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Usque ad Finem!

“Do you resolve by the grace of the Holy Spirit to discharge until death the office entrusted to us by the Apostles, which we are about to pass on to you by the laying on of hands?”

- This is the first of the resolutions a bishop makes at his ordination. It’s to count on the Holy Spirit’s gifts, especially the gift of courage, for the rest of his life to fulfill the amoris officium, the three-fold work, entrusted by the apostles.
- It’s not a task of a commitment until retirement but until the consummation of one’s life in the Lord.
- There are various parts involved:
 - Prayer. Jesus asks, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”
 - We also cannot be too afraid to die, because then the devil will have found our 30 pieces of silver that he could manipulate to extort us out of our duty.
 - If we’re going to do it until death faithfully, we have to be resolved to do it each day until death. Faithful in little things, faithful in great. Married couples similarly are called to perseverance in loving and honoring each other each day for the rest of their lives.
- I’d like to explore each of these themes central to our perseverance.
- First, prayer.
 - Jesus asks us what I think is perhaps the most haunting question in Sacred Scripture: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” It’s not a rhetorical question. He was asking it because the answer wasn’t obvious. He had a serious concern as to whether when he comes for each of us or for all of us, whichever comes first, he would find us truly faithful. And since prayer is faith in action, he ultimately wants to find us praying, offering our lives to him.
 - Jesus gives us a parable about the “necessity” — not the invitation! — for us to “pray always without becoming weary.” Jesus describes a widow, someone who was helpless without a husband or a son to plead her case before a corrupt judge, who continued to seek a just decision against an adversary. It would appear that the judge may have been bought off by that adversary. The judge, who feared neither what God or what others thought of him, was unwilling but the woman didn’t stop. But eventually he relented, saying, “Because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me.” Jesus tells us, “Pay attention to what the dishonest judge says.” Then he adds, “Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them? I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily.” Jesus wasn’t comparing God to a corrupt magistrate but contrasting him. If even an unjust judge would eventually give in, how much more will a Father who loves his children respond to them when they “pray always without losing heart?”
 - Pope Francis a few years ago pondered the reality of this persevering prayer. The first thing he said is that we need to be willing to pray in such an enduring way as to “bother God.” In a homily December 6, 2013, he said, “Jesus himself, when he taught his disciples how to pray, told them to pray like ... the widow with the corrupt judge. To do so — I would say — by being bothersome. I don’t know, perhaps this sounds rather bad, but praying is a little like bothering God so that he listens to us. ... This is how Jesus teaches us to pray.” We generally bring our requests to the Lord “one, two or three times, but without great strength, and then I tire of asking and I forget to ask. ... Jesus tell us: ‘Ask!’ and he also says: ‘Knock at the door!’ and whoever knocks at the door makes noise, he disturbs, he bothers.” Last October he takes up the very important question as to why Jesus would want us to persevere in prayer, asking over and over again, if God already knows what we need. He said, “Jesus tells a parable on the need to pray always, never wearying. The main character is a widow whose insistent pleading with

a dishonest judge succeeds in obtaining justice from him. ... “Crying day and night” to God! This image of prayer is striking, but let us ask ourselves: Why does God want this? Doesn’t he already know what we need? What does it mean to “insist” with God? This is a good question that makes us examine an important aspect of the faith: God invites us to pray insistently not because he is unaware of our needs or because he is not listening to us. On the contrary, he is always listening and he knows everything about us lovingly. On our daily journey, especially in times of difficulty, in the battle against the evil that is outside and within us, the Lord is not far away, he is by our side. ... But the battle against evil is a long and hard one; it requires patience and endurance, like Moses who had to keep his arms outstretched for the people to prevail (cf Ex 17:8-13). This is how it is: there is a battle to be waged each day, but God is our ally, faith in him is our strength and prayer is the expression of this faith. Therefore Jesus assures us of the victory, but at the end he asks: “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8). If faith is snuffed out, prayer is snuffed out, and we walk in the dark. We become lost on the path of life. Therefore, let us learn from the widow of the Gospel to pray always without growing weary. ... Pray always, but not in order to convince the Lord by dint of words! He knows our needs better than we do! Indeed persevering prayer is the expression of faith in a God who calls us to fight with him every day and at every moment in order to conquer evil with good.” In other words, Jesus wants us to pray with the persevering insistence of the widow so that we might grow in faith and persevere in the battle of faith our entire life long. Just think about how Saint Monica grew in holiness through her persevering prayer for her husband Patricius, her mother-in-law and her son Saint Augustine. Perseverance in prayer trains us for perseverance in life. When Jesus comes, he wants to find faith in us through the expression of faith in action that is prayer.

