



Cardinal Seán's Chrism Mass Homily March 30, 2021

In 1998 charming Irish film called “Waking Ned Devine” came out. The storyline revolves around the village recluse, Ned Devine, who purchased a winning national lottery ticket. Ned was discovered in his living room, dead and holding up his winning lottery ticket in front of his television set. His friend, Jackie O’Shea, reported having a dream that night in which it was revealed that Ned would want to share his winnings with the entire village, all 52 parishioners living in Tullymore, Ireland.

The villagers go to great lengths in order to deceive the claim inspector, Mr. Kelly, into thinking that Ned Devine is alive and thus able to claim his winnings.

The film ends in the local pub where all the villagers are gathered to toast the memory of their beloved Ned Devine, whose legacy has enriched them all.

This delightful story seems, to me, an apt parable for the life of one of my favorite saints, Charles de Foucauld. He was like Ned Devine, who died with the winning

lottery ticket in his hand. Our Church is like the villagers who are the beneficiaries of his treasures which remain hidden until after his death.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti," closes with the hope that God would inspire a dream in each of us to embrace the legacy of Blessed Charles, not unlike Jackie O'Shea's dream about sharing Ned Devine's winnings with the whole village. Pope Francis defines that treasure as Blessed Charles' desire to be a universal brother, identifying with the least so that he could become the brother of all.

In many ways, Charles Eugene de Foucauld, Viscount of Foucauld, was a dashing figure like Lawrence of Arabia. A young French aristocrat at the time of World War I, he had a huge inheritance, a promising military career, and was a successful explorer. Charles explored and mapped the remotest and most dangerous parts of North Africa disguised as a rabbi. His exploits and courage won him prestige, wealth, and recognition. After a wild youth of gambling, parties and drinking, Charles left his live-in girlfriend and joined the Trappists. From the Trappists, he went to Nazareth, where he worked as a gardener for the Poor Clares living the spirituality of Jesus' hidden life of Nazareth. (On the Holy Land retreat with the Boston priests, I visited that convent and saw the tool shed where Blessed Charles lived. I asked the Abbess for a job. She said I needed better references.)

The nuns convinced Blessed Charles to return to France to be ordained a diocesan priest and seek permission to go to North Africa to found a religious community based on the gospel of Nazareth.

The handsome, rich, debonair ladies' man and celebrity ended up living in a shack in the desert wearing a makeshift habit, homemade sandals, and a turban on his head. Charles was not a proponent of cosmetic dentistry, and indeed in his years as a hermit, the most common descriptions of him highlight his toothless smile, which I believe is an apt metaphor for his ministry.

His ardent desire was to found an order for adoration and hospitality. He wanted to live in the midst of Muslim nomads, realizing that his mission would be principally one of giving witness to the gospel values. There is a message for us who minister in one of the most secularized parts of the country.

Unlike many of Charles' contemporary Europeans, he did not look upon Islam with condescension and disdain. As a matter of fact, his path to conversion began when he was an explorer in North Africa and lived immersed in the Muslim culture, where he was impressed by their deep faith and fidelity to prayer. He was not tempted to despise the profound value of their religion, nor its providential role in God's plan. Charles learned to have great affection for the Muslim people. I am sure he would have resonated with the beautiful letter written by the Trappist Abbot of Tibhirine in Algiers. The abbot and six of his monks were murdered by jihadists in 1996. The very moving film "Of Gods and Men" recounts the dramatic story of their death. Realizing his imminent demise, the Abbot, Father Christian, wrote a moving letter to his brother in which he shares that his greatest sorrow is that his death will be used by many as an excuse to hate Muslims. Abbott Christian and his brothers were beatified on December 8, 2018. Last May, Pope Francis cleared the way for the canonization of Blessed Charles.

I have said that Blessed Charles' toothless smile is an apt metaphor for his ministry. He sought to found a fraternity, a community of brothers who would live his ideal of universal brotherhood. His conception of being a brother to one and all is not just a human ideal, but the real consequences of Charles' belief that God had come to share our life and to live as one of us, to be our brother.

In the eyes of many, Blessed Charles' experiment could be seen as an absolute failure. His austerity and toothless smile could have been off-putting for many. Yet what people saw in him was his friendliness; he knew how to put people at ease. A French General who encountered Blessed Charles in the desert later wrote that "Charles has conquered the hearts of all the Europeans who have met him in the Sahara. Most of them have kept up a correspondence with him, sharing with him their troubles and their joys, often asking his advice. Among these, I've known personally a Jew, several Protestants, and a man who was secretary of the Revolutionary Youth Movement of a big city in southern France, and the same thing happened with the native population. There were people from various tribes of nomads who without number have a tremendous veneration for him, along with a very solid friendship."

Brother Charles' friendliness was learned by living close to Jesus of Nazareth, who treated the Samaritan woman at the well with respect and openness. The same Jesus who receives the Pharisee Nicodemus under the cover of darkness. This is the friendliness and kindness that Brother Charles learned from his Master, Jesus of Nazareth.

Many of us grew up in the Church where there was a lot of severity, and people were often afraid to draw near. I remember once as a young priest being visited by a family who wanted to baptize their youngest child, who was about two years old. They were a little nervous because they realized they should not have waited that long before coming to see the priest. But because I did not scold them or berate them, but rather I welcomed them, they became emboldened to ask me if I would baptize their three-year-old child as well. They said they had waited to baptize the child so long because they were so busy. I took the information on the second child and said how happy I was to be baptizing two of their children. Suddenly I was asked to baptize their four-year-old, their five-year-old and their six-year-old child.

