

Friends of the Bridegroom

119

Retreat to Priests of the Diocese of Jinja
11th – 16th December 2011



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Monday 12th December 2011

Introduction: Called to be another John the Baptist

I feel honored and at the same time challenged, for the first time having to preach a retreat to priests of my own diocese. It seems easier to preach to those of other dioceses with whom we are not so familiar. My consolation is due to the conviction that I have about what is necessary for a successful retreat.

In the first place the retreat is the work of God in us. He alone is capable of transforming us, of renewing us. If the Lord does not build a house, in vain do the laborers labor.

Secondly, it is the work of the individual himself. What we gain from a retreat depends very much on what we put into it. I would like to give you the text of John: do you want to be healed? (John 5:8). The question might sound to us as irrelevant, considering the circumstances. The pool was known to be frequented by those who needed healing. The man's physical condition must have been visible to all. His proximity to the pool in the company of others who were also ailing left no doubt about whether or not the man wanted to be healed. Yet Jesus asked the man a most important question: "do you want to be well again?"

As a matter of fact the man did not answer the question directly; he started explaining how the quicker cripples jumped in before him every time the water welled up. However, Jesus had gathered all the information he needed; the man wanted to be healed. It would have been

different if the man had answered: “no, thanks, I am just relaxing here, marveling at the wonders of nature.”

Do *you* want to be healed? In our case too this question may sound irrelevant. After all, we have left our work to come to the retreat. Why else do intelligent people come to retreats? Yet it is possible to come to a retreat and to go back as we came, depending on how serious our commitment to renewal is. Do you feel there is room for improvement in your life, or do you feel like, “No thanks! I am as normal as anyone can be. I know that no one is perfect, and I am not about to try the impossible. I do my best to be a good priest. I am an average priest with no major scandals. I say my prayers daily except when I am very tired. So, do you feel you want to be well again?”

It is we to decide whether we create inner silence which is essential for the taking stock of our spiritual life and ministry.

We can also decide to sustain an atmosphere of outside silence, also out of brotherly charity for those who value it in order to be close to God in these four days out of the entire year. It is for each of us to decide whether we really cannot dare to switch off our mobile phones and dedicate this time exclusively to God and our souls.

In a directed retreat it is recommended to have at least four hours of uninterrupted prayer at different times during the day. This is possible also in a preached retreat like this one. However, let me suggest that each of us has at least one hour of uninterrupted private prayer each day, possibly before the Blessed Sacrament.

Only a small portion is contributed by the preacher. I will strive to do my best, but I am not overly worried because even when my best is not good enough, there is no reason why you do won't make a good retreat. It is in this regard that I would like us now to start with a prayer, asking God for the grace of a fruitful retreat.

Timetable

This is my suggestion of a timetable:

7.00 am	Morning Prayer
7.30 am	Breakfast
8.30 am	Talk
12.00 noon	Mass
3.30 pm	Talk (with sharing)
4.30 pm	Break Tea
6.30 pm	Adoration
7.30 pm	Supper

We are in the third week of Advent. It appeared to me appropriate to choose as theme one which is in tune with the liturgical season we are celebrating, and in a way which helps us also to live the liturgical season fruitfully. The theme I have chosen therefore is FRIENDS OF THE BRIDEGROOM, taken from the words of John the Baptist to those who asked him about his identity and relation to Jesus. I propose for us to use John the Baptist as our model for priestly life and ministry.

We often refer to ourselves priests as those called to be another Christ. That sounds nice. It is also well documented in Church teaching. It is quite true in the

sense that it is not us but Christ that reaches out to his people through our administration of his word and sacrament. Yet this term can also be presumptuous. John the Baptist offers us another model: not other Christs but heralds of Christ. However, we are not simply heralds, rather, we are invited to be friends of the one we are called to bring to others.

The theme “Friends of the Bridegroom” suggests several sub-themes which we shall develop in the course of the retreat.

- 1) It is usually the bridegroom who chooses his best man. He usually does not choose anybody, but someone with particular endowments. We did not choose Christ, but he chose us. We shall have time to talk about our calling. God continuously calls us in the different places of work to which we are appointed. How do we respond?
- 2) We are called to life of friendship, of intimacy with Christ. It is from this friendship that we are supposed to draw energy and motivation for our ministry.
- 3) Friends of the bridegroom carry out, not their own plans, but the plans of the bridegroom. They do this not to attract the attention of the bride to themselves but to the bridegroom. What is the motivation in our pastoral activities? Struggle between pastoral ministry and personal ambitions.
- 4) Friends of a bridegroom who promote the cause of the bridegroom must also live in harmony with each other. Friends of the bridegroom that quarrel among themselves might disrupt the preparations for the wedding. We shall examine the relationship

among us priests. How do we destroy relations among us? How do we build up a harmonious presbyterate characterized by brotherly concern?

