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Retreat for the Priests of the Diocese of Lincoln
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Sir 42:15-25, Ps 33, Mk 10:46-52

TAKING COURAGE AND GETTING UP BECAUSE JESUS IS CALLING

- “Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you.” Today as is the beautiful tradition when the priests of Lincoln get together on retreat, we’re celebrating a Mass for Promoting Priestly Vocations, for our future priest brothers, who one day will be on retreat here with us. It’s also a great opportunity for us to remember the generations of priests before us who offered Mass during retreat that one day we would join them. And how fitting is that today we have in the Gospel the encounter of Jesus with Bartimaeus. The episode of this blind man with the Lord contains within it the outline of a vocation story, an outline that is meant to happen in a life not just once but over and over again. We can think with gratitude not only of the first time but of the many times we have rehearsed the various stages we see in the Gospel, the times that we took courage because we grasped that Jesus was calling us, we got up from where we were and responded to that summons. Let’s look at the various stages in the calling of Bartimaeus and ask the Lord for gratitude for those times in our life when the same things happened to us. Let’s also ask the Lord for the grace to help us to recognize the stages in others and to become fitting instruments to encourage them to get up and respond to the Lord’s call as well.
 - “As Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd” — Jericho is the lowest place on earth, more below sea level than any other location. Jesus was passing through the depths of the human experience in order to ascend the 15 mile road up hill that leads to Jerusalem, where he would suffer and died to lift us up. There’s no depth to which Jesus wouldn’t descend for us. And he has, in fact, kenotically bent down for us so many times in life, like he did in today’s Gospel.
 - “Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road side begging” — Bartimaeus was not born blind, but had become blind over the course of time. We see that in the verb he uses later — *anablepo* — asking Jesus in the Greek to “see again.” But he hadn’t just lost his sight. To some degree, he had lost the dignity he would have had. He was sitting by the road side begging. He could not rely on himself anymore. He needed help. He had hit rock bottom. He was in the depth of the valley of darkness in the lowest place on earth. But it was precisely in that spiritual poverty that Jesus would come to meet him, as many times he has likewise come to us.
 - “On hearing that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by” — Not coincidentally at all, so many times in our life Jesus comes into our life right when we need him most, right when we’re at our weakest and most desperate. But he “passes by.” He doesn’t intrude. He draws near but he still wants to engage our freedom, rather than force himself and his love upon us.
 - “He began to cry out, ‘Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!’” — Bartimaeus didn’t cry out for alms, which would have been small. He didn’t cry out at that point for a miracle. He cried out simply for mercy. He had doubtless heard of Jesus’ reputation for working miracles to the north in Galilee and was responding in faith. The fact that he called him “Son of David” was a sign he believed Jesus was the Messiah. The word St. Luke uses for crying out means basically an animal cry, something coming deep from his woundedness. And his prayer would be answered. How often we, too, meet Jesus in his mercy, in the Divine Physician’s coming to heal us in our woundedness. We spoke earlier this retreat about how the future Pope Francis received his vocation while asking for the Lord’s mercy. Many times we have too, where we recognize that our sins are not the most important but his salvation, when our miseries are overwhelmed by his mercies. In some ways, “*Miserando atque Eligendo*,” can summarize all of our vocation stories. God calls us not because of our worthiness, but calls us in his mercy, in response to our pleas for him who is Mercy Incarnate.
 - Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” — Like rabbis were accustomed to do on all their pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the major feasts, Jesus was teaching the crowds along the journey. But when he heard Bartimaeus’ pleas, he stopped in his tracks and ordered that Bartimaeus be brought to him. For

Jesus caring for this man was more important than what he was teaching at that moment, because he was about to show the Gospel rather than just verbally describe it. He was also going to show how he responds to persistent prayer. So many times in life as well, when Jesus was passing by us waiting for us to call upon him, he stopped and gave us all we needed.

