

Will people know?

Homily on John 3:1-8 – Monday of the Second Week of Easter

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The first twelve years after my ordination to the priesthood, I spent in full-time parish ministry. I always served in very large suburban parishes. I was seven years in Arlington Heights and then transferred to Oak Forest. While Our Lady of the Wayside was small in those days, having only 2,500 families, Saint Damian had 4500 families with 650 students in the day school and 1350 in CCD. All in all, we have about 15,000 Catholics living within the parish boundaries. Since this made us 30% larger than the smallest diocese in the United States, we used to joke about being the “micro-diocese of Oak Forest.” As you can imagine, learning people’s names was a bit of a challenge.

But it did not work the other way. People know their priests. I arrived the first weekend of July 1997 and introduced myself at all six Masses. That evening, as I was still getting settled in the rectory, I decided to just drive through McDonald’s for a fast food supper. I pulled up to the drive through speaker and placed my order. The clerk then asked, “Do you want something to drink with that, Father?” After one sermon, she recognized my voice through the speaker. I was reminded of this yesterday, when I was having breakfast at my favorite diner near the parish where I help out. One of the waitresses came by and asked me, “Was that you at the funeral?” Now the only funeral

I have been to recently was last Wednesday for His Holiness, Mar Dinkha IV, Catholicos of Selucia Ctesiphon and Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East. I couldn't figure out why she would have been there, but I answered "yes". So she said, "I thought so. I saw it on television when you handed something to Archbishop Cuipch."

I tell you these stories about myself because there is an implied question in today's gospel which they illuminate. Nicodemus addresses Jesus and say "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you are doing unless God is with him." Now, I can assure you that people will recognize you, as I was recognized in the drive-thru or on television for the Patriarch's funeral. But the deeper question is this, "Will they know you as a teacher who has come from God, by the signs that you are doing?"

As an official public minister of the Church, we don't just want to be recognized. We want our ministry to have effect, to bear fruit. For that to happen, we have to be recognized as teachers who come from God. Ministry is not a performance. It is a prolonged faithful relationship with the people you are sent to serve. Right now, I know that you think your ordination day will be the most profound day of our life. And it will. But in a few years, when you change assignments, it will be surpassed by the Mass of Thanksgiving you celebrate before you leave your first parish. After that Mass, people will spontaneously tell you what you have meant to them. They will tell you how one sermon you preached changed their lives, because God spoke directly to them through you. They will tell you how much it meant that you came and anointed

their mother in the hospital or praised their child for some accomplishment. And I'll tell you a secret. The people who come up to you will not be the group of parishioners who clustered around you when you were parish priest there. They will be people whose names you do not remember or never knew. By this they will tell you that they recognize you as a teacher come from God, for you have worked the signs of God in their lives.

The spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions of the priesthood are mediated through the human. This is how Hilare Belloc could say that "the priesthood is like another incarnation" for it continues in a mysterious way the incarnation of Jesus. The divine Logos made himself accessible to us through the humanity he assumed in Christ. Christ, the one priest of the New Covenant, makes himself accessible to us through the ministerial priesthood.

For those of you about to be ordained deacons or priests, the implied question of the gospel offers points for reflection. For those of you beginning the seminary journey, it sets an important goal. And for all of us as baptized faithful among us, it proposes how we can encounter the risen Christ in the ministerial priests who continue to offer signs of his action in the world.

Let us all, then, in the way appropriate to our state of life, reflect on this implied question to priests: "Will they know you as a teacher who has come from God, by the signs that you are doing?"