

**“Running on Empty”**  
Homily of October 22, 2006  
by Fr. Michael Dibble

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Last Sunday, here, coming down the aisle, I was really fed-up. I was tired. I was cantankerous, grouchy, cranky, all the way down the aisle. And I was yelling at Our Lord. There is no other polite way to put it. “I’m tired. I’m fed-up, sick of Mass. I’ve been going to Mass since I was fourteen years old, every single day, no lie, since I was fourteen. I’m tired. I’m Mass-ed out! I’m out of gas. The fuel is gone. I’m running on empty.” And that phrase kept running through what I laughingly call “my brain.” I’m running on empty.....

Every Saturday, there is a very kind member of this parish who picks me and my Irish terrier up and takes us to the dog park, for an hour or more. And yesterday, this very kind man said, “Well, what’s the acronym for tomorrow?” And I said, because I’ve been thinking ‘running on empty’ and I said “G A S. ...Gas!” And he said, “Ah, I know. Gambling, Alcohol, Sex!!” He did. I said, “Certainly not. Certainly not!” The acronym GAS, with the subtext being “running on empty,” is GLORYING, ANGERING AND SERVER-ING. I know there is no such word, but I needed three syllables, ser-ver-ing.

GLORYING.... The very first thing these two beloved apostles, James and John, (Our Lord loved these two, impertinent clowns but he loved them. You don’t know this because it was just before today’s gospel begins. But Our Lord has just told those twelve guys that he has to go up to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Right after that, these guys come up, “When you come into glory, make sure we are right up there, right next to you.” So often, Our Lord, who loved these clowns, must have thought “Has anyone been listening?... Do you guys ever...?” Anyhow, they wanted glory. Well, glory-ing. And it’s great to study Catholic scholars on the Bible. The past twenty years, we have learned so much more about the nuance of certain Greek words and the Aramaic stems and... The history of the gospels, in those days, if you were starting a new religion, a cult, you’d never have two bigshots.... And James and John, later on, in the Christian Church, became big shots, what we call Bishops. But to write down, honestly, how dumb there were at a certain point (“Can we have glory?”) the scholars who study this (I don’t mean just Catholics.) they say “This is real history. This is the validity of the gospels, is real history cause you would never put in such embarrassing anecdotes about two later big shots as the gospels always do. It’s true, the validity of the gospels. Nobody doubts it anymore. James and John ... GLORY! It’s perfectly human.

The only way I know how to do any of this stuff is by examples, and I love Church History, and about Glory... St. Vincent dePaul founded the St. Vincent dePaul Society, (which is such a great organization), anyhow, in seventeenth century France. And a young woman joined the Sisters of Charity. She was a new young nun in St. Vincent dePaul’s group. Help the poor. She is described, from the French, as “comely.” You know, she was very pretty and very rich and she became a young nun. She was going out the door one morning in the habit with a basket of

bread, and Vincent spotted her face, and he stopped her gently and said, “Sister, what are you going to do?” She said, “I am going to give bread to the needy.” (I wish I could say it in the French because it sounds so much snobbier then.) And Vincent looked at her long, and he said, “Sister, it’s only when you look at them with love, that the poor can forgive you the bread you hand them.” That’s your glory, that Christ is working through you. It’s only when you look at them with love, the poor can forgive you the bread that you hand them.

Another kind of Glory is (I keep repeating this because I need to hear it.)... You and I, in our lives, can’t solve the horrors of abortion or the war or poverty. We can only do today what we can do today. But one of the ways we can give glory is listening, just listening. It’s one of the most depleting, exhausting ways of giving glory to God, by listening to another human being. I heard this important doctor from the Meninger Clinic, years ago, and he had a big blackboard and all he did on the blackboard, he drew an enormous ear. I’ll never forget him. He said, “People are so hungry just to be listened to.” And some of you know how exhausting that can be, not to interrupt. Or when you speak, to echo what the other person is.... It’s a great giving of glory to be a patient listener. It’s not a small thing.

