

BULLETIN – SEPTEMBER 18

Young men ages 16-24 are invited to consider a visit to the college seminary which our seminarians attend. The Office of Priestly Vocations, under the capable direction of Fr. Ron Hutchinson, is organizing a trip to St. John Vianney College Seminary in **St. Paul, MN**. Those going on the trip will be attending the seminary's annual Vianney Visit from **November 17–20**. All young men ages 16-24 are invited to join the all-expenses paid visit to a seminary. A young man does not have to be actively thinking about a vocation to priesthood or religious life at the present moment. We only ask that all attendees be open to and interested in experiencing a few days in the life of a college seminarian. Join us for this wonderful opportunity! Please call Fr. Ron Hutchinson at 243-0491 ext. 1547, or e-mail him at rhutchinson@dioceseofgrandrapids.org. Younger than 16? Older than 24? Contact Father Hutchinson anyway, he can direct you to the proper resources.

The withered hand meets the Word. A couple weeks ago, our weekday Gospel was the passage in Luke 14:1-6 which tells the story of Jesus being in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and curing a man with a withered hand. It's a parallel passage to Mark 3:1-6 and Matthew 12:9-14, and being found in all three Gospels indicates that it is a key moment in our Lord's public ministry. The scribes and Pharisees are watching him closely. Remember, it's the Sabbath, and curing was considered to be "work." Curing, after all, must involve examination, then the performance of labor of some kind to accomplish the task, whether an incantation, a manifestation of power, or whatever. Already suspicious of Jesus and with the murmurings among the crowd of a possible messianic identity, the religious authorities are determined to find some reason to denounce him. Getting him to "work" on the Sabbath would show him to be a non-observer of the Law of Moses. Perhaps they even situated the man with the abnormal hand (Mark and Matthew say "withered," Luke says "dropsy," which is an edema or swelling due to retention of fluid) up front in a very visible place so the hand was painfully obvious.

Jesus responds gently to their "using" the man for their nefarious purpose. "Come right up here," he invites the man. Nothing against the Law there. "Stretch out your hand." Nothing against the Law there, either. Let everybody see it. But wait. The man stretches out his hand, and it's completely normal. How did *that* happen? "What is this, some kind of a trick?" some of the Pharisees are no doubt muttering. Others are defending themselves, "No, *we're* the ones who set it up, he really *did* have a bad hand." They are confounded, not in awe and wonder at someone being miraculously cured, but that their clever plan is foiled. "Drat, missed again!" They miss the beauty of God's action because of the ugliness of their conniving intentions. Not only has Jesus not broken the Sabbath or done anything else they can accuse him of, he is being further acclaimed by the crowds as a miracle worker. The fact is, he has not done anything visible at all. Just said, "Stretch out your hand." What was withered is now restored. When did it happen? How? It just did.

There is something very Eucharistic about this miracle. When we gather at Mass to encounter the Word, any skeptic who is carefully watching to see something miraculous happen will be confounded, similar to the Pharisees. Is this some sleight-of-

hand, some kind of trick whose power can be learned and used? These silly Christians bring a little bread and a little wine, and “*hocus pocus*” (words corrupted from the Latin *Hoc est enim Corpus meum*, or “This is my Body”), *POOF!* A miracle! Such primitive naïveté! But all we’re doing is following the Lord’s command. “Stretch out your hand” becomes “Do this in memory of me.” What was inanimate is now become the very source of life, not only earthly life but eternal life! What was merely a rather insignificant part of creation now becomes the Lord of heaven and earth in the Sacrament of his True Presence. What could be stored in a breadbox or contained in a bottle before Mass now must occupy a secure place in the tabernacle, embellished and adorned like the Ark of the Covenant.

There is no human “work” accomplished here, although the action takes place within the more or less elaborate ceremonies of the Mass. But the action itself is one of the utmost simplicity. Words are spoken, but they are Christ’s own words, spoken by the priest not in his own name, but in the very person of Christ. “Stretch out your hand” – “Do this in memory of me.” We follow a simple command from the Lord, and what we hope for -- no, far *more* than what we hope for – takes place without our being able to notice how it happens. Like the water become wine at Cana (“Fill the jars with water. . . Take some out now . . .”), like the man with the abnormal hand (“Stretch out your hand”), all we have to do is follow the Lord’s command (“Do this in memory of me”), and the miracle takes place. What *was* becomes something new, and impossible to imagine, much less “track” as we would a transformation or a mutation in a science experiment. We are in the world of faith and sacramental realities, not microscopes and mere physical realities.

“Prove it!” the agnostic and the atheist will shout. But the only proof or sign that is given is the evidence of that which is nourished by the Miracle, and has been so nourished for 2,000 years: the Church! Even when the Church seems to be washed up and wiped out, in England after Henry VIII, in France after the Revolution, in the Soviet Union, in China, Cuba, Albania, let some freedom be re-established and the faith begins to sprout up and blossom like spring flowers that the earth cannot any longer contain. Someday soon, we pray, who knows? -- we might hear the same stories of courageous perseverance from the faithful of North Korea.

The prophets of Catholic doom in our own country forever bemoan the Church’s “loss of power,” the disappearance of so many churches, schools, seminaries, motherhouses, and other institutions from the landscape, the apparent loss of faith reflected in dwindling numbers and growing disrespect from the culture around us. But in prosperous times as the world reckons prosperity, we can easily forget that our power is not in brick and mortar, nor in numbers and statistics. The greatest power of all is that which we do not even put into our own words, but which we allow Christ to speak *through* us: “This is my Body . . . this is my Blood.” We present what he tells us to present, we do what he tells us to do, and it happens. When? How? It just does, and after 2,000 years, the Church remains the living proof. What else can explain it?

And on the personal level? Remember, when life deals you a bad hand, stretch it out before the Lord. The exercise of faith in itself will begin to bring about healing, both inside and out. The only evidence of the Miracle is the restored hand, just as the only real evidence of the Eucharistic Miracle is a continuously renewed Church. What a privilege to be a member of the Mystical Body of Christ! God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: “Go as far as you can see. When you get there, you’ll be able to see farther” (John Pierpont Morgan, 1837-1913, American financier and banker).