

Fr. Roger J. Landry
Retreat for the Priests of the Diocese of Lincoln
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Sir 36:1.4-5.10-17, Ps 79, Mk 10:32-45

SHARING JESUS' HOLY AND PRIESTLY AMBITION

- Today in the Gospel we encounter what in some aspects is one of the most disappointing and humanly revolting scenes in the Gospel. Jesus describes for the third time what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. He had been walking alone, ahead of the others, and the others were amazed and afraid of this fact, almost certainly because Jesus was in a pensive mood that they hadn't seen very often. He took the Twelve aside and said to them what was obviously on his mind as he was walking on the path up to Jerusalem: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death but after three days he will rise." And what was the response of the disciples? Was it to commiserate with him? Was it to console him? Quite far from it. Instead, James and John came to Jesus and said, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you!" After Jesus asked, "What do you wish me to do for you?," they replied, "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." Jesus had told them that he was going to die and they were asking for favors. Before we get into the meat of the scene and what it means for us, let's just pause to consider the ugliness of what was happening. Imagine, for example, that your father or your brother or your best friend or a parishioner or even a stranger on a plane came to you and told you that the doctor had just given him two weeks to live and, instead of consoling him, instead of even *caring about him*, you immediately shifted your attention and asked him to help you get a promotion at work or to give you his house or pepper him about getting a larger share of his will. That's what was happening in this scene. That's what Jesus' friends were doing to him in today's Gospel.
- And it wasn't the first or only time. On the other two occasions when Jesus announced in detail the betrayal, torture and ignominious public execution he was about to endure, the apostles never responded appropriately. The first time Jesus foretold his crucifixion was in Caesarea Philippi, right after Peter proclaimed him the Messiah and Son of God and Jesus proclaimed Simon bar-Jonah to be the rock on whom he would build his Church. But when Jesus announced what type of Messiah he would be and how he wasn't going to inaugurate his kingdom dressed in purple, seated on a marble throne, with a crown made out of gold and diadems but naked, nailed to his wooden throne and crowned with thorns, Peter, rather than consoling him, rebuked him and swore that no such thing would ever happen to him. The second time Jesus announced what would happen was after Jesus, Peter, James and John had come from the Mount of Transfiguration and Jesus had exorcised a demon-possessed boy that the other disciples couldn't help. Jesus told them a second time, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death he will rise," but instead of responding to what their friend had said, they allowed him to walk on ahead of them while they, in the back, quarreled about who was worthiest to head up the top cabinet secretariats in the Messianic administration they believed Jesus was about to inaugurate. When Jesus asked, "What were you arguing about on the way?," they, embarrassed, remained mute. Today, after James and John asked Jesus to give them a blank check and do whatever they asked, the other disciples got indignant, not fundamentally because of the Boanerges brothers' importunity, not because they found such behavior contrary to genuine love rather than using of Jesus, but because they likewise coveted the two seats the Sons of Zebedee were requesting and were upset because they were gutsy enough to ask for what the others didn't have the chutzpah to request but all secretly desired.
- The last and perhaps worst example of this type of unholy behavior occurred during the Last Supper. After Jesus indicated to them, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me," the apostles again got into a dispute over which of them was the greatest. Rather than thinking about who would be the despicable betrayer, they were thinking about who would be the greatest, not recognizing at the time that all of them would end up

betraying him.