- Second, overcoming a fear of death.
 - Charles Borromeo. John Cihak’s new book. First time in English.
 - For the Second Provincial Council, in 1569, he talked about persevering in the task of reforming their flocks, of loving their children with paternal solicitude for their eternal welfare. He said this is long-term work:
 - “Let us not think, Fathers, that we completely did our part by the many things we established three years ago in this very place. For if we examine the whole matter in the way we really should, we will find that we indeed only began the work of our ministry. We certainly have not finished it. ... For at the time when we first came together in council, if indeed we gave to our people not only milk but also food, nevertheless at that time we were hardly able to give them the more solid foods” (cf. 1 Cor 3:2).
 - “It frequently happens that once farmers have cultivated a field well, purged it of useless weeds, pruned the vines and the trees, unless they repeatedly apply the same cultivation, the good field which came up by their efforts, will turn up wild and rough. So too it will be with the faithful, who *are God’s field*” (1 Cor 3:9).
 - “For if we do not strive to tear up the seeds of vices by the roots, but instead consider it sufficient to use a light touch to correct only certain external matters which cause offense to the popular mind, then it will turn out for us as it does for farmers.”
 - “Nor is there any reason to be frightened off from carrying out our essential task, either because in our pastoral efforts and actions we see the aroused irritation of mind of those who are sons of perdition, or because we hear those voices of the people, the voices with which, like bad figs with leaves, depraved morals are also accustomed to cover themselves. It is the severity of the ancient canons that these times cannot bear. They say, “This is how we have been living for a long time, thus did the previous generation live and behave. There is no need to change anything in our way of life.”
 - “But let us despise this type of thing and everything like it, and let us set before our eyes that freedom of spirit and virtue which armed our fathers the Apostles, fortified the martyrs, and equipped the holiest men of our order: Athanasius, Chrysostom, and Ambrose, bishop of this Church, and imbued other religious men who burned with a firm apostolic ardor for souls. They were not broken or weakened by anything, be they threats, the shouts of men, or fury from judges.”
 - “For if we act otherwise, then in that fearful judgment of God to whom we will render an