- 5) When we talk of “friends of the bridegroom” we imply a third party, namely, the bride. Christ’s bride is the Church. We shall also have time to talk about our relationship with the bride of Christ. How do we relate with those directly under our charge? Our relatives and acquaintances? Protégés? The religious? Women?
- 6) Unlike John the Baptist perhaps, when each one of us looks back in the nature of our relationship with the bridegroom, we realize that we have not always been good friends. The message John the Baptist preached to his contemporaries also applies to us: REPENT! We shall have a penitential service towards the end.
- 7) John the Baptist, the friend of the bridegroom had some remarkable characteristics which we priests do well to imitate. He was a man of great self discipline. He was a man of exceptional humility. He was a man burning with zeal for the mission ahead of him. How do we fan into flame the Spirit of God given to us?

Second Talk: As for you little child: the call

Biblical text: the vision of Zachariah in the temple. The Benedictus.



In the vocation of John the Baptist we see the mystery of God's call. It is typical of God to choose the weak and make them strong, thus showing that the overwhelming power is not attributed to human capabilities. John's parents had lost hope of receiving a child.

The silence that was inflicted on Zechariah as punishment for his disbelief was also meant to serve the purpose of making him reflect. Sometimes we talk too much and hardly have time for reflection. In the 9 months of his

silence Zechariah had time to reflect on many things: on the scriptures and on the nature of his son's mission. When the mouth finally opened, it was like a dam that has broken. He poured out what had been in his heart for so long. He saw God's wonderful plan for his people, and his little boy's part in that plan: as for you little child, you shall be called a prophet of God the most high, for you shall go ahead of the Lord, to prepare his ways before him...

When we look in our own personal histories of our calling, we might see in them elements that show us that it was not due to our own merits or the merits of our parents that we became priests. I would like to share two of such elements. I would not have made it to priesthood due to the fact that I was an illegitimate child. My parents were not married in Church. My mother was the second wife. The two separated when I was only one year old. All my adult life I my mother and father lived in separate homes. Even today children such as myself are not allowed in the seminary in many of the dioceses of the central province.

Secondly, I could not have made it to ordination merely with school fees from my parents. It was only through the assistance of Fr. Benedict Kizza that I made it through secondary school. These are only two of the examples. I can think of many other factors why I attribute my priesthood to the kindness of God.

In recent times particularly in the Western world there has been a push for having seminarians undergo a psychological test before being admitted into the seminary. There is a humorous satire about a psychological board of Nazareth who submit test results for the twelve apostles and give a report to each of the apostles. All the eleven fail

the test for different reasons. Most are uncouth and not very well educated. Some are raw fishermen. One is a former rebel. Another is a tax collector. Only Judas seems more promising, since he seems to have been trained in the temple, and he is very practical in financial terms.

You can share an element in the history of your vocation for which you see that it was not due to your merits but to the grace of God that you are a priest.

Now God choose us, and he appointed us to bear fruit; fruit that will last. At this very moment we may be doing one of three things.

- 1) We might be like over-manured plants that grow a lot of leaves and no fruits. We may be like pigs that grow too fat to bear young ones. We can flourish very well physically in the ministry without bearing fruit.
- 2) We may be bearing fruit, but not the kind of fruit that Jesus intended us to bear. We may be bearing sour fruit. We may be bearing fruit that are full of worms and that never grow to maturity. That happens very often with tomatoes or pawpaws. That can happen to priests too.
- 3) Or we may be actually bearing fruit that lasts. People are converted. Those who are troubled find peace. Those who have lost their way find it through us. Those who are weak in their faith grow stronger. Reflect on what kind of fruit you are bearing.

Another point for our reflection is that God does not call us once. He continuously calls in the different

circumstances of our life. Each time we face a new transfer it may be God calling us to a different post. Transfers are never pleasant. You may have established your life, perhaps started a few businesses that are thriving, or made friends that you do not wish to lose, or built up a place after so much effort and now you are asked to start from scratch. You may be moved from a place where there is power to one where there is not. Or you have struggled to get a vehicle for the place and now you must go. How do you respond to unpleasant transfers? Read the text where Jesus was prevented from preaching in the temple and he had to revert to pagan territory.

Tuesday 13th December 2011

First Talk: Friends of the Bridegroom

Recapitulation

In the last talk we reflected on the mysterious ways by which God indicates that we did not choose him, but he chose us. We left ourselves the question: what kind of fruit are we bearing. Whatever the answer, we know that we can bear better fruit than we have been bearing up to now. Good fruit comes from a healthy friendship with the one who called us. Thus, our next reflection is on the quality of our friendship with Jesus.