- These were all examples of what St. James describes in his letter as “selfish ambition.” They were seeking their own interests, not those of the Lord. They were using him, not truly loving him.
- What happened with them is a perennial warning to the Church, to the disciples of the Lord. We might believe that we would never treat a friend like that, but the reality is that no matter how often we hear about Jesus’ sufferings, crucifixion and death, no matter how frequently we stare at the Crucifix, rather than seek to console the Lord out of love, we, like the apostles, are likewise prone just to divert our attention to what we really love, our own plans, careers, worldly hopes and hungers. When he’s died for others’ salvation, and some of us continue to fight for seats at tables or greetings in marketplaces rather than for towels to wash others’ feet, it must be particularly painful.
- So it’s important during this retreat to ponder the theme of ambition. As we delve into the topic, we should note that Jesus’ response was not to castigate James and John or the other apostles by the corrective, “Don’t be ambitious!” Jesus took advantage of the ugliness of their and the others apostles’ raw earthly ambition to instruct them about the holy ambition he wants them to have. He had, after all, chosen men with the capacity for ambition, who were seeking to be great. What he wanted to do, however, was to change their “selfish ambition” into a holy ambition and chart out for them the path to true greatness. He wanted them to be ambitious for the right things. He wanted them to strive to advance not in a hierarchy of “power,” but in a hierarchy of true Christian loving service, not on the worldly or ecclesiastical ladder of status, but on the ladder of holiness. He wants us to be ambitious, not as sycophantic worldly courtiers but ambitious for souls, to be ambitious to do his will, to be ambitious to spread his name and his love, to be ambitious to die for him so as to live with Him. He wants us to strive not that we be exalted, but that he be exalted, for his Father’s name, kingdom, and will, rather than our own, be hallowed, glorified and done. To be number one would not be decided by sharing Christ’s power, but by sharing Christ’s love. Christ’s cabinet would be filled not by those who would kiss his butt, but by those who would put their own butts on the line for Him and for others, by being baptized into Christ’s death through their own suffering and death. He who is the Way has shown them us the path to greatness and the means to become truly number one. Jesus wants us all to be great, not mediocre. Over and over again he stressed that he wants us to “strive,” to “seek,” to “burn,” to “hunger and thirst” for greatness (Mt 5:6; Mt 6:32-33; Lk 12:30; Lk 12:49; Lk 13:24) But the greatness to which he wants us to aspire has nothing to do with some type of terrestrial pecking-order. Real greatness, he describes, is to become most like him, to share in his greatness, in his divine holiness, in his total self-giving love.
- How much we in the Church today need to focus on this theme of ambition because we have a two-fold problem in the Church today with regard to it. On the one hand, there are still far too many “climbers” in the Church, who seek the rewards of spiritual worldliness, striving to exalt themselves through becoming a superior, or getting the rich and cozy pastorate, or having a school, gymnasium or parish hall named after them, or being named a prelate of honor, or being invested with a pectoral cross and kissable ring, or even getting a dossier at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints so that everyone else will remember their conspicuous sanctity. When you look at the movement of religious women seeking to be priests, I think this is at the heart of much of it, that many look at the hierarchy Christ established as a hierarchy of power and they want a piece of that power. On the other side of the problem — and often as a response — there are the legions of Catholics who consider all ambitions bad, who bury their own and others’ talents, gifts, and truly-inspired desires out of a false sense of humility, who temper their and others’ zeal lest they appear to be ambitious. These equate holiness with mediocrity and are often pastorally inert, not doing anything, not starting anything, not building anything, not knocking on any doors. By their lack of ambition and lack of enthusiasm they perhaps do even more damage to the Church out of omission than the outright worldly ambitious do out of commission. Neither group, however, is truly carrying out the mission of the Church.
- This paradox of the path to greatness — that the humble are exalted and the self-exalted humbled (Lk 14:11), that the first will be last and the last will be first (Mk 10:31), that greatness is shown in washing others’ feet rather than having authority over them — is something the world doesn’t understand. This point was driven home to me in my first year of seminary in Rome. Brian Murphy, the Associated Press’ Rome correspondent, got our rector’s permission to shadow six first-theologians around for a year, to write a book about the various issues involved in the transition from the “world” into the life of preparation for the

