



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Funeral Mass for Fr. Mike McCaffery

Homily

[Isaiah 43: 1-5, 49: 15-16; Romans 5: 1-6; Matthew 5: 1-12]

Allow me to begin by expressing my heartfelt condolences to you, the members of Fr. Mike's family. He was well-known and well-loved, and many, many people mourn his loss, but no one more so than yourselves. We can well imagine that this Cathedral could be filled many times over with the people wanting to be here to pay their respects and offer you their sympathy, but we are living within pandemic rules that even Fr. Mike might have found difficult to bend. Those same people are present with us via livestream, and in their name I pledge to you our heartfelt support and the assurance of our prayers.

The passages from Sacred Scripture that we have just heard proclaimed were chosen by Fr. Mike himself for his funeral mass. We can conclude from this that these texts were, in his mind, determinative for the shaping of his priestly life and ministry, and contain a message that he hoped we would all receive today from the Word of God. What that message is becomes clear if we meditate upon what we have heard in the light of Fr. Mike's own ministry. This is what I'd like to draw out in this homily, although perhaps not with the degree of brevity for which Fr. Mike was famous.

Among the many comments that have been reaching the Archdiocese, coursing through the media, or shared in the Ice District following news of his death, perhaps the most common is that Fr. Michael McCaffery was not a stereotypical priest. Whatever image people may have had of a priest, Fr. Mike didn't fit. Those that had grown up with him were shocked that he became a priest in the first place, and those who met him afterwards sometimes needed convincing that he had, in fact, been ordained. We might chuckle about this, but here we have an important key to appreciating his priestly ministry. Fr. Mike was real, he was himself, and that gave the people with whom he came in contact permission to be authentic, to be themselves in his presence. Now, let's think of that in the light of the teaching of St. Paul. When that Apostle writes in the passage from Romans of the mercy and love of God poured out on the world in Jesus Christ and into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, he is referring to the unconditional love that God directs to each man, woman and child as His unique and beloved creation. God does not love a stereotype; He loves persons. Hope and joy arise when we know God loves us for who we are, not for who we pretend to be. Fr. Mike did what he could to encourage people to be real by being real himself, and thus help them know how much they are loved by God.

Throughout the many years of his priesthood, Fr. Mike listened to numerous stories shared by his parishioners and many friends. Whether in the confessional, in the course of pastoral counselling, or even just over a coffee, he heard and saw first-hand that life can get very messy, that categories of black and white rarely apply in people's lives. Fr. Mike willingly stepped into the grey, he did not hesitate to go to the edge, if that is where he would find people and help them encounter Christ. Now, that often took him to the periphery of usual priestly ministry. I've lost count of the times Mike would drop into the office to say hi, and then hesitate for a minute before saying, "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but ...," leaving me to wonder, "Now, what?!"

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But let's consider this against the background of the promise God made through Isaiah long ago. To paraphrase what we heard in the first reading, God assures us that whatever difficulties come our way, whatever problems we create for ourselves, whatever suffering weighs upon us, He will be there with us, accompanying us and leading us to safety. As Pope Francis insists, when life's difficult circumstances or unfortunate mistakes force people to the edge, a priest must be willing to go to the peripheries to seek them out, assure them of the love of God, and welcome them into the embrace of God's merciful love within the Church. That was certainly the heart of our Fr. Mike.

Over the past few years, we all saw Fr. Mike grow gradually weaker as he faced advancing age and health complications. This in no way lessened his readiness to continue "hatching, matching and dispatching", as he loved to put it, but the strength and vibrancy with which he could do so was steadily ebbing. It seemed to me that he was generally accepting of his limitations, except perhaps on the golf course. With more frustration than resignation, he would tell me that he could now hit his sand wedge as far as the driver! In the way Fr. Mike faced his weaknesses, there is something deeply significant that I would not want anyone of us to miss. In the life of a priest, the exterior engagement with the reality of limit is symbolic of the inner journey towards acceptance of powerlessness, a path of awareness and acquiescence that every priest must walk. Only by the gift of God's grace does a priest have the power to do what he could never do on his own. Acceptance of powerlessness and one's consequent need for God is what Jesus means when, in the Beatitudes, he speaks of the poor in spirit. This applies, of course, not only to a priest but also to all of us. The more a priest lives in the truth of his reliance upon God, the more effectively he can encourage others to do the same. When we accept limit and rely on God's grace, that's when we are really blessed, truly happy. Fr. Mike sought to bring this home to people throughout his ministry by biblical preaching, sacramental celebrations and pastoral accompaniment. In his latter years, he taught us this most powerfully of all through his surrender in faith to God's power at work in his own limits and inabilities.

One final point: I remember Mike often reminding us, his brother priests, that the purpose of regulations, laws and decrees in the Church is for the salvation of souls. He was right: Jesus came to save souls from sin and lead them by his death and resurrection to eternal life. It is precisely the Lord's victory over sin and death that we celebrate in every funeral mass offered for one who has died. So as we gather this morning, either by physical presence or remotely via livestream, let us, who were so often reminded by Fr. Mike of the Lord's will to save our souls, pray that God have mercy on that of our beloved brother and friend, and welcome him to the joy of eternal life.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith

Archbishop of Edmonton

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