friends on the Peninsula, drives all the way up every Sunday in the summer, on holiday, to go to this Mass. In his Christmas card he wrote this year, "When I was a little kid (back in New York) I was sitting in Church (Grammar School) and I'd be sitting there smiling and one Sunday a teacher walked over to my pew and said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Nothing." And the teacher said, "Wipe that smile off your face. You're at Church." And some of us recall that kind of mentality. And in this particular Christmas card about this particular place of worship (His name is Bill.) Bill wrote, "All my life I have held onto the faith. But most of the time in Church I have either been sad or mad. When I go to this place, Christ the King, I'm glad." (Underlined, so I guess I would get the point.) Sad and mad for so many years, still believing, but finally to be glad! Nil desperandum! Don't despair, even some of you carrying crosses today. We're together.

Number two, blessings in disguise, blessings in disguise. Some of you are kind enough to drive me hither and thither, or to Mass some Sunday. I don't have a car. And I've gotten to know many of you. And I've asked you, "Can I mention this?" "...Yes," you have said. Some women and guys have been out of jobs for awhile, downsourced. You know the miserable, wretched cant of today, downsourced. Out of a job. That's tense! That's a tense time. It's scary. But a couple of the people over the past six years have mentioned a couple of examples, waiting for a

new job (They all got jobs, by the way since, not paying as much in every case, but...) I remember one father saying, "In the time I was so nervously looking for a new job, I discovered I not only loved my wife and kids, I like them. I like them. I discovered them." Some of you may think maybe he was drinking or something, but I think some of you know what I mean, just to breathe, a scary time looking for work, to breathe and discover. He used to say when he was busy, tough, tough job in the City and he would be at Mass here on Sunday, you know for a long time, especially during the homily, he would go into a whirligig of worry, about tomorrow, about Monday, about the job. What to worry about? What to do? What not to do? Now, he said, in the time he was without work, he actually listened to the gospel. He rediscovered Jesus and his strength and love and began to breathe. This was on the Christmas card. By the the way some of you were nice enough to take the time to send a Christmas card. I haven't written one since 1961. But I am so grateful that you did, and if I didn't answer it is because you didn't give a return address. But I thank you for taking the time. Nil desperandum! Jesus said to his own best friends, remember in the gospel, "Come apart. Rest awhile," Our Lord said. Right in the middle of busy work, "Let's go for a sail." That's Christ talking. Nil desperandum.

The third is the life of Jesus. When Father and I and the pastor sit over there and we hear about the study groups and the lectures and the talks, they are usually given in this parish, about Jesus, about Christ, about the gospels, about the whole reason we are here. It's so refreshing, after a hard day's work, a hard day at home taking care, you come here at night. (It's crowded!) to talk about Christ. OK. That's a big thing to some of us older priests, refreshing! In high school seminary, I was a junior. I went to see the spiritual director and I said, "Father, I am bothered by concupiscent concepts." Can you believe what a pretentious poop I was?! Ooh! You know, dirty thoughts. Well, I was a junior in high school. And there was a pamphlet that was published in those days by a Father Kelly, and in this pamphlet he literally (And I devoured it and highlighted it!) explains how you can veer from mortal to venial sin depending on the amount of time the concupiscent concept is contained in your cranium. And he listened to me babbling away about how long before I can drive these thoughts.... and finally, Father Doherty said, "Michael, shut up!" And he hauled out from under his desk, for which I am always grateful to this moment, a Life Of Christ. "I want you to read this, Michael." I said, "I know the life of Christ. I have heard the gospels since I was a child." He said, "This is a Life of Christ," way back there in 1951. It tells you about the climate. It tells you about why Jesus' enemies were on his back. It tells you why it took some courage for some guys to leave their businesses and follow him. It tells you how wonderful... It changed... It's dramatic. I am given to melodrama, but that book changed my life. It's all about Christ, about Our Lord who is still alive. He is still with us. And, by the way, some of you have mentioned that your kids don't come to Mass anymore, you know, adult children. Well you weren't Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family in Nazareth. You were a fallible human mother and father. And your kids have wandered away. Well, Jesus talked about dropping seeds. You did the best you could. You sowed the seeds. You've got to leave them in Our Lord's hands. You've got to! Nil desperandum! You did the best you could. Now you pray for them. You don't slam doors or burn bridges. They are your kids and another thing, and this is me talking to me, pick up the morning paper and what a mess this planet is in. What good has Jesus' message done? I said that once out loud to the dog and he looked irritated. "What good is

Jesus' message? Look at the mess...." How long has the human species been on Planet Earth? About a million years, homo sapiens? Well, Our Lord only came two thousand years ago. That's a drop in the bucket of life on this planet. Our Lord sowed some seeds two thousand years ago. We try to water them as best we can. Nil desperandum. Our Lord talked about sowing seeds. Give him time to let these things grow.