priesthood. I was one of the six “new men” chosen. About midway through the year, many of Brian’s preconceptions were being shattered and he who described himself as a “born-and-fled” Catholic was beginning to experience a conversion. There was one thing in particular, however, he couldn’t grasp and he came to me in the hope that I could explain it to him; he saw it as at least a paradox if not an outright contradiction. The seminarians sent to Rome, he said, were generally considered the “best and brightest,” and the North American College was popularly referred to as the “West Point” of Seminaries, and had the reputation as the “Vatican’s Elite School for American Priests.” A large percentage of the U.S. bishops, he said, are alumni of the College. But he stated that everybody seemed to downplay and be outright embarrassed by these terms of exaltation and would gather every Saturday to pray the Rosary before the image of Our Lady of Humility. When he asked whether they desired to be bishops, they all said no, and that just did not make any sense to him. In journalism, he confessed, most people start out as copy editors desiring to become reporters. Once they become reporters, they aspire to become editors. Once editors, they hope to move up the ladder still, as editor-in-chief or achieve other positions of authority. He couldn’t figure out why young talented men in the seminary could honestly tell him that they’d be happy the rest of their lives to remain at the “entry level” as parish priests. Why wouldn’t they all want to become Monsignors, or bishops, or cardinals or even the Pope? He added that when he asked young men this question, most treated it as if there was something wrong in desiring ecclesiastical preferment. He summed up his question by asking: “Is there any place for ambition in the Church?” I answered that there are two types of ambition in the Church, one bad and one good. The first is for self-aggrandizement; the second a Christ-like zeal for souls. To the extent that the first exists within the Church, Christ’s goals are often thwarted as particular people in the Church seek to build their own kingdom rather than the Lord’s. But when a priest or a lay person is filled with the a zeal for souls, Christ’s kingdom is normally advanced.

- Jesus tells us today about his ambition for us and he wants us to recalibrate our ambitions based on his. He says today, referring to his baptism in blood, “I have a baptism with which to be baptized and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!” He wanted us to be so “submerged” in his ambition for souls that we will sacrifice ourselves together with him for their salvation, to offer our life together with his to ransom others from the slavery sin and the death to which it leads.
- What are the ambitions Jesus wants us to have? In the Gospels, he lists six of them, and on this retreat we can ask him for the grace for us to be more ambitious for these things than star athletes work hard for championships, than the hardest working student strives to be graduate summa, than the greediest person works to make millions.
- The first ambition Jesus wants us to have is to be **great in faith**. He praised the Syro-Phoenician woman and the Roman Centurion for their great faith and longed that all in Israel would emulate it. All the more, he would want us, his followers and his priests, not just to have faith but to have great faith. And we should aspire to it with passion, begging him as he first disciples, “Lord, increase my faith!”
- Second, Jesus wants to have an ambition to **live by his truths and to pass them on to others**. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” He wants us all to be great in that way. This retreat is an opportunity for us to rekindle that fire to know and live our faith and to pass on as of the greatest importance what we ourselves have received (see 1 Cor 15:1-5).
- Third, he wants us to have an **ambition to be truly humble**. That’s not a contradiction in terms. “If anyone wishes to be first,” he says, “he shall be the last of all.” In the sight of God, to promote oneself is to demote oneself, to ascend with him toward heaven we need to descend. In another part of the Gospel, in response to the disciples’ question, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?” Jesus called a child over and said, “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven.” To be child-like doesn’t mean to be childish. St. Paul summons us to “full stature in Jesus Christ,” but our advance in Christian maturity is at the same time progress in childlike simplicity. The truth is that often, as we get older, we cease to relate to God the way we should, as his beloved children. We may not act quite as poorly as the Prodigal Son in the parable, but we often just want to “grow up” and leave “home,” to do things on our own, to be less dependent on Him than we were before and more self-reliant and self-sufficient. Whereas when we were a child and used to talk to the Father every day, now on our own we space out those

interactions. We still love the Father, but less than we used to. When he offers to do something for us, we say, “Thanks, Dad, but I’ve got it covered.” To become greater, we need to become humbler and more dependent on God, not less.