- They said to Bartimaeus, “Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you.” — What a beautiful expression, something that should be part of our vocabulary with everyone in the Church! “Take courage, get up, Jesus is calling you.” It would have been very easy for Jesus to come to meet Bartimaeus exactly where he was begging. But Jesus loved him too much and understands the human heart too well to do that. Instead he drew near, he got close, but then he had Bartimaeus get up to come to him, to exercise Bartimaeus’ freedom, to stoke his desire, to give him greater participation in the miracle Jesus himself was about to accomplish. It takes courage to get up and leave our comfort zone to respond to the Lord. Bartimaeus had that courage and did. Similarly, on many occasions we needed a similar courage to respond to the Lord. It might have been getting up and going to the Church rather than remaining in our room. It may have been helping out with some form of charity rather than remaining isolated. But when Jesus calls he always challenges us to move. He never says to us, “Stay exactly where you are. Don’t budge an inch.” Rather he, who is always on the move, he who is always passing by waiting for an invitation, perpetually invites us to get up from where we are and follow him. That’s the fundamental moment of the vocational call.
- “He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus” — We see two crucial elements here in the response of Bartimaeus that are meant to be part of every vocation story. The first is that he “threw aside his cloak.” The cloak was his outer garment that kept him warm at night. It was in a sense his security blanket. It was quite valuable to him and part of his life. But he was intentionally embracing a new life and establishing a new security. He left it behind, which is not just a fact but an important symbol of how he was thinking more about clinging to Jesus and the new life for which he was hoping than clinging to the past. The second element is he “sprang up.” Even though he was blind, he got up immediately. He always raced to respond to his being called by the Lord. Unlike the excuse makers in other sections of the Gospel who said that they would follow Jesus after they had buried their father (who might die three decades later), inspected their oxen, enjoyed their honeymoon, etc., Bartimaeus responded with alacrity. That’s key to understanding the greatness of the call Christ gives to come to him, something we can be grateful for having heard and having responded to, we pray, with similar immediacy. And even if we debated it for a long time, the Lord continues to pass by and call, every time he gives us a new assignment, every time he summons us to go out to the peripheries, every time he calls us on a sick call at night. May we spring up from our desk, from our bed, from our back yard, and follow him where he’s leading!
- “What do you want me to do for you?” — Jesus asks us this question always with the love of the most generous person who has ever existed. What do you want? What do you seek? He wants us to examine our desires and ask for the big stuff, the most important. We’ve been made ultimately to want him. Bartimaeus didn’t ask for alms, because he wanted far more. Likewise Jesus each time we meet him, at the beginning of the day in the Morning Offering, in our Holy Hour, at the altar, on both sides of the Confessional screen, in the disguise of the poor, asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” On level it’s we who would be saying to the Lord in obedience, “What do you want me to do for you, Lord?”, but it’s he who asks us, because he deeply desires our happiness. Our vocation is not a divine gun held to our head forcing us to do things we would rather not. It begins with Jesus’ asking us what we want from him, and what we ultimately want is his help so that we might do what would please him most, because that is what would be us most deeply.
- “Master, I want to see.” — The Latin words for this have become a very popular Christian aspiration, “*Domine, ut videam!*” Bartimaeus says, “I want to see! I want to live in the light. I want to see things as they really are. I want to see you!” The verb used here in Greek is “I want to see again.” He wants to live in grace again. He wants to live anew in the light. He knows what he lost and he knows where to find it. To say to Jesus, “I want to see!,” is not just to turn to a healer and ask him to restore his vision. It’s to say I want to live in your vision. St. John would write in his Gospel, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life.” That’s the gift for which Bartimaeus was begging. Likewise with us, when the Lord asks what we want, we similarly want to

see. We want to see Jesus in prayer. We want to see Jesus in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. We want to see Jesus in others, in the faces of those we love, in the faces of those we find so difficult to love. We want to see Jesus behind the distressing masks of the poor, the sick, the lonely, the homeless, the abandoned, the blind. We want to behold Christ's face in the beauties of creation. We want to see him behind each of the commandments, teaching us how to love. We want the eyes to see his will in our daily life, in the present and for the future. Ultimately we want to see him forever face-to-face in heaven, smiling on us with love. But so often we're blinded. Sin blinds us. Worries blind us. Pain and suffering blind us. Hatred and prejudices blind us. The inability to forgive robs us of our sight. Others, including those we love, can sometimes get in the way and remove our line of vision. Today, the Lord comes to us and asks us, as he asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Today we respond, each in our individual circumstances, "Lord, I want to see!" begging him to take out whatever planks are in our eyes so that we may see him clearly and have the chance to live with him in the light.