Let us start by examining the love and friendship between Jesus and John the Baptist. From what we gather from scripture Jesus and John the Baptist had little contact between themselves, although they were cousins and John's mother was perhaps the greatest confidant of Mary. Apparently the encounter at Jesus' baptism was their first. John points out that he did not know Jesus; it was him who had sent John that pointed out Jesus to John. They are so different in character. After Jesus' baptism there is little recorded interaction between Jesus and John. Yet the two have the greatest esteem for each other. There is a salient love between them. John describes his relation to him as one of a bridegroom's friend. John must decrease while Christ has to increase. We read John 3: 22-36. Jesus in his turn describes John the Baptist as the greatest of all those born by women.

22 After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. 23 Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. 24 (This was before John was put in prison.) 25 An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

27 To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. 28 You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' 29 The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. 30 He must become greater; I must become less."^[a]

31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. 34 For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God^[b] gives the Spirit without limit. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

When people love each other they sometimes communicate even without words. Consider for instance the silent communication when John sent his disciples to Jesus in the following passage (Luke 7:18-30):

18 Then the disciples of John reported to him concerning all these things. 19 And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus,^[b] saying, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

20 When the men had come to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?'" 21 And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight.

22 Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. 23 And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

24 When the messengers of John had departed, He began to speak to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 25 But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts. 26 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is he of whom it is written:

Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You^[c]

28 For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist;^[d] but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." 29 And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. 30 But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.

“I am inclined to think that this was not a question through which John wanted to know about Jesus as if he had doubts. Elsewhere he shows us that he was certain about the identity of Jesus. Rather, it would seem that he was having a difficult time convincing his disciples that he was not the Christ, and of leading them from himself to Jesus. They could not understand for example why the disciples of Jesus seemed to lack discipline and would not fast as they and the disciples of the Pharisees did. In order to convince the disciples John sends them to Jesus to find out for themselves. Jesus also understands John’s mind and answers in the same style. He does not ask whether their master has doubts. He makes them wait and witness to the messianic deeds he performs and then tells them to go and tell John what they see and hear. In reality he makes them experience his power as the Messiah.

It is immediately after the disciples of John have left that Jesus heaps praises upon John the Baptist. It is like sharing with the people around the great admiration he has for John.

Our love for Christ

In one of the reflections at St. Augustine’s Institute we share on the question: what has given you the greatest joy and energy in your ministry. Very few as far as I can remember mentioned that it was their intimacy with Christ. I am sorry to say, that I too gave a different answer. Yet intimacy with Christ should really be the source of our joy and energy in our ministry.

Let us gauge our love for Christ. Here are a series of questions for our individual reflection:

- What is the quality of your friendship with Jesus? Have you ever *experienced* Jesus as a friend? Can you describe that relationship the way you would describe your friendship with another human being who is dear to you? Can you recall any intimate moments with Jesus?
- Do you share with him your secrets, joys, sorrows, disappointments, weaknesses? Do you ask him for advice? Do you say you are sorry when you hurt him? Do you ever do any thing simply to please him?
- Do you regret long absences from his presence? Do you look forward to the next encounter with him? Are you hurt when he is insulted? Are you happy for and with him at a new conversion?

It is possible that there are among us here those who would answer yes to each of these questions. They are not likely to say it publicly out of humility. However, it is also possible that there are among us those who are wondering what I am talking about; to whom an experience of Jesus' friendship is alien.

Let us admit it, much as we talk so frequently about friendship with Christ, it is not easy for many of us to develop or appreciate a friendship with one we cannot see, hear or touch. Yet the love between Jesus and John the Baptist shows that this is possible. Like John the Baptist we do not need to have familiarity with Jesus in order to love him or to become his friends. Paul loved him with all his life, yet he too had never met him in his earthly life, apart from the apparition on the way to Damascus. So have

many saints and martyrs, as we shall hear today at Mass in the case of St. Lucy the martyr. To grow in the love of Christ the first thing we need to do is to appreciate his love for us. Paul narrates his own experience of the love of Christ in Phillipians 3:7-15:

7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul also prays that others may experience such love.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19)

In the first place we need to know that love of God is a gift and commandment at the same time. As a gift we can only pray for it, we cannot acquire it by our own decision.

In the prayer of Paul for the Ephesians above, Paul prays because he knows that they have not had the experience which he has had. For those of us who have not had a deep experience of God's love, this prayer is relevant. It is relevant also for those who have had it in brief spells. Our love for God is consequent to an experience of God's love

for us which comes prior to ours. We can pray with faith and ardent desire for this experience, but we can also do something to dispose ourselves for it. In this sense it is a commandment which we must obey.

