

Holy Name Anniversary Mass

March 4/5 2017

I gratefully appreciate the invitation to return to Holy Name and participate in the parish's 160th anniversary because I wanted to tell you how important this small parish is to the church of Nashville and how significant it has been in my own life. Of course, I want also to congratulate this milestone year with you.

If memory serves me the first time I came to Nashville was at the end of January 1970 for the ordination of my classmate and friend Charlie Strobel who was the first in my class to be ordained a priest. That made the visit a very special occasion. My own ordination would follow on March 7th. Soon after my whole class would be ordained and finally survive the four years of the mayhem and turmoil that consumed Washington DC in the nineteen- sixties. For those who can remember 1960's were very unsettling years and did make a permanent mark on our lives.

I returned to Tennessee once after that when Charlie was stationed in East Tennessee and I was in my first parish assignment in Atlanta. After that I came for a visit to Holy Name came when Charlie was pastor in 1984 or thereabouts. It was then he tried to coax me to come to Nashville to start a house of prayer or some such thing here. We decided to pray about the matter and drove up to Kentucky for an unscheduled visit to the monastery of Gethsemani. Little did I know then that a year later I would enter that monastery and once again try my hand at Trappist life. However, my mid-life plan got interrupted in 1986 after Mary Catherine Strobel's tragic death! It was then that Charlie called the monastery's abbot and asked him to allow me to come to Holy Name to be with him during the funeral. I came here during that sad time and afterwards returned to Gethsemani after the funeral Mass. Two weeks later he called again and asked the abbot for me to return. Simultaneous to his call, I had what I regarded as an 'extraordinary experience' of Mary Catherine Strobel one morning as I was preparing for the morning Mass. I related my experience to the abbot and he told me to take a house car and return to Holy Name. Charlie had decided during that traumatic time to change the direction of his ministry and embrace a new calling to serve the poor full time. I reluctantly agreed to take his place at Holy Name ... but only for one year. Back then, as I am now,

convinced that I was not intended to be a parish priest. I told Father Timothy, the abbot I would return after one year here but instead I stayed for twenty! During that stay I also served as parish-priest for Saint Patrick's for nine years. The reason I make these admissions is that I never wanted to be a parish priest. In my youth I had determined that the priesthood was the way to get close to this mysterious and evasive Jesus . After ordination, I spent one year in a parish as an assistant in downtown Atlanta, and soon after was assigned to the archdiocesan chancery office where I spent several years; however, that experience convinced me that working in an office was not my idea of ministry so I asked to return to monastic life. Here's where my story changes.

Once here I read and reread the parish archives which included a long list of pastors during your past 160 years. However, there have been two men I have come to know well, Jim Zralek and Charlie Strobel and in my estimation, both are exemplary examples of Christian discipleship and far outshine others I have known in the ministry. Because of them I came to learn something I would not have learned had I not come to Holy Name.

Early on in my boyhood, I became enthralled with the mystery of Jesus and the message that He left. The stories telling that He still truly lived captivated my imagination. It was then I began my search for Him wanting to discover His presence. My efforts back then were concentrated in the Mass and rituals in my parish church the normal devotional life of the pre-Vatican Council church. I soon learned that such pious methods were only a very limited piece of the puzzle of the mystery of the living Christ. Thomas Merton, the renowned Trappist monk, once wrote that *we will never fully appreciate the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist until we see the intimate connection that exists between the Eucharist and the mystery of the Church...Christ's body.*

It was here in Holy Name's Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen that I experienced Christ's presence in the midst of His people especially the poor and downtrodden. The meals served in that soup kitchen are celebrations and constant reminders of Christ's presence among us. He comes and is present among the disheveled and the needy who gather weekly to eat together. Just as Jesus told His disciples...*whenever you do this, remember Me!* The poor and needy come here to eat and experience a moment of His presence and His love. It is not a sanctimonious and pious activity, but an experience of His love that

transcends the meal. I had come to realize that He is truly present in such gatherings like Holy Name's soup kitchen meals in the parish center. What I longed to experience as a young grammar school boy sitting in a pew in my New York parish church, I found here thanks to Holy Name and the priests who well understood and made real the gospel message. Because of you and the priests who served you here, I too learned the hidden gospel message and I remain grateful for that.

I think each person's relationship with God is marked by a host of personal factors that may or may not be church related. The Lord does not need the church, the sacraments, priests or religious to come to us. These are only temporary instruments to remind us of His presence in our lives. Like all things of human design, they too will all pass away. In our weekly gatherings in this church we come and encourage one another and share the hope that we have that His promises are real and we will see Him face to face. However, hope is a very elusive human factor and that is why we come here together to share and bolster our faith and renew our hope.

I am grateful to you for the years I spent here among you, for your kindness and patience with me who wrestled constantly with parish priesthood, but it was here that I learned of God's wondrous presence and I learned about His gracious love. And it all happened among you, the people of Holy Name, who share your lives and faith while breaking bread with your more needy neighbors and in doing that bring the presence of Jesus to all who come here. You have taught me a great lesson for which I am grateful. That lesson has become the prelude to a happy and peace-filled retirement. Thank you!