

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
October 5, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA Matthew 21:33-43

Fr. Benedict Groeschel died Friday night, on the vigil of the Feast of St. Francis. Fr. Groeschel ran a retreat house up in Larchmont, New York, and I had him as my retreat leader there when I went for a week a few years ago. I also met him when he came here to preach Forty Hours Devotion at St. Peter's Cathedral downtown, when Fr. Charles Connor was the Pastor. Fr. Groeschel was a thoughtful and kind soul, who was brave enough to speak the truth. When, in the years before I was ordained to the priesthood but after I had left the Episcopal Church, Fr. Connor referred to me as Fr. Bergman, Fr. Groeschel corrected him. He said, "You mean the once and future Fr. Bergman."

I thought of Fr. Groeschel as I read the Gospel we just heard, because he was responsible for starting the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in 1987. He and six of his brother priests left their order to begin a new one because the one to which they had belonged had in many ways embraced the spirit of the age. Fr. Groeschel knew he could not remain in his order and bear the fruit God intended for him, so he left. He now has well over a hundred brothers and priests in the order he helped to found; and they never want for vocations, because they are so committed to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience. God has blessed this new order with growth even as the one Fr. Groeschel left has suffered from a lack of vocations.

Jesus promised in our Gospel today that this would happen. If we produce the fruits of the Kingdom of God, we will be blessed; but if we don't produce, or if we produce rotten fruit, our flower will fade, our vine will wither, and we will be cut down and finally be thrown into the furnace. Participation in the life of Jesus Christ means we must do more than simply not sin; we must do the good works that reflect our Lord's victory over the power of death. The truth we speak must be accompanied by the fruits of the Spirit.

Not every one of our attempts at bearing fruit is God's will. A few of you might remember when we got names from Catholic Social Services and bought gifts for a couple of families they told us were in need. I personally delivered the things we offered as Christmas gifts; and when I arrived at the house carrying half a van load of items, the father of the children did not come out to help carry them in. Not only that, he never got up from his seat on the couch to greet me, nor did he stop playing the video game that flashed and screamed on his big screen TV. That's why we haven't done something like that since. I realized our limited resources should be shared with those who are truly needy, or at least the truly needy whose gratitude might lead them to give glory to God.

That experience led me to direct our charity where I thought the Lord would most likely bless our work. Rather than throw money around willy-nilly, we would offer assistance to those who wanted to come into the Church but needed help to do so. Thus, over the years our parish has given thousands of dollars to communities in transition, those moving from Anglicanism into the Catholic Church. The fruit of such work is a number of parishes like ours and God's continued blessing upon our work. I am certain that such blessing would have ceased had we continued to spend money on our well-intentioned but relatively fruitless Christmas project of eight or nine years ago.

Since then our focus has had to change several times more, but always with the intention that we follow God's will and bear fruit worthy of His blessings. So, for example, the speaking tours I used to do to encourage entry into the Church have been taken over by the Ordinariate. We give ten percent of our operating income now to facilitate the continued entry of Anglicans into the Church, but for the most part we are now only on the front lines here in Scranton and in our mission in Bath. The erection of the Ordinariate was an answer to prayer, but it has meant we as a parish have had to discern what God will bless us to do now.

The Gospel is clear today that there will always be fruits of the Kingdom. The goal of every Christian, then, and of every parish and of every nation must be to be among those who are bearing fruit. God will not bless those who kill His servants and his Son while plotting to take over and claim God's kingdom as their own. Thus, our blessings from God are dependent upon whether we respond to His call to serve. Keep in mind I'm not talking prosperity Gospel here. I mean principally the spiritual blessings that issue in the growth of the Church and meeting the needs of the vulnerable, and, naturally, God will bless us with the material means to do so.

I wrote to you in our parish newsletter a bit about where I believe the Lord is calling us now. We will continue to be a blessing to many, but our focus will be much more local in its scope. With the help of some very kind benefactors, a list that I am sure will grow in time, we will help to re-open a Catholic store at the Guild building downtown. Our purpose is two-fold: on the one hand, a city our size, with as many Catholics as reside here, needs a store like the Guild as a resource to help Catholics share the Faith. But our purpose in selling those goods will then be to fund our school, something about which I've been talking now for well over five years. The Catholic store downtown will allow for the reintroduction of Catholic education in this part of the city for the first time since Holy Rosary School closed. Through God's blessings and the gift of the Ordinariate we will be able to do two things the Diocese of Scranton has recently found impractical itself—sell Catholic goods and offer Catholic education to the children of Providence.

Bishop Bambera told me when I met with him in April that those choices were made because they were losing money, and the Diocese could not subsidize those operations any longer. Obviously, that means we're going to have to run things a little differently if we are to be successful. Fortunately, however, we are not called to success, as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta was fond of reminding us. We are called, rather, like the workers in today's Gospel, to faithfulness. If we are faithful, Fr. Groeschel and many before him showed us, we will be successful.

Rest eternal grant unto him, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon him.

May his soul and the souls of all the departed by the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.