1. Jesus tells us the way we become his friends: “You are my friends if you do what I tell you.” (John 15:14). Larry Winget in his book *Shut up, Stop Whining, and Get a Life*, describes stress as “the result of knowing what to do and not doing it.” What are those things that I know very well I should do and I am not doing? What are those things that I know I should I should not be doing but I am doing? These are obstructions to my experience of God’s love for me.
2. “My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.” (John 15:12). How has he loved us? A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends. This is what he has done. When we deliberately fail in our love for each other, we prevent God’s love to dwell in our hearts. Failure to love my neighbour also prevents us from experiencing the love of Christ in our hearts.

The next session will be on this command to love our neighbour.

Second Talk: This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you

We start this session with an exercise. We need a volunteer to come forward for the purpose I will mention to you...



The rest of us are going to give complements to the volunteer.

Call him and tell him what you like about him. Even in an artificial

exercise like this a person feels elevated and empowered. We can enrich and better our brothers by pointing out what is positive within them, rather than by pointing out their mistakes, or, worse, discussing these mistakes being their backs.

This afternoon we share just on one question: obedience to Jesus' command of love by loving fellow priests. We divide in four groups and group one and three discusses question one, while group two and four discuss the second question. This time we shall require a report from each of the groups.

- What are some of the signs by which we lack brotherly concern for each other as priests?

- How can we cultivate love among our priestly community?

Homily

This morning we reflected on our call to friendship and love of Christ. The martyrs bear the greatest testimony to what heights a human being can ascend in attaining the love of God. They stopped at no sacrifice. The martyrs experienced something that their contemporaries could not comprehend; something so compelling that they could not stop at any sacrifice. Today we contemplate the life of St. Lucy. To a world so promiscuous as Sicily of the year 300 AD it made no sense that a girl should defend her chastity, even in marriage to the point of death. It is perhaps incomprehensible even to us believers.

The traditional story of St. Lucy tells us that she was of noble Greek parentage, born in Syracuse, Sicily, and brought up as a Christian by her mother, Eutychia. Although Lucy, like Cecilia, wished to dedicate herself to God, Eutychia arranged for her a marriage with a young pagan. The mother, who suffered from hemorrhage, was persuaded to make a pilgrimage to Catania, to offer prayers at the tomb of St. Agatha.

Lucy accompanied her mother, and their prayers for a cure were answered. Then Lucy made known to Eutychia her desire to give her own share of their fortune to the poor and devote herself to God's service. Eutychia, in gratitude for her cure, gave permission. This so angered the young man to whom Lucy had been unwillingly betrothed that he denounced her as a Christian to the governor, Paschius. The persecutions instituted by the Emperor Diocletian

were then at their height, and when Lucy steadfastly clung to her faith, she was sentenced to prostitution in a brothel. God rendered her immovable and the officers were not able to carry her off to the place of evil. An attempt was then made to burn her, but boiling oil and pitch had no power to hurt her or break her strong spirit. At last she was put to death by the sword.

God has asked none of us a proof of love for him as high as martyrdom. What he asks of us is expressed in the parable of the two sons. We are sure of one thing, that by the fact that we are all priests and sisters here, we are not that son who said “no” to his father. We agreed to go and work in the father’s vineyard.

Through the intercession of St. Lucy we pray that having imitated the first son who accepted the invitation of the Father to go and work in his vineyard, we may also imitate the second son, by willingly accepting to do what the Father has commanded us to do.

Wednesday 14th December 2011

First Talk: arrange the wedding of the bridegroom

Recapitulation

Yesterday we shared about the love of Christ. Jesus told his disciples that you are my friends if you obey what I command you, and that this is my command: love one another. We would now like to reflect on another text in which Jesus defines love for him. Said to Peter: do you love me? Feed my sheep. To love Jesus is to take care of his flock.

However, there is a difference between the vocation of Peter and our vocation.



Peter's role as the head of the Church of Christ is unique in the history. The rest of us must work as part of the team which Peter heads to feed Jesus' flock.

To stick to the model we

chose for this retreat we use the image of the Church as the bride of Christ. The book of Revelation describes the

wedding feast of the Lamb in which his bride the Church is ready to meet him. We read:

"Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) (Rev. 19:6-8)

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband... One of the seven angels... said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God. (Rev. 21:2,9-11)

The thought of both men and women as a bride need not puzzle you. For although God made us male and female (Gen. 1:27), that distinction is relevant only in our earthly perspective. As far as our relationship to Christ, and our position of being in Christ, there is no relevance of gender to him.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:26-28)

In our culture a man pays bride price for his bride, similarly Jesus already paid the bride price for his bride in his own blood:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant

church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (Eph. 5:25-27)

He has left us the task of preparing his bride the Church to meet him by assigning to us different functions:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13)

No matter what our present assignment may be we must never lose sight of the ultimate purpose for which we became priests, namely: to prepare the bride of Christ to meet her groom. Our task is to bring others to salvation. Occasionally we may do this as individuals. However, we also do it as a team working under the leadership of Christ and his representatives. It is important for us to revise this fundamental point of Ecclesiology: to work, not as individuals but as a team.