- account for the souls which were entrusted to our faithfulness and care, we are going to hear the outcry of others accusing us and the irate judge likewise bitterly reproaching us with the following: “If you were the watchmen, why were you blind? If you were the pastors, why did you allow the flock entrusted to you to wander? If you were the salt of the earth, how did you lose your flavor? If you were the light, why did you not shine on those *that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death* (Lk 1:79)? If you were apostles, why did you forgo apostolic strength and instead do everything for the eyes of men? If you were the mouth of the Lord, why were you mute? If you felt yourself to be unequal to this burden, why were you so ambitious for the office? If you were in fact equal to it, why were you so lazy, so neglectful? The voices of the Prophets, the laws of the Gospel, the examples of the Apostles, piety, religion, the tottering state of the Church, the fearful day of judgment, rewards, punishments and eternal torments: did those things move you not at all?”
- Fear of death: Sermon to superiors of monasteries and other religious priests at the time of the 1576 plague
 - “We know and see that as the body is wasting away by pestilence, so the devout souls of our brethren languish with desire for divine things. With voices only half-living, or by a gesture only, they request the Sacraments and implore mercy, but we with hard hearts delay or look away. As you know, we have kept the parish pastors in their post, but they are not enough for the multitude, as we know, unless each of them had the strength of many. In general, those who are led off to the quarantined houses are too far away to be helped by their own parish pastors. Not to mention the fact that parish pastors are often turned away by their subjects, if they have already ministered to the afflicted, until the passage of time can show that they themselves are healthy. And so it happens that even the residents of that priest’s neighborhood need the service of other priests. I have sought outside priests, and not in vain, but we still need more, for the multitude of people led off to quarantine still lies helpless. I do not find other priests willing to help, and I cannot force them, nor should I. I have recourse to you, whose condition and state in life manifests a disdain for all human things so that you aim exclusively at the worship of God and concern for the salvation of men. If there is anyone whom we could expect to come and save others and imitate the Lord in this way, it would be you first of all.
 - “How can those upon whom mercy has been given and liberally poured out be so tightly limited with theirs, and measure it out in accord with temporal and external necessities? The same Son of God, who for the sake of the salvation of all men, including his enemies and the impious, was fixed to the cross and died in the greatest shame and the bitterest torment, invites us to go forward into the danger of a quiet and glorious death for devout brethren. He to whom we owe as much repayment as we could not obtain by dying a thousand times without end, does not even request this pathetic life of ours, but only that we put it at risk. We see many go through these dangers without escaping death. Moreover, we even see many who are free from fear but still die. But if we do not escape it, this will not be death; rather it will be a quicker attainment of blessed glory, which is true life.”
 - “Just like almost countless others, who nevertheless looked out for themselves with all diligence, we are going to die.”
 - “Our Fathers, incited by the spirit of God, did the same in similar circumstances. They taught that this is what should be done, as one can see clearly enough in the writings of the ancients collected and edited by our command. Moreover they extolled a work of this kind because it has the greatest power to motivate our souls to confirm that they are the stuff of martyrs. It is indeed a desirable time now when without the cruelty of the tyrant, without the rack, without fire, without beasts, and in the complete absence of harsh tortures that are usually the most frightful to human weakness, we can obtain the crown of martyrdom. What is even more, we can do so without the terrible hardship which always tends to accompany a disease of this type, in which the sick are abandoned by everyone and given no support or help from anyone.”
 - Today we celebrate the feast of SS. Perpetua and Felicity. Women martyrs. Virgin Martyrs.
 - Today we celebrate two great saints who experienced this rescue by faith and who were able to live their whole lives not only seeing to some degree the new heavens and new earth but living in

it. They were capable of making that journey of faith to which Jesus was calling the royal official and us. SS. Perpetua's and Felicity's stories are particularly relevant for the Sisters of Life, because they were both young mothers, martyred in the northern African city of Carthage. The account of their martyrdom is one of the great hagiological treasures of the early Church, because Perpetua wrote of their sufferings in detail the day before their death, and eyewitness accounts of their martyrdom were immediately spread around the early Church. These accounts were so highly regarded by the early Christians that St. Augustine needed to remind them that they should not be treated during Mass with the same reverence as the readings from Sacred Scriptures.