- That passion for humility leads to the fourth point: Jesus wants us to have an **ambition to imitate him in total self-sacrificial service**. Today Jesus said to the apostles: “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” He reinforced this point at the Last Supper, when he washed their feet. After doing this, he told them and us: “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I, then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” For Jesus to reign is to serve and he wanted all of his followers to join in that same reigning by serving. St. Paul would describe to the Philippians (Phil 2:3-11) that Christ’s example was the stairway to heaven when he called on them to imitate it: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” This self-abasing loving service was at the root of Christ’s greatness, St. Paul continued: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” And Jesus to each of us turns and says, “Follow me!” On another occasion Jesus made a similar point by saying that if we wanted to be the greatest in his kingdom we needed to welcome children in his name. He illustrated this point of service with a little child not because a child was considered “innocent” but because an infant was culturally insignificant and completely dependent. A baby has many needs that parents and adults need to take of, and most often will not even say thanks in return, not to mention return the favor. It’s all giving and very little receiving. You really cannot get into a quid-pro-quo relationship with a little child. The only adequate response to such a person is love. Too often the worldly ambitious treat others well so that they can get something from them later to advance in the eyes of the world. But this can never really be done with a child. Your only reason for treating the child well is love and respect for the child, for the gift of life, and for the person’s being in God’s image. Jesus calls us to treat all people in this way, not using them for our own advantage — as the worldly do and as climbers do — but loving them and serving them, expecting nothing in return other than the love and gratitude of Jesus. Jesus wants us to have the ambition to serve selflessly, just like he serves us.
- Fifth, he wants us to seek to be **great in love**. Moved by the Holy Spirit, St. Paul said to the Corinthians that they shouldn’t be ambitious for the ability to speak in or interpret tongues, for the power to work miracles, for various positions in the Church, but that they should “strive eagerly” — be ambitious! — for the “greatest spiritual gifts” — faith, hope and love, of which love was the greatest. St. Paul said in that famous passage it didn’t suffice to have the faith to move mountains. It wasn’t enough to give the body over as a martyr. One needed to do this with love. And someone who loves has a lot to work on. Out of love, he needs to learn how to be patient, kind, not jealous or boastful, insistent at his own way, arrogant or rude, irritable or resentful, rejoicing at the wrong of others. He needs to believe, hope and endure all things and rejoice in the truth. This is something to which Jesus definitely wants us all to inspire.
- Lastly, Jesus wants us to **be ambitious to be saints**. “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” Jesus said, echoing the prophets’ call for us to be holy as the Lord, our God, is holy, so that we might fully become the image and likeness of the God who created us. It’s enlightening to look at the ambitions of many of the saints. St. Paul had the ambition to become all things to all people so as to save as many as he could. St. Ignatius of Loyola had an ambition to do for God what St. Francis did, what St. Dominic did, and do everything not just for God’s glory but for his greater glory. St. Francis Xavier had the ambition to bring whole nations to the Lord. St. Teresa of Avila had the ambition to reform the Carmelites so that it might

sing forever of God's glory. Blessed Mother Teresa had the ambition to satiate Jesus' infinite thirst for souls. Do we have the ambitions of the saints? Do we have the desire to be numbered among them? Do we desire our people to be numbered among them?

