

“Easter Vigil Homily”
Homily of April 14, 2006
by Fr. Brian Joyce

Storytelling, candles, Alleluias, bells.... What next? Well, I am going to tell you what's next. Among other things, what's next is I am going to ask some questions. I am going to ask questions of everybody here, of our catechumens and our candidates and every single person in church this evening. And I am not going to tell you much about the questions, but I am going to tell you something about the answers. There are four things I want to tell you about the answers.

The first is the answers are very personal. I'll ask a question like “Do you believe?” and the answer is not “We believe.” It's not “They believe.” It's not “Others believe.” It's not “Some people believe.” The answer is “I believe.” It reminds me of the old spiritual, “You got to walk that lonesome valley. You got to walk it by yourself.” Nobody walks it for you. You've got to do it by yourself. Fulton Sheen was a great bishop and television preacher in the forties and fifties and early sixties.... When he was asked to go to the New York City Council and pray for them, he came in in his bright red robes, swept into the council hall and said, “I'm not going to pray for you. Nobody can pray for you. There are three things a man has to do for himself. He has to blow his own nose, to make his own love and he has to say his own prayers. You say your own prayers.” The answer is not “They do; My mother does; My father does.” The answer is “I do.” And, at another level, not just the fact that it has to be my own personal answer, that it has to be personal, but you know our faith, we talk about different levels of faith, different levels of commitment. And each of us are at our own place on the journey. So, when you answer, you answer for yourself, where you are, where I am, “I do.” That's the first thing about the answers. They are personal.

The second, they are public. We talk a lot about our spiritual lives and our interior lives and that's very important. But unless it is also public, it's not Christian. One of the things that Christ says to us is “You got to go public.” You know, it's like Charlie Brown saying, “I love mankind. It's people I can't stand.” Or people who say “I love someone, but I have never said it. I have never shown it.” We have to go public. I haven't bothered to count but someone told me that in the gospels the most common word is “Go.” And in my own life, when I listen to the story of the Resurrection of Jesus, it's very nice to hear about the empty tomb. It's very nice to hear about Mary Magdalene and John and Peter realizing that Jesus has risen. But what convinces me is that they went public. A group of people who were scared to death experienced the risen Jesus so much so that they went out and turned the world upside down. So the second thing about your answer is it's public!

The third is it's ongoing. It's personal. It's public and it's ongoing. Tell you what I mean by that. We have twenty-seven brothers and sisters joining us in this celebration, some being baptized, all being confirmed. I don't know about them, but I'll tell you about the rest of us. We are repeat offenders. We've been here before. We have said, "I do" before. But "I do" once is not enough. Once is not enough. We go through our whole lives and, as St. Paul said, "We work out our salvation in fear and trembling." It does not happen once and for all. Or, we think of Thomas who had doubts and questions. Or we think of Peter who had failures and weaknesses. And we join them and we know that we have miles to go before we sleep. We are on a journey and we have to be able to be ongoing in saying "I do."

And finally, besides it being personal and public and ongoing, our answer is in community. It is "I" that we answer, but it is not "I" alone. This evening, here in the diocese of Oakland, which is just these two counties, there are at least a thousand, over a thousand, who are joining our community like brothers and sisters are doing tonight. But we all belong to a community two thousand years old with millions of members. I'll give you a metaphor for this, from my own life. Next week, I will be going to our class reunion, those of us who were ordained priests in 1963. Lot of singers in our class, Father Don Osuna who is a composer and an artist, Bishop Mike Kenny who, before his death, was known as the "Thrush of the North" when he was the Bishop of Juno, Alaska. Father Dan Danielson has a great voice. Father Tony Valdivia. And they let me sing with them too. Just before we were ordained, we gave a concert and a number of songs were sung, quite a few from the Broadway musical, "Carousel." And we sang together "When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high and don't be afraid of the dark. At the end of the road is a golden sky and the sweet silver song of the lark. Walk on through the wind. Walk on through the rain, though your dreams be tossed and blown. Walk on. Walk on, with hope in your heart for you never walk alone. You will never walk alone." Well, we sang it a year later at our anniversary. And then in 1979, we were in St. Peter's in Rome and Mike Kenny was ordained a bishop by Pope John Paul II, and then we went to the high altar of St. Peter's and he celebrated Mass. And after communion he walked off the altar and joined eleven of us and we stood up and sang "You'll never walk alone." And then Michael died in 1995 and thousands of people gathered in Juno, Alaska, for his burial. We went out to St. Theresa's Retreat House and he was buried there. When everyone else had left, we joined around him and sang once again, "You'll never walk alone." People thought we were crazy but we were a band of brothers.

You are a band of brothers and sisters, sisters and brothers banded together, not only with one another here this evening but with people who have gone before us because we are close to that community of saints, and people who will come after us. And we never walk alone. Brothers and sisters because Christ has conquered death. Christ has conquered separation from people. Christ has conquered fear and lasting evil. He has conquered it with love and with hope and with resurrection. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.