- Perpetua was a 22 year-old newlywed and mother of a small child and Felicity was a young married slave pregnant with her first child. They were arrested as catechumens and baptized in prison awaiting execution. They both knew that to profess Christianity was a "crime" punishable by death, but they were undeterred. Perpetua's father, an old man and a pagan, tried all means imaginable to get his daughter to save her life by saying a prayer and making a small sacrifice to the pagan gods. He first begged her to have mercy on his white hair. As deeply as Perpetua loved her father, Perpetua replied, "I cannot call myself by any other name than what I am — a Christian." Her father then in desperation tried violently to shake her, but he wasn't able to shake her of her fidelity. Finally he brought her much-loved baby boy, saying, "Look upon your son who cannot live after you are gone," and throwing himself at her feet begged her with tears not to bring such dishonor on their whole family. Perpetua wrote of how much she grieved for her father and family, but entrusted herself to God, whom she knew loved her family even more than she did and would take care of them should she die for love of him. When she was led before the procurator of the province, Hilarian, he tried all the same tactics of the threats of torture, of the pain of her father, of the ruin that would come to her son. But none worked. Upon his query, "Are you a Christian," she answered resolutely, "Yes, I am." She was sentenced to be killed by wild boars, cows, leopards, bears and gladiators in a spectacle for bloodthirsty soldiers. Alongside her on the altar of the arena was Felicity. Because she was pregnant when captured, she feared that she might not be able to give the supreme witness of her love for Christ, because in general Romans did not execute women who were pregnant lest they execute a child for the "crime" of the mother. She asked some clandestine Christians, however, to pray for an early childbirth and her prayers were answered. She gave birth to a girl whom two of her fellow Christians adopted. As she was being led into the amphitheater, she was singing triumphal psalms and rejoicing that she had so quickly passed "from the midwife to the gladiator, to wash after the pangs of childbirth in a second baptism." She was to be baptized in the same baptism of blood for which Jesus once longed and said, "There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!" (Lk 12:50). The procurator set a savage cow upon Felicity and Perpetua. The cow violently threw Perpetua down on her back, tearing her tunic and disheveling her hair. Perpetua got up and quickly pinned her hair, since letting one's hair down in the ancient world was a universal sign of mourning. In the meantime, the cow had gone after Felicity and had brutally tossed her on the ground. Perpetua ran over to her and helped her up the cow ran away. They stood awaiting another attack, but none came. They turned to the crowd and shouted to the Christians among them, "Stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not let our sufferings be a stumbling block to you." They gave each other the kiss of peace, and since the cow wouldn't kill them, the gladiators were dispatched to pierce them with a sword and send them to God. They then completed their earthly journey of faith soon after their baptism. Their faith came to perfect, as did their hope and love.

- Preparing for death each day.
 - Death is the great contemporary phobia. Every November the Church seeks to help the faithful confront and overcome this fear.
 - Throughout the Gospel, Jesus tried to get us to acknowledge and prepare for death so that it may not catch us as a "thief in the night" (Lk 12:39). He confronted our fear of death head on and told us not to fear the temporary destruction of the body but only the eternal loss of the soul through sin (Mt 10:28).

He sought to help us to prepare for death by teaching us how to store up for ourselves treasure in heaven and to live for and in his kingdom. And he indelibly illustrated all of these truths by the courageous, trusting way he himself died.

- Preparing for death in imitation of, and union with, Jesus has been one of the characteristics of the Church since the beginning. We see it with St. Stephen's echoing Jesus' last words when he was being stoned to death. We notice it in St. Paul's call for us to be crucified with Christ so that it is no longer we who live by Christ who lives in us by faith. We spot it in the famous call of Thomas à Kempis' classic "The Imitation of Christ," who forcefully reminds us, "In every deed and every thought, act as though you were to die this very day." This is the way, he taught, that we will "learn to die to the world now" so that we may "begin to live with Christ." Kempis' spiritual wisdom, which has formed many saints over the last six centuries, is based on the insight that it is only when we realize that today may be our last day, that we may not have the opportunity to punt the truly important things until tomorrow, that we begin to think clearly and get our priorities straight. We act differently toward people when we realize that today could be our last interaction with them. We begin to look at time differently and no longer wish to waste it on the various diversions with which we fill our lives. We're not tempted in the same way toward the harsh word, or the impure thought, or the vengeful action, knowing that that might be the last thing we ever do. We begin to have a far deeper appreciation for prayer and the sacraments and the Church. We cease to sleepwalk spiritually and become fully alert to the meaning of every moment, thought, word and deed.
- On Sept 6, 2011, two days before he would retire as Archbishop of Philadelphia, Cardinal Justin Rigali wrote for the priests of his Archdiocese an extraordinarily beautiful meditation on Christian preparation for death. Full of faith in contrast to those filled with phobias, Cardinal Rigali called reflection on death an "uplifting" though "challenging" theme. Probably because of the attention given to the installation of his successor not to mention the general cultural preference to ignore thinking about death altogether, Cardinal Rigali's truly profound thoughts have not yet gotten the attention they deserve.
- He wrote in the introductory letter to the clergy: "At the summit of our priesthood is our Eucharistic celebration of the death of Jesus. We know that this sacramental celebration of His death must one day be linked, on the part of each of us, to the personal and free laying down of our life in death. In this way our Eucharistic ministry will find its completion and unite us forever to Christ's Resurrection. At the end of my own ministry as your Bishop, I would like to share with you my reflection on the mystery of Christian and priestly death in its relationship to Christ's redemptive death. I think it is appropriate for us to meditate on this uplifting theme, which is so meaningful and challenging to all of us as priests. My hope is that these thoughts may stir up in your hearts ever greater priestly generosity, fervor and joy."
- "Preparing for death is the greatest opportunity in our lives," Cardinal Rigali wrote somewhat provocatively. Rather than dreading death as the inexorable occasion in which our life will be taken from us, we can learn from Jesus how to make our death an act of supreme self-giving love. Sometimes we view the crucifixion as if Jesus suffered it passively, exclusively as a victim. Jesus, however, in foretelling his death, clarified that he was approaching it with full freedom, love and courage. "I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," Jesus stressed. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down" (Jn 10:11, 18).
- Likewise, all of us have been given by Jesus' death and resurrection a similar power. "We have the possibility to rehearse our death," Cardinal Rigali wrote, "not in its minute details—although saints have found this useful—but in the sense of accepting it in anticipation by an act of our will that will be consummated freely at the moment of our death and offered to the Father in union with the death of Jesus. We can indeed accept and anticipate by an act of our will the laying down of our life in union with Jesus!"
- The rehearsing of our death in Christ each day is not meant to be a morbid exercise, but a life-giving daily encounter with the Father in which we entrusted ourselves to him through, with and in Christ. "The Father wills that we pass through death with His Son in order to live, not in order to die." Cardinal Rigali declared. "Seen in this perspective, death is the moment to give all, to surrender all with Jesus and in union with His sacrifice. All of this can be anticipated by an act of our will, by an act of our love. When anticipated by an act of loving acceptance, death is an opportunity to say 'yes' to the Father, just as Jesus did; to say 'yes' with all our heart, as Jesus did."