- Jesus is ambitious that we be ambitious and help our people become ambitious to be great in faith, zealous in living it and passing it on, to be last and the servant of all, to sacrifice ourselves out of love and responsive to God's call for us to be holy as he is holy. Jesus summarized the ambition he wanted his disciples to have when he asked James and John, "Can you drink the chalice I am about to drink?" Jesus' chalice was the cup of suffering of the Suffering Servant, the chalice he had asked the Father three times in the Garden of Gethsemane to take away. He was asking whether they would be able to make their nourishment what his was, to "do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (Jn 4:34). Discipleship, priesthood, consists in drinking, together with Jesus, from the sacred chalice of redemptive suffering appointed by the Father. Jesus was founding a new society, a new kingdom, based on the principle of sacrificial love and inviting people to have such an ambition for the salvation of all as to drink his chalice with him to the dregs. To drink his chalice doesn't mean merely to lift the cup of salvation during the Eucharist but to live this truly Eucharistic life, giving our body and blood over to others for their salvation. Sometimes, let's be honest, that's a struggle. It was a struggle for St. Augustine of Canterbury, whom we celebrate today. After he was sent by St. Gregory the Great to re-evangelize Anglo-Saxon England, he turned back in France when he and the monks with him had received warnings about the ferocity of the Anglo-Saxons and the dangers of the English Channel. But when he returned to see his former fellow Benedictine the Pope, St. Gregory convinced him to return, and the rest, we can say, is English Church history. The metamorphosis between worldly ambition and Christ-like ambition, between saving our lives or losing it, happened in James and John and in the lives of the other apostles when Christ showed them that the path to prominence was not lined with glitter but rather than thorns. It wasn't an easy conversion for them, but it was one that 11 of the 12 of them made. They drank Christ's cup, they were baptized into his death and now are seated at his right in heaven. Christ wants all of us to undergo the same transformation. Like with James and John and the other apostles, like with Augustine of Canterbury, there may have been times when we have turned away from drinking Christ's chalice to the full, but this retreat is another chance for us to turn and take up the chalice anew.
- And as we drink Jesus' chalice, Jesus gives us our reward. It's not places at his right and left as he enters into his kingdom — those places were reserved by the Father for two thieves — but it's himself. Jesus gives himself as our ransom, as our servant, as our slave, as our savior. And he gives us his mission promising to remain with us always until the end of time.
- Today, as we celebrate this Memorial Mass for all the deceased priests who have labored here in the Diocese of Lincoln over the previous 125 years, including so many who would have been instrumental in the vocations of the priests here present, so many who would have built the parishes at which we're now serving, so many who would have drunk the Lord's chalice for the sake of his people in southern Nebraska, we can ask, "What type of priest do I want to be and be remembered for having been? What is my ambition?" And as we look around us, we see the beginning of the path to greatness today. Jesus mentions that to whoever wishes to be great *among you* must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wishes to be the first *among you* must be the slave (*doulos*) of all. Greatness comes not from serving or being enslaved only to God and his will. Greatness comes not from a willingness to serve or be a slave of strangers. Greatness and becoming the greatest comes from serving and become a slave very concretely to those among us. James and John would become great and the greatest by serving Peter, Andrew, Bartholomew, Matthew, Simon and Jude. We'll become great by truly serving those around us right now, those who surround us in our parishes, those who are our neighbors. Greatness comes from giving our life away in love for them. The greatest of the priests who have gone before us have been the servants of those, even the slaves of those, God has put in their midst. Let us pray that we will follow them on that same path of greatness.
- Christ wants us to be great and today he shows us how. The greatest illustration he gives us of the path to greatness is here in the Mass, our participation in time in the eternal offering of Christ in the Last Supper and on Calvary. When Jesus humbly bent down at the beginning of the Mass to wash his followers' feet, he was just getting started. Later he would abase himself even further, changing bread and wine into his body and blood so that we, his servants, could consume him and live off of him. This is the chalice he places

before us to drink, to which offer he hopes we will respond with as much trust and zeal as John and James. I have always loved those altar cloths in many Churches and Chapels across the globe that have had written on the sides of them St. John's and James' response to Jesus' question, "Can you drink the chalice I am about to drink?" "Possumus!" they said, Latin for "We Can!" Those words on the altar cloth are a reminder for every priest, as we lift the chalice of salvation, that the Lord calls us to greatness not just by celebrating the Mass but by doing this in memory of Christ and learning from him how to be the servant and slave of all and give our life as a ransom for many. He not only wants us to receive his self-gift of loving service in the Eucharist, but he wants us to make it the path of our life. He simplifies everything he's taught us today about the path to true greatness in the words he will say again to us in a few minutes: "Do THIS in memory of me!" May the priests who have gone before us, may St. Augustine of Canterbury, may Saints James and John and the other apostles all intercede for us to help us to recognize that, too, can!