The success of the modern world is in teamwork. Big and successful businesses are a masterpiece of teamwork. Each individual has a role and must faithfully carry out that role. Recently there was talk of a group of people in Kampala inventing an airplane that would go out in outer space. To a person who understands the specialization that goes in the making of a plane, such a claim is too ambitious, if not an attempt to deceive people.

There are two famous biblical images that indicate the teamwork that is required in the preparation of Jesus' bride: that of Paul, of the Church compared to a living body, and

that of Peter in which the Church is compared to an edifice.

1 Corinthians 12:12-22: 12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by [c] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 14 Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

15 Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” 22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, 24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28 And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second

prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues[d]? Do all interpret? 31 Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

1 Peter 2:5: you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Too often we like to work as individuals; to accomplish something that will leave our names implanted on the places we have been: my school, my health centre, my project, my parish hall, my church... One person starts projects, another comes and destroys them to start his own. I heard of someone who planted a banana plantation, another came and replaced it with a football field. Or sometimes we begin projects and resist transfers because of them. We feel punished because of having to leave them. The question to ask ourselves ever so often is: are we gathering with Christ, or are we scattering?

Those who have come to St. Augustine's Institute will probably recall how we shared about the poem written by Archbishop Oscar Romero. I do not have the full text but I remember the gist of it. He compares us in our pastoral work to laborers, where Jesus is the master builder. The master builder has the blue print, the complete plan. The individual laborers have only to accomplish their tiny bits. The more complex the structure the less individual laborers can grasp the entire plan, and the more they must concentrate on their little bit. If the individual laborers tried to accomplish their bit without reference to the master builder and without reference to their immediate boss, they

would make a mess of the whole plan. Too often we try to play master builder instead of the laborers that we are.

Probably I had had occasion to speak of how I admire the work of the termites in an ant hill. If some people have heard it before, I am sorry but I will repeat it. Termites would be as insignificant as nnunga if their did not have team work. But because they have team work they are quite a formidable force. You can see their structures even a mile ahead. Let us examine their work.

One day after the ants have flown you see two ants that have shed their feathers walking in pairs on the tail of another. If they are lack to escape the many enemies awaiting to eat them, they barrow into the ground and start a new family, a new ant hill. The female starts producing babies fathered by the male. The mother ant is capable of producing a variety of children according to the needs of the family. She produces the works who as soon as they reach the age of reason start by building the palace as well as bringing food for the parents. Soon the palace takes shape and they start constructing an empire. She produces the soldiers to guard the property.

When the workers plan to eat someone's room they do some careful planning. They build a scaffold of soil so that they are not picked by predators as they go about their work. As they work they are guarded by the big-headed soldiers.

If you have ever dug an ant hill you will have noticed how carefully build it is. The closer you get to the queen ant the more you encounter the high-racking officers in the ant army. The biggest-headed generals guard the palace of the queen. If you dig the ant hill and do not kill the queen and

king you are likely to find the next morning that the damage is already repaired by the workers who never tire or complain. Each does their work without complaining and there is harmony and common purpose. They have something to teach us about team work in the Church.

The religious beat us in many ways, both spiritually and materially because they are better organized. Of course they also have problems of relationship, of lack of financial transparency. Still we can compare what they accomplish in relation to what we accomplish. The place where we are is a case in point.

Even when we unite in small cliques these two damage the common cause as we see in our diocese. Small groupings can be of help if there are no rivalries and ill-will among them.

Here are a few questions for personal reflection:

- What kind of work have I been assigned to? How well am I dedicated to my work? Do I regard its execution as obedience to Christ or do I pursue my personal interests in my work?
- How well do I cooperate with other co-workers: my fellow priest in the parish? The parish council? Other priests in the deanery? The bishop? Do I regard them as team members or competitors?
- How much am I attached to the work assigned to me? Am I ready to be assigned wherever my services are needed, or would I first look into the why? How do I understand Jesus' teaching that he who rejects you rejects me, and not only me but

him who sent me, in relation the person of the bishop?

This afternoon we shall continue with the topic, and we shall have some discussions in the lively topic of transfers.

Homily

The liturgy of today speaks to us of the immensity of God. God is so big that you cannot grasp him. I invite you to reflect on three of these aspects. One is the vastness of his creation, two: the power in his Son manifested in healing, and three: the depth to which he invites us to know and love him in contemplation.