- Because the anticipation day-after day in self-offering to God become a person's fundamental "yes" to God, it is a daily moment of conversion and "a magnificent opportunity to be able to make up for every lack of love in our lives, for every lack of obedience, for every lack of saying 'yes,' for every sin that we have ever committed." Presenting ourselves to the Lord each day in this anticipated death — which can be done both at our early morning offering of the whole day to God conscious that it may be our last day, or at night at our examination of conscience when we make our own Jesus' words, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46)— is the means by which we learn to say "yes" and offer ourselves in love to God throughout the day. And this self-surrender will bring, the Cardinal assured us, doubtless from personal experience, not sadness but "joy and peace and love in obedience."
- He says that this daily dying and rising with Christ is the best way to be freed of the fear of a sudden death, even if it should come today. "When the hour of death comes," he noted, "we may not be conscious. It may come very suddenly, by reason of an accident, by reason of a heart attack; there are a million and one possibilities left to our imagination but this does not matter. The point is: the surrender will have been made thousands of times! The Father will understand that each of us had the power, which we exercised, the power, with His Son Jesus, to lay down our life freely, lovingly and definitively. Then there will be no obstacle to the consummation of our love. Life and holiness will be ours forever in the communion of the Most Blessed Trinity." Death will therefore become the final renewal of our baptismal promises and the fulfillment of our self-offering with Christ to the Father in the Holy Eucharist. And the Father will be able to view our death as the "re-enactment" of the death of his Son and apply to us the "full salvific power of the cross and resurrection."
- Since preparing for death is the greatest opportunity in our lives, Cardinal Rigali stressed, "Now is the time to give all!" Let us take full advantage of this month of November to form in ourselves this habit of daily self-offering. Each day let us pronounce the definitive "yes" to God that we want to say at the moment of our death and for all eternity.
- Final examples.
 - So many bishops who were martyrs.
 - JP II on Oct 27, 2001 at the end of the Synod mentioned 22 bishops canonized in the 20th century, many of whom were martyrs.
 - Fisher. Becket. Polycarp. Ignatius. Apostles. Ireneus. Romero. We can mention the many who were imprisoned for the faith.
 - PG 25. Throughout the history of the Church, from the Apostles onwards, there has been an extraordinary number of pastors whose teaching and holiness are capable of giving light and direction for the spiritual journey of Bishops in the third millennium. **The glorious witness of the great pastors of the early centuries of the Church**, of the founders of particular Churches, of the confessors and martyrs who in times of persecution gave their life for Christ, remains as a beacon to which the Bishops of our time can refer and from which they can derive guidance and encouragement in their service to the Gospel.
 - Eleazar
 - Eleazar, a nonagenarian Jew whom the Greeks in 142 BC were trying to force to eat pork in violation of the Mosaic Law, gives us unforgettable lessons about fidelity, courage, and the importance of setting good example.
 - The Greek authorities opened up Eleazar's mouth and jammed it with pork, but he spat it out, knowing that the penalty for doing so was death. I'll let the author of the Second Book of Maccabees take it from there:
 - "Those in charge of that unlawful ritual meal took the man aside privately... and urged him to bring meat of his own providing... and to pretend to be eating some of the meat of the sacrifice prescribed by the king; in this way he would escape the death penalty, and be treated kindly because of their old friendship with him.
 - "But he made up his mind in a noble manner, worthy of his years, the dignity of his advanced age, the merited distinction of his gray hair, and of the admirable life he had lived from childhood; and so he declared that above all he would be loyal to the holy laws given by God: 'At our age it would be unbecoming to make such a pretense; many young men would think the ninety-year-old Eleazar had gone over to an alien religion. Should I thus dissimulate for the sake