- "Go your way; your faith has saved you." — Jesus says two very beautiful things to him upon healing him. The first is about the greater miracle than the healing of his physical sight. "Your faith has saved you!" The Lord not only gave him his wish to see but heard his initial cry to have mercy on him, and Jesus' generosity far outdid Bartimaeus' imagination to ask. Faith in response to God leads to salvation, and even though Bartimaeus didn't dare ask for that, God gave it. And likewise in response to our bold trust in him, in response to our leaving our stuff behind and hustling toward him, in response to our sincere telling him what we want, God responds by giving himself to us and granting us far more than we had implored. The second thing we see in this scene is Jesus continues to engage Bartimaeus' vocational freedom. He says, "Go your way!" In other words, he was giving him the chance to choose what to do with his sight. He wasn't going to make him an indentured servant for the rest of his life, paying off the debt of the Jesus' spiritual optometry. No, Jesus had given without a quid pro quo and left Bartimaeus free to choose his path. That's what makes how he used it so much more relevant. Likewise Jesus always leaves us free so that we can use our freedom to choose. And that's a choice he's asking us to make every day, hoping that we will in fact choose the one who at every instant chooses us. "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you!" Jesus reminds us, but in response to that divine election, he leaves us free to choose him in love, to respond to his invitation and proposal.
- "Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way" — Bartimaeus used his freedom to follow Jesus. He left the depth of Jericho behind and followed him up to Jerusalem, he followed him on Palm Sunday, he followed up on the Way of the Cross, he followed him. And St. Luke comments, "He immediately received his sight and followed him, giving glory to God, and when they saw this, all the people gave praise to God" (Lk 18:43). He spent the rest of his life glorifying God in such a way that others joined him in that divine praise. The end of our vocational story is a similar glorification of God, hoping that our example will be contagious. This doxological sequela is what the priestly life is all about!
- It's important for us to do such a vocational *lectio divina* on a retreat, full of gratitude to God, recognizing that here in Lincoln, Jesus is passing by and calling us anew, asking us what we want, giving himself in response, offering us salvations, and engaging our freedom to follow him all the way to the celestial altar. But during this retreat focused on the Missionary Reform of the Church and the Priesthood I don't want to stop at our vocational stories and how it pertains to our discipleship. I want it to extend to our apostolate, to our participation in Pope Francis' transformation of the Church through the joy of the Gospel. This scene is a paradigmatic one for the New Evangelization. I mentioned a couple of days ago that to explain the methodology of the New Evangelization, Pope Francis in Brazil showed that we need to imitate Jesus' interaction with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, entering into their conversation, their journey away from Jerusalem and all it symbolized, as they headed toward the darkness; we need to enter into it with the light of faith, showing that the reasons for the departure already contain with the seeds for their return, and warming their wounded hearts with the warmth of hearts on fire. Pope-emeritus Benedict, however, used today's Gospel of Bartimaeus to describe the context of the New Evangelization and indicate what we need to do to help the Bartimaeuses of our day encounter Christ as he is passing by. He described the meaning of

Jesus' encounter with Bartimaeus as his concluding reflection for the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization that took place in the Vatican in October 2012.