Number four: Some of you signed your Christmas cards, "...from Igor, a work in progress, ...from Myrtle, a work in progress." I love the phrase "a work in progress!" Do you remember the story, (Six years ago we talked about this. It's true, not apocryphal.) Michelangelo was working on a big hunk of Carrara marble. Young artist Raphael came to visit and Michelangelo tossed a cloth over the statue, this hunk of marble, that he had been chipping at. He went in to get some wine for his guest, Raphael. And Raphael, while Michelangelo was away pulled down the sheet. And we read that Michel said Raphael was recoiling. When Michelangelo came back with the Port, Raphael said, "What is this monstrosity that you're chipping away at? It's a nightmare, a hunk of this and a claw, a foot?" Michelangelo said, and in Italian, (I've read what he said in Italian. It's beautiful!) "It's a work in progress. It's a work in progress. Come back in a year." Well, it was eighteen months later that Raphael returned. Michelangelo pulled down the sheet, and it was The Pieta, Our Lady holding the dead body of Jesus in her arms, one of the marvels of western civilization. Raphael gasped of course. And Michelangelo said, in beautiful Italian as it was translated to me, "It was a work in progress." You have to wait and be patient, as Our Lord is with you and with me. Nil desperandum.

One thing about Fundamentalists that bothers some of us, non-Catholic and Catholic Fundamentalists, is that they tend to take an occasional phrase and hammer it home out of context. And I think their sincerity is palpable. But, for example, Our Lord once said to his friends, (We're on number four now.) "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Uh-huh. Oh! That's intimidating. That's frightening. Uh-huh. Later.... "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Well, if you hammer that into someone it can so intimidate them that they just run away. The night Our Lord is sweating blood in the Garden, the night he's arrested, remember, he brings his three best buddies along with him to the Garden to keep him company. That's all, just keep me company, and they fall asleep. He wakes them up three times. The third time (It's the same Jesus talking.) "Couldn't you wait one hour with me?" he said. "But I know, the spirit is willing. It's the flesh that's weak." Oh, thank you for the second text. The spirit's willing. I know you guys wanted to stay awake. But the flesh is weak. Wake up now.... It's the same Christ. Unlike so much of the Fundamentalist thinking, it's not scary and you're all going to roast in Hell on a giant rotisserie and all that kind of thing..... Nil desperandum. Seek Christ whole!

And number five is from another former student who comes to the Church, whether I am around or not. He doesn't care. He visits another guy on the Peninsula, summer holiday. And he comes to this place, drives all the way up. And he wrote in this year's Christmas card, "Thank God for Catholic iconography." He specified statues, paintings, singing, Christ on a cross.... He wrote that he prefers to see Christ suffering on the cross. But he likes this cross also because Our Lord

has triumphed over the pain, as we will. He says, "Oh, I love the sensuality of Christ the King." By which he means the Catholic sense of feeding our senses, music and art. And St. Theresa of Liseaux back there and St. Anthony who, I still find out, discovers lost objects. That's part of our great Catholic tradition, and how sad, in the sixteenth century, that so many good-will people said, "Strip the Church naked, just bare, and think about the concept." He added a p.s. on his Christmas card, this guy who comes here as often as he can, "All my life I have been carrying an invisible boom box on my shoulder. And the boom box all my life has been saying, "You're worthless. You're worthless. You're worthless." He says, "When I go to that Church," (This one!) "I know I'm not nothing." It's a start. "I know I'm not nothing."Nil desperandum.

And the last two quotes, the last blessing among the six bests is Father and I and I think Father Timoney were on a retreat, giving a retreat, hearing confessions about a year ago. I think it was the very beginning of 2005. And we were hearing confessions in different rooms. One guy stepped out of the room, having gone to confession, and said, in a voice that carried down the lanes to the other guys waiting on line, "Go to the old guys. They're nicer!" The old guys are always elated to find out there are still younger guys who are willing to come up to bat. We are. And, finally, and really finally, there is an usher in this Church who ushers at one Mass every Sunday and has for the past six years, when I come through the door, he greets me with a radiant smile and says, "Good morning, Father." "Good morning," say I with my casual elaborate dignity. "Are you giving the talk today?" "Yes." And suddenly the grin disappears and a look of alarm leaps into his eyes. But he quickly restores the grin and says, "Keep it short!" The next time he does, I am going to say what Father Potter said in chem lab, "Nil desperandum." Amen.