

Jerry RAGAN, new national responsible of USA fraternities.
Homily in his parish, 11 August 2014

So, as many of you have already heard I was out in Colorado Springs last week and while there I was elected to a three year term as the National Responsible of the Jesus Caritas Fraternity of Priests. I have been a member of this worldwide fraternity of priests for the last twenty years. When I left my support system of family and friends in Philly, it was Fr. Mike Smith who approached me and invited me into fraternity with a group of four other priests. The support of my brother priests in fraternity has been a great blessing in my life. In the Diocese of Savannah there are 3 fraternity groups. I belong to the Augusta fraternity. Most fraternities consist of a gathering of four to seven priests and are based on the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld. He was a French priest who lived among a native tribe in the Algerian desert and who was shot to death in 1916. He was beatified in Rome in 2005 by Pope Benedict xvi.

As with many saints, Brother Charles was somewhat different but he had an intense love for Jesus and the Eucharist. And he had a deep sense that we are called by God to love all people, especially the poor. Brother Charles talked about being a universal brother and said that we “learn to love God by loving others.” It has been a great grace for me to share fraternity with men who love being priests. It has been a great grace for me to spend time in prayer with other priests and find great support for my life and ministry in their friendship. My life has been so greatly blessed and enriched by the Jesus Caritas Fraternity of Priests.

And yet as I saw the storm clouds of this election gathering I was resistant and fearful of the idea that I might be elected as the National Leader of the Fraternity. In fact, I sat down with Bishop Hartmayer a couple months ago and told him of the possibility and that I thought it would be best to take a pass on it. He was a good listener but really didn't steer me in either direction. I feared that I would be overwhelmed by the responsibilities of the position. I love being a parish priest. I love being a priest in this faith community. So, I feared that I'd be cheating you and the fraternity if I tried to do both things at the same time. I quietly tried to tell my friends in fraternity that I'd be very happy to avoid nomination. I thought I had some pretty good friends but I knew I was in trouble when my name came out first in a straw poll Tuesday night a week ago. So, the next day I called Bishop Hartmayer and instead of being neutral, he was very supportive and encouraging of me being open to the nomination. I prayed about my fears and I don't know if I was being brave or foolish but then I was nominated that night I accepted the nomination. The following evening, Thursday, July 31st, on the second ballot I received the necessary 2/3 majority needed to be elected. I am humbled and deeply honored to be recognized as someone who passionately cares about the well-being of his brother priests.

As I move forward in this new position I find strength in knowing that I can rely on your prayerful support and I feel deeply blessed to know that my brother priests and deacons and a great parish staff have my back. I could not take on this responsibility without their help. And I find this Gospel passage from Matthew to be so very enlightening. I love the way St. Peter faced right into his fears. He may have sunk like a rock when he got out of the boat but at least he was willing to try. And it was in trying that he found his

true strength for Jesus was there to save him. In trying he found the only true path to overcoming one's fears is to stay focused on Jesus.

Deep down I think each of us has certain fears that we need to face. We can be afraid of terrorists and immigrants and people infected with Ebola. We can be afraid of the future and losing our wealth in the stock market. We may be troubled by the fear of inadequacy, or a fear of failing. Many have a fear of death. But perhaps the most surprising fear of many people and one that we do not like to talk about is the fear of God. It is the fear that God is not really on our side. It is the fear that God will put us out on a limb and leave us.

But this is the story of Jesus, the Son of the living God, who doesn't abandon us, even in the most fearful circumstances. This is a story about the Son of God who calms our fears, gives us inner peace. This is story about the love that reaches out to well-intentioned but faltering disciples. This is a story about Jesus never giving up on a person whose faith is hot one minute and cold the next. This is a story about those times when we find that for some reason Jesus seems distant and we can't come to him, instead Jesus comes to us. When we can't walk to Jesus, Jesus walks toward us and climbs into our boat full of trouble and tragedy to bring the help that we need. This story reminds us that it is not only in some quiet, out of the way place far removed from the storms of life that we meet Jesus. Often it is in the middle of wild and life threatening situations that we meet Jesus face to face. We can expect to meet Jesus, to be brought to faith like Peter and the disciples - in the middle of a storm.

The focus of this miracle wasn't the walking on water; it was the saving of Peter and the disciples in the midst of disaster. No matter what challenges I face, I would be crazy to think I can move forward relying on my own resources. I am always amazed at the large number of people who tell me that they are a "walking miracle;" that God has intervened and saved them, rescued them, healed them, strengthened them for some challenge or even tragedy; that they could not have made it without God. I hear such comments all the time, and the focus is never on the how the miracle happened or rational explanations for the miracle. The focus is always on God's intervention in their lives and their deepest appreciation for God's presence in the midst of the storm. The focus is not on explanations but simply on a sense of God's saving love. So, we gather this day and every Sunday to join with them in praising Jesus as we respond with the disciples in homage of him saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Amen! Amen!

Jerry