And finally, giving Glory by your Catholic sense of humor. And if that’s ethnicity, I’m not apologizing. There is a very definite Catholic sense of humor, that gives us perspective from living on this planet and seeing things also from Christ’s point of view. Catholic sense of humor... It comes from our European roots, the German, the French, the Italian, the Irish.... It is. Example: giving glory to God by your humor. In this high school, where I was lucky enough to be in that high school for so long, there was a young girl, sophomore in high school. We will call her “Olga.” And Olga arrived on Monday morning in my office before Period 1. She was crying, and I had a big box of Kleenex, which rapidly diminished and she kept saying, “Oh! The Sophomore Hop is Friday.” I said, “Yes.” ... “And I’m waiting for Bruce Biceps to ask me to the Hop.” I’m not mocking her pain. There is a certain kind of adolescent agony.... Remember?... that can’t be dismissed. It’s real pain. And she was crying. She came every morning before Period 1 in my office and the Kleenex was going. And I was admitting great sagacity, sacerdotal sagacity, wisdom, perspective and counsel. And Friday night came and I snuck into the prom and there was no sign of Bruce Biceps, and she was kind of sitting alone with her girlfriends. The next week, one of the days next week, I saw her rushing down the corridor. I said, “Olga...” “Yes, Father?” I called her over and I said, “Olga, I want to thank you, the way you showed up on Friday night, the courage, the courage you manifested.” She said, “Uh, what?” ... “I know what pain you were in all last week...” And then she reached out and comforted me and she said, “Oh, Father, that was last week!” and she tore off. And I thought, “All that great wisdom that I brought to that task, the pearls that I dis....” We keep our Catholic sense of humor. To be glorying and helping and then see it evaporate.... Keep your Catholic.... It’s a unique thing and it gives glory to God. Don’t take it too seriously.

The next is ANGERING. Just showing up, all those six years on Wall Street hearing those confessions all day long. Not a complaint, a simple fact. Three of us, all day, hearing confessions. And so many, none of them came face to face, the Wall Street Confession, Monday

to Friday, 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., all day. They never came face to face. And in the box, you would hear this sound from so many of the women and men working, especially on Monday, “ah-h-h huh-h-h...ah-h-h huh-h-h...” They weren’t coming to confess great sins. They were in great need of counseling and comfort. And just showing up on Monday, planting your feet on the floor, especially if your task at home or on the job is gruelingly boring or extremely stressful. I keep talking about this because I know it is, just showing up. And this “ah-h-h huh-h-h...” I often found out it meant, “Does anyone notice? The people I love, I’m doing this for, at home or work, do they notice? Am I still being taken for granted?” It’s not a small thing. That “ah-h-h huh-h-h...” speaks volumes, and that kind of anger can grow like an impacted tooth. And we mustn’t let it. We’ve got to say “Thank you.” It’s not a little thing. That anger must be blown away.

The other thing is politics. When I was a priest in the late sixties, I finally paid attention to politics, in Upstate New York. These cars would arrive on Sundays to go to church, and then look at the bumper stickers. “How can they vote for.... Why are they.....?” right up until the present. How could a good Catholic who knows the gospel possibly be for that one or that...? And then you would see them at Mass, kneeling together. Or they give you a lift to Safeway or something. You’d find out what they are doing for other people, how they are suffering, the cross they are carrying. And, so, instead of exploding at them, “How could you possibly be for this one or that one?” you know why Jesus in today’s gospel, when the ten apostles are so mad (The English translation is so British. “The other ten were indignant.” No, the Greek is “They were furious, those two clowns asking for top jobs! They were furious!”)... What does Christ do? He calls them together, calls them all together, “Just be servants for each other.” As you are now, at Mass.