- “The miracle of the healing of blind Bartimaeus,” Pope Benedict said, “comes at a significant point in the structure of Saint Mark’s Gospel. It is situated at the end of the section on the ‘journey to Jerusalem,’ that is, Jesus’ last pilgrimage to the Holy City, for the Passover, in which he knows that his passion, death and resurrection await him. In order to ascend to Jerusalem from the Jordan valley, Jesus passes through Jericho, and the meeting with Bartimaeus occurs as he leaves the city – in the evangelist’s words, ‘as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude’ (10:46). This is the multitude that soon afterwards would acclaim Jesus as Messiah on his entry into Jerusalem. Sitting and begging by the side of the road was Bartimaeus, whose name means “son of Timaetus,” as the evangelist tells us.”
- I want to stop for a second on the name St. Mark gives the blind man. He in essence repeats himself, saying first his name is Bar-Timaetus, which means in Aramaic, “Son of Timaetus.” Then he says in Greek, “The Son of Timaetus.” While it’s possible that he was just translation the Aramaic name into Greek, but St. Mark isn’t accustomed to doing that with other names. One of the things that is likely at work is that he was stressing something about this blind man’s situation that the play on words among the two languages elucidates. In Aramaic, the root *tame* means defilement; in Greek the root *time* means “honor.” So what various scholars think is going on is showing Bartimaeus’ fall. He was a son of someone of honor — Timaetus — but he had become a son of defilement. He should have been living with honor but now was living in shame. Hence Jesus was going to be restoring not just his sight but his name and personal dignity.
- Let’s return to Pope Benedict’s commentary. He says, “**The whole of Mark’s Gospel is a journey of faith, which develops gradually under Jesus’ tutelage.** The disciples are the first actors on this journey of discovery, but there are also other characters who play an important role, and Bartimaeus is one of them. His is the last miraculous healing that Jesus performs before his passion, and it is no accident that it should be that of a blind person, someone whose eyes have lost the light. We know from other texts too that the state of blindness has great significance in the Gospels. It represents man who needs God’s light, the light of faith, if he is to know reality truly and to walk the path of life. It is essential to acknowledge one’s blindness, one’s need for this light, otherwise one could remain blind for ever (cf. Jn 9:39-41) Bartimaeus, then, at that strategic point of Mark’s account, is presented as a model. He was not blind from birth, but he lost his sight. He represents man who has lost the light and knows it, but has not lost hope: he knows how to seize the opportunity to encounter Jesus and he entrusts himself to him for healing. Indeed, when he hears that the Master is passing along the road, he cries out: ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ (Mk 10:47), and he repeats it even louder (v. 48). And when Jesus calls him and asks what he wants from him, he replies: ‘Master, let me receive my sight!’ (v. 51). Bartimaeus represents man aware of his pain and crying out to the Lord, confident of being healed. His simple and sincere plea is exemplary, and indeed — like that of the publican in the Temple: ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner’ (Lk 18:13) — it has found its way into the tradition of Christian prayer. In the encounter with Christ, lived with faith, Bartimaeus regains the light he had lost, and with it the fullness of his dignity: he gets back onto his feet and resumes the journey, which from that moment has a guide, Jesus, and a path, the same that Jesus is travelling. The evangelist tells us nothing more about Bartimaeus, but in him he shows us what discipleship is: following Jesus “along the way” (v. 52), in the light of faith.”
- But then Pope Benedict, learning from his great intellectual mentor St. Augustine, picks up on what I alluded to before about Bartimaeus’ fall from sight and grace and what that means for the new evangelization. Pope Benedict says, “Saint Augustine, in one of his writings, makes a striking comment about the figure of Bartimaeus, which can be interesting and important for us today. He reflects on the fact that in this case Mark indicates not only the name of the person who is healed, but also the name of his father, and he concludes that ‘Bartimaeus, the son of Timaetus, had fallen from some position of great prosperity, and was now regarded as an object of the most notorious and the most remarkable wretchedness, because, in addition to being blind, he had also to sit begging. And this is also the reason, then, why Mark has chosen to mention only the one whose restoration to sight acquired for the miracle a fame as widespread as was the notoriety which the man’s misfortune itself had gained’ (On the Consensus of the Evangelists, 2, 65, 125: PL 34, 1138). This interpretation, that Bartimaeus was a man who had fallen from a condition of ‘great prosperity,’ causes us to think. It invites us to reflect on the fact that our lives contain