About two weeks ago it was announced over the news that scientists had discovered two other black holes more enormous than anything ever imagined before. Black holes are objects in the universe holding the greatest concentration of energy, so dense that nothing can escape their gravitation pull, not even light. It was said that their size was estimated to be 10 billion times that of our sun. In comparison to the earth, if the earth was the size of a full-stop, the sun is the size of a foot ball.

Secondly, 300 million light years, the distance of these black holes was described as close on the galactic scale. Yet that is the distance light travels at a constant speed in 300 million years. Light is the fastest thing known. An object traveling at the speed of light of 186,000 miles per second would go around our earth seven times in a second. Now imagine an object so far away that at that speed reaches us after 300 million years. Just how big is the universe!

In the first line in today's first reading from Isaiah God says: "Apart from me, all is nothing." All these marvels of

creation put together are simply nothing apart from God who holds them in being. Further down it says: "I am the Lord, unrivalled, I form the light and create the dark."

The second marvel of God sounds equally incredible to us. The cures Jesus performs sound so inconceivable. He does not cure those with flue or headaches; but those who are hopelessly ill, and he cures so many. Just imagine him taking a walk one day into Mulago hospital and sending home all those in the cancer ward, going on a little further to the casualty ward and sending home walking also those with legs hanging on strings. We have heard of miraculous healings but at such a scale sounds almost incredible today.

The third marvel is of the saint we celebrate today. John of the cross, a Carmelite monk reached levels of contemplation unimaginable by the majority of us. Whereas he is hailed as one of the greatest mystical writers, most people including myself find his writings above comprehension.

All this should evoke in us humble adoration of the enormity of God. Yet this great God, the creator of the universe, the God with absolute power over illness; the God who is accessible in the centre of our being, invites us to know him better, love him more and serve him out love. One thing we can love from St. John of the cross is the desire to grow in our spiritual life through the assistance of a spiritual director. I read this from a website about John of the cross:

When you are led by others, as John, you will become more humble and less susceptible to pride. In the spiritual ascent to God, there are many pitfalls, ambushes and spiritual traps for those who aspire for intimate union with God. When we allow God to completely purify us

in this life and fully cooperate with God's Spirit, and those providentially selected for us, we will be in for such an awakening and amazement that we will not believe could be possible. This will normally happen ever so gradually.

Second Talk: Transfers



It is to be expected that we cannot always have the appointments we desire. It would be impossible to have a common goal if each received the appointments we had. Jesus told Peter that when he was young he used to choose his way, but when he grows old someone will take him where he would rather not go. The same had happened to the Master himself. We cannot expect less. Yet when we accept without reserve God sees to it that things turn out for our best.

Share an experience of a transfer you received, that you did not want to take on but accepted out of obedience to God, and in which you later were pleasantly surprised. If you do not have such an experience just keep quiet and allow yourself to be enriched by the experience of others.

You can also share about a task you were given and to which you were ill-disposed, which you took on in obedience, and which you liked later on.

This time we shall share in the larger group, so that we are enriched by our brothers' experiences.

Thursday 15th December 2011: Conclusion

First Talk: Fan into flame...

Recapitulation

Yesterday we saw that another aspect of expressing our love for Christ is by feeding his lambs, his sheep, his bride. We also so that this requires at times that someone else ties our belt and takes us where we would rather not go; we shared about the unpleasant transfers, which, however, sometimes turn into graced chapters in our life, if taken in submission to God's will.



Today we consider the fact that in order for us to woo the bride of Christ to him we must be convinced and convincing. To feed the lambs we must ourselves be fed; you cannot feed them on empty stomach,

otherwise you might start eating them. To persuade we must be convinced. To be a light to others we must be alight, you do not light a fire with a smoking piece of stick. To lead others to repentance we must repent. To teach others to love we must love. We cannot give what we do not have. There must be a fire in us that is captivating. In today's gospel Jesus says of John the

Baptist: "John was a lamp alight and shining..." We too must be lamps that are ablaze and shining, not smoking wicks that only give pain to the eyes without giving light.

Let us look at the following texts:

Luke 12: 49-50

I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already! There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress till it is over!

Luke 24: 32

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Jeremiah 20:9

But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

We sense in the three texts strong motivation, a passion for what the characters have to do, an unstoppable drive to accomplish the task ahead of them. People sense this and readily follow a person so strongly motivated, so charismatic. God intended that we become ministers that ardently burn with the fire and zeal of the Holy Spirit.