Afterwards, I was reflecting on what happened, and I said to myself: thank God you didn't put up a fuss about the first child not being baptized for so long. Had I done that, there would have only been one baptism. My guardian angel must have had me on my best behavior.

As priests, we often have to deal with people who are not living their faith to the fullest, have dropped out of the Church, and often they had a bad experience in the parish situation around a funeral, a marriage or a baptism. They may have experienced harm at the hands of a priest. Perhaps they were humiliated by a sister or catechist. Sometimes they simply drifted away from the practice of the faith, swallowed up in religious indifference and the secular cynicism of our age.

It is important that we priests present ourselves to them as a friend, even if we have a toothless smile. Charles' inspiration was Jesus' way of relating: treating each person with respect and admiration and considering the other person as a friend, and

then being willing to “lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” We live in a society where there are so many divisions, that arise from contrasting social status, racial identity and ethnicity, as well as religious and political differences that push people away from each other and from God. In the gospel, there are no categories of people that Jesus rejects. He reaches out to publicans and Pharisees, tax collectors and foreigners, rich and poor, Sadducees and Romans, Samaritans and prostitutes, young and old, healthy and sick. Blessed Charles learned to be a universal brother at Nazareth.

Just as for Blessed Charles, the themes of adoration and hospitality must be front and center in our lives as priests. Hopefully, during this Eucharistic year, we are finding more time to be alone with the Eucharistic Lord and to learn from his silent love how to be patient and how to be present to the Lord who is calling us to friendship, and then sharing that friendship with the people we are called to serve. As the Cursillistas put it: Be a friend, make a friend, lead a friend to Christ.

In his Nazareth in the desert, Blessed Charles lived the life of adoration and hospitality, the fruit of his prayer and contemplation, were the stunning rules of life that he composed during this time. But in God’s providence, he did not attract a single follower. The only group that survived was a group of laypeople and diocesan priests back in France who tried to live his spirituality.

When he died, one of those diocesan priests, René Bazin, wrote a biography of Blessed Charles. In many ways, he was like Malcolm Muggeridge, head of the BBC, who discovered Mother Teresa in the documentary “Something Beautiful for God.”

Bazin published the biography, “The Life of Charles de Foucauld Explorer in Morocco, Hermit in the Sahara,” in 1921. That same year, a 16-year-old René Voillaume read the book and was transformed by the witness of the spirituality of Nazareth lived out by a toothless adventurer in the middle of the desert. (I read the same book as a young seminarian, and it had a profound impact on me). The young René Voillaume went on to become a diocesan priest, as was Blessed Charles, and eventually received permission to found The Little Brothers of Jesus and later, with Mother Magdelaine de Jesus, also founded The Little Sisters of Jesus. Today there are 20 recognized groups counting 13,000 members in the world. New communities continue to be founded as more discover the life and heroism of a Blessed Charles of Jesus. In our own diocese, we are lucky to have the Daughters of Mary of Nazareth living the spirituality of Blessed Charles.

But the greatest contribution of the failed founder with a toothless smile is the spirituality of Nazareth that he has communicated to many thousands of diocesan priests through the Jesus Caritas fraternities. His idealism has inspired many priests to commit their lives more profoundly to Jesus through deepening their communion with their brother priests for the sake of God’s people.

The spirituality of Nazareth for diocesan priests encourages: 1) adoration before the Blessed Sacrament; 2) modeling our lives in Jesus and the gospels; 3) simplicity of lifestyle; 4) reviewing our life with our brothers on a monthly basis by together reflecting on our vocation in light of the Scriptures; 5) being a universal brother, breaking down the barriers that divide people into different camps; 6) seeking times of solitude to experience Nazareth in the desert to be close to Jesus.

Fraternity is a beautiful way of living celibacy. It would be tragic to conclude that the vocation to be celibate was a vocation to be solitary, or withdrawn, or intensely private and alone. We wither if we have no one to confide in, no one to offer us unconditional support, no one who knows us as we really are and still accepts us. When I plead with my priests to have priestly support groups, I envision these elements of spirituality that are so life-giving to a priest. Opportunities to be together for recreation, sports and entertainment can be helpful. However, a priestly support group is so much more; it is a brotherhood formed by commitment to live the gospel together, a life of adoration and hospitality of brothers.

When we form deep friendships with priests that allow us to speak with each other about our relationship with Jesus, our capacity to serve as shepherds of God's people is greatly enhanced. I have always been struck by two facts mentioned in the gospel account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. First of all, Cleopas and his companion were talking about Jesus. I am sure that if they had been talking about the latest soccer scores, politics or the stock market, Jesus would never have drawn near to walk with them. When we share our faith with each other as priests, the Risen Lord draws very close to us even if we don't realize it. The other striking fact about the Emmaus encounter is that when they arrived at their destination, Jesus makes as if he is going to continue on the road. It is only because the disciples invite him to dinner that he stays. Jesus wants us to talk about our faith with each other, and he wants to be invited into our lives. These things are not easy, they don't always come naturally to us as priests, but they can make a huge difference in our life and ministry.

Yes, blessed Charles died with the winning ticket in his hand. He has much to teach us about the power of simply witnessing to the faith, about what success means for a priest, and how “one man sows and another reaps.” Today as we renew our priestly vows, let us strive to be men of adoration and hospitality, friends of Jesus who share that friendship with our brother priests and the people we are privileged to serve.