It’s OK to be mad at our fellow Catholics about politics. I love Church History. Here is an example. St. Catherine of Siena was not even a nun. She was just a very smart, brilliant Catholic laywoman. And she was furious at the Pope because for years the Popes had been living in France, in Avignon, in a Chateau. They didn’t want to go to Rome because it was too hot. I mean literally, too hot politically, too hot in temperature. So these Popes were living for decades in Avignon. And Catherine of Siena got mad and she made her way (This is in non-Catholic history books, as well as Catholic.) to Avignon. She had an audience with the Pope. She walked in. She had been writing him letters and letters. She walked up and she boxed his ears, boxed his ears! Whap... whap! Isn’t that great?! I mean, those were the days! You know, you could poke the Pope and she said to him, (Oh, the letters!), she said, “Why aren’t you in Rome? Rome is where Peter died. Rome is where the Pope should be. Rome is the center of the Church.” And the French Pope at the time said, “Il fait chaud.... Il fait chaud.” (It’s so hot!) And she said, “You get back to Rome!” And he did. He said, “OK.” I’m rushing it, but it’s true. So, if great saints can poke Popes, but we are still together, you see that angering is.... With Christ along, we’re not running on empty. And those apostles were so mad and Christ calls them all together.

And finally, SERVER-ING. More anecdotes that I remember... In the Wall Street area, down by the river, there is a Wendy’s. I used to love going to Wendy’s for supper. They had a great salad bar. (This is under server-ing, however silly.) One Friday night, it was packed with

conventioneers from Wall Street companies. It was packed, and I finally got there and there was a young lady who was serving the salad, and I leaned over the lettuce and the tomatoes and I said, "I want to thank you." (I wasn't dressed as a priest.) I said, "I want to thank you for your courtesy and patience with this big crowd." And she said, "Oh-h-h. Would you go over there, Sir, and tell my boss?" And I looked at the boss. She looked like the Wicked Witch of the West. She was tired, the boss, and she was harrassed, I guess, and she was scowling over all these ledgers and vouchers. So I made my heroic way over and said, "Excuse me, but I want to thank you for the service and the courtesy I experience here at Wendy's. That young lady is particularly kind." And she looked up and she stopped scowling and she said, "Oh, this is good timing. Thank you." Nothing about my heroism in taking on this dragon, but how server-ing can be as simple as paying a compliment. I know that sounds awful trivial and silly, but it's not. I'm not meaning flattery which is bogus and self-serving, (That's flattery.) but a genuine compliment.... to your kid, to your spouse, even to Our Lord for a nice day. A compliment, I can live on the compliment for weeks. It's a great, great filling up the gas for somebody else so they don't have to run on empty.

Another thing is server-ing the hopeless. There is a place in New York City called "Bellevue," and they got a big section for alcoholics. And from '49 to '52, I used to wait there frequently on a Friday night for my father. That's no surprise to you at this point. I'd wait for my father to come out of the alcoholic ward, and there was a lady there many nights over those years, an Irish Catholic lady. And I was dressed as a seminarian... funeral director, black tie, white shirt.... We got to talking, those windy corners, and she was waiting for her alcoholic husband, and I was fully knowledgeable about such treatment! I said, "Well, maybe you should separate. That'd scare him." She said, "I've tried it twice." "Well, does he abuse you and the children?" "No. He's a gentle man." "Well, he should join a twelve step program." Here I'm talking. My own father wouldn't. She said, "We tried that. No, he's hopeless." "Well, why are you waiting here?" The nerve of me!! She said, "He's got to have somebody waiting here. Just the two of us now. He's got to have somebody waiting, and we've tried everything..." I never forgot her. I am telling you this now, years later. She was servering, hopeless, but she was there, in the wind. He's got to have somebody waiting for him.

And finally, about servering, the Amish.... Maybe you are a little weary about hearing about the Amish now, but I mean what a servering of the entire planet, just reading about them. "Well, they live in a closed community. They can afford to be..." Yeah, but it's as if they read the gospels. It's like they read the gospels. They have done a servering to all the rest of the world, the Amish.

And finally, there is one thing you learn when you get my age. A few things you do learn. One of the things is that sometimes Our Lord will ask you to be servering another human being, in some small way maybe, at exactly, exactly, exactly the moment when you yourself feel like you are running on empty. ....But you do it.