You might have encountered a preacher in your life who is so passionately consumed by the message he has to transmit that he totally disregards fatigue, inconvenience, pain, criticism, in order to put his message across. You too might have some interest in which you can be so passionately engrossed that nothing seems to stop you. During the campaigns we saw people who seemed so

consumed by winning that they would not stop at nothing. God wants us to be so filled with his Spirit that we may proclaim his message with a fire in us.

This does not have to be with big loudspeakers in trading centres. It does not have to be done with shouting until we grow hoarse. We can be equally convincing even with a calm voice, if we are fully convinced ourselves.

When Jesus met the two men on the way to Emmaus and explained the scriptures to them, they seemed to be in a trance. They forgot all the gloom they had been experiencing. They forgot all the fatigue. Eight miles on foot during the night is a considerable distance. However, after their hearts had been set on fire they could not rest until morning. They felt the urgency of wanting to share the message that very night, so they set on their way back to Jerusalem. Jesus wants to kindle our hearts in the same way that he kindled the hearts of these two disciples. He wants us to feel the urgency of sharing his message with others.

In the history of salvation we have heard of men and women who were burning with fire in their ardour to serve God. The text from Jeremiah quoted above is such an example. Even though the message he had to deliver caused him a lot of inconvenience, making him lose his friends, and attracting enmity with people who sought to kill him, Jeremiah felt the message like a fire in his heart which he could not stop. Similarly, St. Paul also felt that the Spirit of God drove him in such a way that no sacrifice was too great to stop him from carrying out his mission. He says: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness

or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:35-37).

Jesus wants that you and me are set ablaze with the fire of his Spirit. He wants that our hearts burn within us like the hearts of the two men on the way to Emmaus. He wants that when we speak out his word people feel their hearts burning within them. He wants us to be passionate ministers of his word like Jeremiah and St. Paul. He can accomplish all that if we allow him.

How will he do that? What have we to do in order to dispose ourselves to the all-consuming power of the Holy Spirit?

When we look again at scripture we read from Luke 24:49: *“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”*

In obedience to his command the apostles gathered together and remained in prayer until they received the Holy Spirit. Then their hearts were set on fire. They who had been in hiding now proclaimed the gospel without fear or favour. They were willing to die for what they believed, and indeed all of them with the exception of John died a martyr’s death.

We have already received God’s Spirit. We received the Holy Spirit at our baptism and confirmation. We receive the Holy Spirit in every sacrament, in reconciliation and in the Eucharist. All we need to do is to allow the Spirit within us to become active.

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

How can we fan into flame the fire of the Holy Spirit in us? We need to remove the things that prevent it from burning brightly. And to do so we must identify them. That is the task of everyone to do, but in order to ease this task, I point out the areas to look into.

1. Our lack of readiness to suffer, to carry the cross. The Lord told us that no one can come to him without picking the personal cross daily and following him. Yesterday we heard the reading from John of the cross saying the same thing, we



cannot access the breadth and length, the height and depth of the love of God without readiness to suffer. Here he is quoting St.

Paul. There is an in-built and instinctive principle of self-preservation that avoids suffering and maximizes pleasure. Yet we usually pay with interest any legitimate suffering avoided. Conversely, any of it consciously embraced makes us grow a little bit stronger.

2. One way of quenching a fire is by throwing into it stuff that is non-combustible. Sin is the non-

combustible that we through into our relation with God. We cannot serve two masters. Each time we add another master our love for the Master diminishes.

3. Another way of extinguishing a fire is by denying it fuel. We cannot keep the flame of God's fire in us burning for long without feeding it with the fuel of prayer.

Here then is something for examining ourselves: Where in my life do I resist the inevitable suffering in my life? What are the sins in my life that are a hindrance for the fire of God's Spirit? How faithful am I to prayer? Where can I improve?

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I ask each one to write out a biblical text that has great meaning for you, that you would like to model your life upon. It may be the fruit of this retreat or it may be something you already had. Come with it in the next session for sharing. You may want to write it on a paper you can recognize so that you can take it away with you afterwards.

Second Talk

This is our last session in which we have sharing. I invite you to read out a biblical text that has inspired you during the retreat. It may be from among those given by the preacher during the retreat. It may be one that you found yourself during this retreat. Or it may be one that habitually speaks to you. However, it is one that you would like to continue living in your ministry. We shall place these texts before the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to help us live them in our lives.

Penitential Service

Structure:

Opening Hymn

Introduction

We gather to celebrate God's mercy

Gratitude for this sacrament

Ask for wisdom to treasure it

We say together that we are sorry: Confession

Reading

Gospel of third Sunday year C

Reflection:

Individual confessions

Magnificat

conclusion

We have used in our retreat the model of John the Baptist. We know that if we were to summarize in a single word the whole message and mission of John the Baptist in a single word, it would be the word "repent." In all likelihood John had nothing to repent of, if Jesus who could read hearts referred to him as a pattern of righteousness. Yet if we cannot make any claim to having him as a model if we fail to heed the message which is fundamental in his call.