precious riches that we can lose, and I am not speaking of material riches here. *From this perspective, Bartimaeus could represent those who live in regions that were evangelized long ago, where the light of faith has grown dim and people have drifted away from God, no longer considering him relevant for their lives. These people have therefore lost a precious treasure, they have “fallen” from a lofty dignity – not financially or in terms of earthly power, but in a Christian sense – their lives have lost a secure and sound direction and they have become, often unconsciously, beggars for the meaning of existence. They are the many in need of a new evangelization, that is, a new encounter with Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God (cf. Mk 1:1), who can open their eyes afresh and teach them the path. ... This biblical passage has something particular to say to us as we grapple with the urgent need to proclaim Christ anew in places where the light of faith has been weakened, in places where the fire of God is more like smouldering cinders, crying out to be stirred up, so that they can become a living flame that gives light and heat to the whole house.”*

- Pope Benedict concluded his homily by saying something about the new evangelists and our relationship to the Bartimaeuses we will encounter and to whom we hope to bring Christ’s healing and light. “Dear brothers and sisters, Bartimaeus, on regaining his sight from Jesus, joined the crowd of disciples, which must certainly have included others like him, who had been healed by the Master. New evangelizers are like that: people who have had the experience of being healed by God, through Jesus Christ. And characteristic of them all is a joyful heart that cries out with the Psalmist: ‘What marvels the Lord worked for us: indeed we were glad’” (Ps 125:3).
- So the present culture of the west is like ancient Jericho and there are many blind men and women who are crying out for meaning and mercy, perhaps without explicitly acknowledging it. How are we supposed to respond to that phenomenon? That’s something that Pope Benedict didn’t raise and answer three years ago at the end of the Synod but it’s something his successor and heir, Pope Francis, did in his homily this morning at the Domus Sanctae Marthae in the Vatican. Basing himself on the actions St. Mark describes in his telling of the events in today’s Gospel, Pope Francis says that there are three possible responses to the Bartimaeus’ of today in need of help.
 - First, he said, are Christians who are concerned only with their own, “closed, selfish” relationship with Jesus, who do not hear the cries of others: “This group of people, even today,” the Pope stated, “do not hear the cry of so many people who need Jesus. ... [They] are indifferent: they do not hear, they think that life is their own little group; they are content; they are deaf to the clamor of so many people who need salvation, who need the help of Jesus, who need the Church. These people are selfish, living for themselves alone. They are unable to hear the voice of Jesus.” These people are symbolic of what Pope Francis described six days before his election as the Church corrupted, living of itself, by itself and for itself.
 - The second group of people, he said, includes “those who hear this cry for help, but want to silence it,” like the disciples when they sent away the children, “so that they would not disturb the Master.” Jesus for them was “their Master,” not a Master for everyone. They “send away from Jesus those who cry out, who need the faith, who need salvation.”
 - The third group are “those who help [people] draw near to Jesus, ... who are consistent in what they believe and in how they live, and they help to draw near to Jesus, to the people who are crying out, seeking salvation, seeking grace, seeking spiritual health for their souls.” These are the protagonists of the New Evangelization. These are the Missionary Disciples in Communion that are age desperately needs.
- Pope Francis finished his homily this morning saying, “It would be good for us to make an examination of conscience” in order to understand whether we are Christians who drive people away from Jesus, or who draw people to Him because we hear the cry of the many people who are seeking help for their own salvation. The Lord Jesus has called each of us to be people who help others draw near to him, who hear the cries and even silent screams of others, who aren’t afraid to be interrupted, who recognize that God is calling everyone, who aren’t hesitant to say, “Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you,” who bring others to Jesus and who invite them to use their freedom to join us in following Jesus to Calvary and through Calvary to the place where eye has not seen but where there will be endless light.
- Today we began Mass by echoing Bartimaeus’ cry to have mercy on us and Jesus has had mercy in calling us to himself over and again. Today the same Jesus who has passed by our lives and invited us to follow him passes by this retreat center, summoning us by name, and asking, “What do you want me to do for you!”

With gratitude for all his gifts as this retreat draws nearer to its conclusion, with gratitude for our vocations and the vocations the Harvest Master will grant in response to our prayers today, we ask him for the grace to see Him in the Eucharist, to see him in those we serve, to see him in all those crying out, and finally with them one day to see him face-to-face forever!