

Charlie

Sermon for the Month's Mind Mass of the Reverend Msgr. Charles R. Meyer

Thomas A. Baima
University of Saint Mary of the Lake, Mundelein, Illinois
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I am grateful for the opportunity to offer some reflections in memory of a brother priest and a good friend. Allow me to begin by sharing with you something written fifteen years ago on the occasion of his 60th anniversary. Sister Agnes Cunningham, professor emerita of historical theology, wrote this:

A casual visitor to Mundelein Seminary could be intrigued, amazed, and perhaps amused at the sight of a lone biker energetically pedaling his way around the magnificent grounds of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake on almost any warm day of the year. The biker, himself, might not be the source of the visitor's reaction as much as the bike. Equipped with antennae and receiving apparatus of diverse design, the bike becomes an instrument that transmits to this *grand sportif* information of the latest local, national, and international news: of weather and police reports; of short-wave announcements and, possibly – who dare deny it? – of communications from outer space.¹

This individual, as any member of the USML community could tell you, is “Charlie,” our affectionate term for one more formally known as, the Reverend Monsignor Charles

¹ Agnes Cunningham, SSCM, “Reverend Charles R. Meyer, M.A., S.T.D.” in *Chicago Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 2006), 10.

R. Meyer, priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, prelate of honor of His Holiness, doctor of sacred theology, professor of dogmatic/systematic theology and church history – "the man who can answer all our questions."

Actually, my first awareness of Charlie was during my first year of theology, when he was scheduled to have the community Mass. Charlie would rarely concelebrate. Instead he would celebrate Mass in the Jesuit Chapel each morning before breakfast. But at least once each quarter, he would take his turn as the presider and preacher. My most vivid memory was the excitement among the seminarians that Charlie was going to preach. Now, we had very good preachers on the faculty in the 1970's. And the priests knew the seriousness of standing before 20 plus doctors of theology and 90 graduate students who, aspiring to do the same thing, were, for that reason, a tough audience. Having never heard him preach, I was curious about what all the fuss was about among my brother seminarians.

I don't remember the gospel text for that day. I have only fragmentary memories of the content of the sermon. What I do remember vividly was the rapt attention of the seminarians. They perceived something important was happening which I would later come to realize was that they were receiving spiritual guidance from a man of God. I was witnessing why the Second Vatican Council taught in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* that

The People of God are joined together primarily by the word of the living God.

And rightfully they expect this from their priests. Since no one can be saved who

does not first believe, priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all.²

Msgr. Meyer did not like this particular formulation of Vatican II. And if he didn't like the way a doctrine was presented, he would argue against it. He really took to heart Pope John XXIII's distinction "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."³ If you wanted some entertainment, you could always quote the passage about the primary duty of the priest at dinner and then sit back and wait for the argument to erupt. He preferred the formulation a paragraph earlier in the document which says: "Priests, who are taken from among men and ordained for men in the things that belong to God in order to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins, nevertheless live on earth with other men as brothers."⁴ This better fit his own Eucharistic piety and his understanding of how grace was mediated by the Church through the sacraments. But from the pew in which I was sitting, what I saw was his ministry as a preacher was bearing fruit in this community.

And not only in this community. Although he served only a very short time in a parish, whatever else he would become, doctor, formator, professor, or dean, along side of it all he was a diocesan priest. He served each week as assisting priest. In that role, he was sought after by laity who enjoyed his homilies and who saw in him someone

² Second Vatican Council, *Prebyterorum Ordinis: The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), No. 4.

³³ John XXIII, "Opening Speech to the [Second Vatican] Council" in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 715.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Prebyterorum Ordinis: The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), No. 3.

who could help them make sense of life. The priest is to be an educator, but an educator who points us beyond this life to the life to come.⁵

In the same speech to the Council, Pope John went on to say, “the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time, she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world, which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.”⁶ These twin goals could also describe Msgr. Meyer’s approach to theology and ministry.

Nowhere did this twin obligation show itself as clearly as with two groups of laity to whom he ministered over many years as a result of his parish involvement. One was a woman’s theology group, and another a group of physicians and other scientists. Both saw in Msgr. Meyer the capacity to help them engage difficult modern issues and integrate their faith lives. These two groups of laity had, to use the words of Angela Tilby, “awakened to a hunger for reality, for some unifying and satisfying experience where the individual fits into the cosmic scheme of things.”⁷ I would suggest that they also give us a window into the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation which Msgr. Meyer offered to them and to his students and his colleagues.