A preacher during a retreat once illustrated the idea that we ought to burn with the fire of God's Spirit thus giving light and heat. He brought in the retreat room a charcoal stove with live coals, a pair of tongs and a basin containing some water. He told us that while we are full of the Spirit we are like a hot charcoal stove full of live ambers. It is used to give heat. It can cook food which then can be eaten with taste. You dare not touch it with bare hands or else it will

burn you. You need to hold the ambers with a pair of tongs. In the same way no wicked person would approach a man full of the Spirit to tempt him. However, if the burning charcoal is thrown into the basin of water, the fire burns out. The charcoal becomes cold, black and ugly. Anyone can touch it with no harm. It is incapable of giving heat or light. Worse still, it dirties with soot those who touch it. That is what we become when we lose the fire of the Holy Spirit.

This morning we saw that the things that prevent the fire of God's Spirit to burn in us are our failure to carry our crosses, our sins of commission and omission and our failure to remain united with Christ in prayer. We can use these three criteria in fact to make an examination of conscience.

As we heard from the gospel reading from Luke 3:10-18, different categories of people came to John and asked him: "what must we do to produce fruits of repentance." He gave an appropriate answer to each category. It is interesting to note that although John the Baptist was very strict on himself, the answers he gave to each of these categories required them nothing more than being dedicated to their respective jobs in a spirit of conscientiousness and love. That is what is required of us in order to grow in Christ. Simply do your job where you are assigned to the best of your ability.

Homily

I once went into a shop to buy a guitar. I had some money at the time and I wanted to buy the best that there was, because it is something I treasure. I asked the man for the prices of the guitars on display. Some were 150 thousand lire, some 200 others 250. There was one however, which was 800 thousand. I asked the man what was so special about it. He pointed to its name and said, can't you see? It is a fender. The name said nothing to me. So I asked the man, what is so special with a fender. He looked at me with an expression that said to me that he could hardly believe my ignorance. And he repeated: it is a *Fender!* In a tone of voice that added: you moron. I didn't want to appear any more like a dummy, so I paid for the Fender and took it home. After sixteen years I have discovered the exceptional quality of the fender.

There certain things we may possess but whose value we may not fully appreciate. Their people whose lives we might share without knowing how privileged we are to do so. In today's gospel Jesus asks his listeners what they went out to see in the desert. He wants to hear what they really think about John the Baptist. Eventually he hears someone who says that they went out to see a prophet. The responder is close to the truth but not the whole truth. John the Baptist is much more than a prophet, Jesus Says. And what makes him so great is because it is of him that scripture says: "See, I am going to send my messenger before you; he will prepare the way before you." What makes John the Baptist so great is that he

was privileged to be the immediate precursor of the Savior.

People might then have been filled with awe, thinking back that they had been close with such a man predicted in the scriptures, with such a noble mission. I do not know whether they realized the implication of that; that if the mission of John made him greater than all those born of women, how much greater was the one whom he came to announce, the one who was talking to them.

Many of Jesus' contemporaries knew he was great, judging from his life and his works, but they probably did not fully take in how great he was. They did not realize that they were living in a unique moment in the whole of history. To the Pharisees who demanded a sign from him he said that *"The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here."*

Even his own apostles who accepted and believed in him as the Messiah did not fully appreciate what they saw. He once told them: *"Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Luke 10:23-24).*

John the Baptist who had a better idea about who Jesus was said that he was not worthy even to undo the strap of his sandal. The apostles who had to learn more slowly presumed even to sit one on his right and one on his left in his kingdom. How different is the attitude of John the apostle long after the resurrection when he writes in his first letter: *“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life- and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.* (1 John 1-3). We sense awe in those words, as if John discovered much later that Jesus was a mystery much deeper than they perceived during his life with them.

We are quite familiar with the Jesus whom we bring down everyday on the altar. We reverence him, we preach to others about him, we try to follow him. Yet how possible it is that we too do not fully appreciate the great mystery we handle every day! We are concluding our retreat to go back to our usual business. All the challenges that we left before coming to the retreat are awaiting us. All our usual temptations are awaiting us. Past experience tells us that we can very quickly slide into the ordinary life, and forget about all the wonderful feelings and good intentions we had at a retreat. But we have one great friend who can keep the grace of the

retreat alive and active in our lives, that is Jesus Christ in the most holy sacrament of the altar. We have him in our tabernacles wherever we work. If among the resolutions we make after our retreat we include that of visiting him constantly, we are assured that he will help us retain what he has given us.