

MAUNDY THURSDAY 2013

I recently visited the parish of Barry, for the opening of the St. Vincent de Paul Charity shop in the centre of the town. The shop is beautifully fitted out and furnished. The merchandise is outstanding. But it is the quality of the volunteers, and their desire to engage their clients in conversation and care which is at the heart of the work of the SVP – and the gospel.

In many ways, that charitable work – and so much else that goes on in our parishes - reflects Pope Francis's words at his recent inauguration as Bishop of Rome. He spoke about St. Joseph as being the "Custos" the "Protector", the "Carer". Joseph cares not just for Mary and Joseph, but also the Church. And in turn, the Church and its members are to care for all people, and for creation. Joseph cared discreetly, humbly and silently, with unflinching presence and faithfulness. We are called to do the same, even when we find it difficult to understand confusing circumstances. Just like Joseph did.

Is not this what the priest is called to do in his life and in his pastoral ministry? It's no accident that he is called "Father" not least because that title evokes the image of Joseph, the Carer. Protector of the strong and the weak in our parishes. The priest provides the Bread of Life to the hungry when he says "My Body. My Blood. My Life. Given for you". The priest is called to be the sign of the caring presence of God in the midst of human brokenness. He is the one who says "I absolve you from your sins" and all that signifies. The oils which we bless in a few moments are symbols of healing, of strength, of comfort and challenge. They show God cares – and so do we.

Pope Francis asks how did Joseph respond to his calling as Protector of Mary, of Jesus and the Church? He gives three signs which are the call to holiness in the life of the priest and, indeed, of all God's people. Joseph was constantly attentive to God; He was open to the signs of God's presence; He was receptive to God's plans, not simply his own. The life of faith. The life of prayer. The life of obedience. That is why we renew the vows made at our ordination during this Mass: to serve God and his people within and outside the Church as Carers, Protectors, Shepherds, Servants, as Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

The volunteers of St. Vincent de Paul are a living sign that the lay people of our church have a unique ministry to witness to the dignity of human life and the value of every person in the sight of God. Once more, Pope Francis reminds us of the need to protect the family – husbands and wives, parents and children, the old and the vulnerable. We are all dependent on each other, not just as economic units to be set aside when we are no longer productive, but as living parts of the Body of Christ. It is right that as Catholics we should always protect the right to life, from the womb to the tomb, the care of the sick and the dignity of the dying. But that can't just be written in official documents and spoken about by bishops and priests. Being protectors also means keeping watch over our own emotions, examining our own conscience, caring for our hearts, the seat of good and evil intentions, thoughts and words and actions which can build up or tear down.

If priests are meant to proclaim the Gospel of Life in all its fullness, then all those who are baptized are called to do the same. In his final message for Lent Pope Benedict wrote:

“...there is no greater action more beneficial-and therefore more charitable-towards our neighbour than to break the bread of the word of God, to share with our neighbour the Good News of the Gospel, to introduce our neighbour to a relationship with God. Evangelisation is the highest and most integral promotion of the human person”.

As a Catholic community, do we believe that in our heart of hearts? Might we listen again to the words of St. Vincent de Paul: “Let us courageously extend the confines of our heart and will in his presence. And let us not decide on doing this thing or that until God has spoken”. How to do that? By following the example of St. Joseph who was “..constantly attentive to God. He was open to the signs of God’s presence. He was receptive to God’s plans, not simply his own”.

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