Integration of our faith with our lives follows a pattern we all know from spiritual theology. First comes recollection. While whole books are written on what

⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis: The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), No. 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Angela Tilby, “Forward,” in *Evelyn Underhill, Practical Mysticism* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1914), x.

could be called the “art of just paying attention” recollection is the essential foundation. The second stage is purifying the senses. As a good Jesuit trained Thomist, Msgr. Meyer knew this step was key. To use Tilby’s words, this step is “to awaken one’s perception to the diversity of the world and the hidden glories of creation.”⁸ We see this actualized through his interest in science. He believed that just as Thomas had become conversant in the 13th century with Aristotle’s natural philosophy, that a theologian and priest in the 20th century had to be conversant with the modern way of seeing the world. Such a purification of the senses would prepare the theologian to encounter Reality. Now, spiritual authors tell us that seeing reality involves three steps: seeing reality in the natural world, seeing reality in the eternal world, and seeing the limits of seeing.

Perhaps we might see an example of the first spiritual movement in Msgr. Meyer’s work on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead. Msgr. Meyer took science seriously but did not surrender to it the way some theologians did. I always had the sense that for him, the science/religion question was one of science catching up with religion, by which I mean science developing a sense of where its method ended, and mystery began. I think this is clear in the title he gave one of his books. For him, as a good Thomist, science and religion could mutually inform each other. Note that his book was not titled Religion and Science, rather the title read “Religious Belief in an age of Science.”

⁸ Ibid.

Perhaps we may see the second spiritual movement in his work on grace and on pneumatology, as well as in *Touch of God: A Theological Analysis of Religious Experience*. The eternal world requires its own science, which we call theology. The third movement, seeing the limits of seeing, however, was not found in his classroom or books. This third movement of the spiritual life was best seen early in the morning, at a side altar in the Jesuit Chapel, where he would offer Mass. While he did write a book on the *Priest: Man of God*, for me seeing him live his priesthood through daily Mass and prayer offers a very slight glimpse into what that third movement of the spiritual life was for him.

Presbyterorum Ordinis has a paragraph that is of particular importance to me as I recall my relationship with Msgr. Meyer. It is about intergenerational fraternity between priests. The Decree reads:

Older priests, therefore, should receive younger priests as true brothers and help them in their first undertakings and priestly duties. The older ones should likewise endeavor to understand the mentality of younger priests, even though it be different from their own, and follow their projects with good will. By the same token, young priests should respect the age and experience of their seniors; they should seek their advice and willingly cooperate with them in everything that pertains to the care of souls.⁹

⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis: The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 8.

I was fortunate to be received by Msgr. Meyer upon my appointment to Mundelein Seminary, now 21 years ago, into two of his priestly fraternity groups. The first was a small group of faculty members who would go out to dinner each Friday night. This group was of long standing, but I was welcomed almost as soon as I arrived back at Mundelein. The second was a group of his friends from when he served as assisting priest at Saint Edna's parish in Arlington Heights. I was quite good friends with a couple of those priests from my seven years in Arlington Heights at Our Lady of the Wayside, and from other assignments. In this circle of priestly fraternity, of which Charlie was the center, I experienced what *Presbyterorum Ordinis* described. I was fortunate enough with the help of Father de Gaal, to be able to continue the Friday night dinners with Msgr. Meyer after he entered nursing care in 2014. We continued until 2019 when he was too weak to go out. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic made even visitation impossible.

As I write this, I realize that so many of the reflections about Msgr. Meyer take place at meals. Where at the "Breakfast Seminar" in the faculty house, for which at least a couple of bishops have asked if they can get graduate credit for attending, to lunch in the old faculty dining room, to Friday evening outings or dinner with the Arlington Heights group, Charlie was perhaps at his best during meals. This may, in the end, also be his best argument in his long-standing dispute about *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. So, let me give him the last word. If the primary task of the priest is to make Christ known,

then Charlie might argue that we come to recognize Jesus, that we really come to know him, the way Saint Luke tells us, in the breaking of the bread.¹⁰

¹⁰ Luke 24:35