of a brief moment of life, they would be led astray by me, while I would bring shame and dishonor on my old age. Even if, for the time being, I avoid the punishment of men, I shall never, whether alive or dead, escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by manfully giving up my life now, I will prove myself worthy of my old age, and I will leave to the young a noble example of how to die willingly and generously for the revered and holy laws.'

- "Those who shortly before had been kindly disposed, now became hostile toward him because what he had said seemed to them utter madness. When he was about to die under the blows, he groaned and said: 'The Lord in his holy knowledge knows full well that, although I could have escaped death, I am not only enduring terrible pain in my body from this scourging, but also suffering it with joy in my soul because of my devotion to him.' This is how he died, leaving in his death a model of courage and an unforgettable example of virtue not only for the young but for the whole nation" (2 Macc 6:18-31).
- At the very end of his life, St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Tim 4:7). Eleazar went out fighting that fight, finishing the marathon of life, maintaining the treasure of faith and being unwilling to betray the faith and the Lord who inspires it even to save one's life here on earth.

○ Polycarp

- I was born on February 23 and for that reason I've always had a special devotion to St. Polycarp whose feast day each year falls on my birthday. When in 155, a ferocious anti-Christian persecution broke out in Smyrna where he was bishop, several Christians were martyred. The frenzied and bloodthirsty mobs, however, demanded more. They clamored for the death of Polycarp, who at 86 years old was universally acknowledged to be the "father of the Christians" in the region. When the police arrived to arrest him, he said "God's will be done," met them at the door and had a nice dinner prepared for them, so that he could have two hours to pray for his flock.
- When Polycarp was finally brought into the feverish amphitheater, the proconsul — with threats of death by wild beasts and incineration — exhorted him to remember his age, swear allegiance to Caesar and revile Christ. Polycarp unflinchingly replied, "For 86 years I have served Christ and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? If you require of me to swear by the genius of Caesar, as you call it, hear my free confession: I am a Christian." The proconsul condemned him to be burned alive.
- After the wood had been prepared and set ablaze, and Polycarp had been bound, he courageously and faithfully gave his Eucharistic valedictory: "I bless you, Lord, for having been pleased to bring me to this hour, that I may receive a portion among your martyrs and partake of the cup of Christ... Grant me to be received today as a pleasing sacrifice, such as you yourself have prepared, O true and faithful God."
- Like the wise Eleazar, St. Polycarp is a "model of courage and an unforgettable example of virtue" not just for the old or the young, but for all of us on the road of faith.

• Conclusion

- Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.
- Renew resolution: "Do you resolve by the grace of the Holy Spirit to discharge until death the office entrusted to us by the Apostles, which we are about to pass on to you by the laying on of hands?"