

Fr. Raymond Borkowski, OFM Conv.
60th Anniversary of Priestly Ordination
Celebration at St. Paul's Church, Kensington, Conn.
7th Nov. 2021

Homily delivered by Fr. James McCurry, OFM Conv.

Readings from 31st Sunday:

1 Kings 17:10-16 – The faithful and generous widow of Zarephath.

Hebrews 9:24-28 – Christ the High Priest, a man of “sacrifice” on a love-mission.

Mark 12:38-44 – The widow’s mite

I want to thank Fr. Raymond for inviting me to preach the homily today, as all of us gather to celebrate his “Diamond Jubilee” – his 60th anniversary of Ordination to the Priesthood. For over 50 of those years, it has been my privilege to know Fr. Raymond, and to look up to him as one of the great spiritual giants and mentors, who has had an indelible influence on my own life as a friar and priest.

It seems like only yesterday that I was a young college student ringing the front doorbell of St. Hyacinth College and Seminary in Granby, Massachusetts, coming there to make enquiry about a possible vocation to the Franciscan Order. Fr. Raymond met me that day, and we spoke at length. His hair was still brown, and he wore dark-rimmed glasses. I do not know what his first impression of me was, but he did take notice of the large Boston College ring that I was sporting on my finger – for good or ill. The rest is history. Two years later, I was wearing a Franciscan habit.

By the early 1970s Fr. Raymond became the official “Vocation Director” of St. Anthony Province, having succeeded Fr. Edward Kurdziel, whom he had been assisting at the time of my vocational discernment. I daresay that Fr. Raymond may well get recorded in the “*Guinness Book of ‘Franciscan’ World Records*” as having brought more young men into the Franciscan Order than any other friar who has ever held the post of “Vocation Director.” Through the years, Fr. Raymond has taken on a legendary aura among friars not only of his native Province, but of the whole Order.

In 60 years, Fr. Raymond has served the Church and Order in many capacities, not only as Vocation Director, but also as educator, formator, guardian, definator, missionary, chaplain, pastor – a real “Friar Johannes Factotum” – a Friar Jack-of-All Trades! Each of Fr. Raymond’s ministries has presented him challenges – all of which he has, by the grace of God, managed to handle with aplomb. Not only did he masterfully deal with the antics of rambunctious and cheeky seminarians in the US and in Africa, but in Granby he even was successful in coping with the likes of an elderly, hypochondriacal curmudgeon of a friar named Fr. Zeno. Fr. Zeno delighted in playing the game of “hide and sneak” with his shrewd guardian, ever trying to torment the poor long-suffering Fr. Raymond, who nonetheless usually won the day.

Over 30 years ago, Fr. Raymond and I had the blessing of traveling together on pilgrimage trips – to Poland, the Holy Land, and Rome. When we went to Poland, the Communists were still firmly in control. Our American pilgrims were the first group of foreigners to arrive after the regime had imposed “marshal law.” We were to be met at the airport by a government delegation. So, I had learned and practiced a short phrase in Polish to greet them. I (a full-blooded Irish-American without an ounce of Polish blood in my veins) had made the mistake of not rehearsing my Polish in advance with our good Polish-American Fr. Raymond. I had no clue what was the meaning of the Polish words that I would be mouthing when, amidst an afternoon rainstorm, I greeted the Polish officials in Polish: *“This morning the sun is shining, and the birds are singing!”* Fr. Raymond burst out laughing a Polish “bwa-haw,” as the confused officials standing in the rain thought I was daft.

On that trip to Poland, Fr. Raymond re-connected with his own Polish roots of faith. The main square in Warsaw was blockaded by the government because people kept putting a large cross of flowers (the length of a football field) at the site where Cardinal Wyszynski’s funeral had taken place. Didn’t Fr. Raymond point out to me nearby a convent of Visitation Nuns! (He always has great relationships with nuns!) At this convent, near the blockaded square, simple people were creating a similar cross of flowers on the pavement every day – the soldiers coming each night to remove the flowers, and the people returning the next day with more flowers. The battle of the cross! We prayed daily at the cross of flowers, and Fr. Raymond understood more deeply than ever that his own family roots in Poland were indeed chiseled on the anvil of suffering.

We also journeyed together through the Holy Land, where Fr. Raymond was my roommate. Early one morning the two of us took a walk along the Sea of Galilee, where we engaged with fishermen hauling in their night’s catch of fish. Fr. Raymond reflected with me on our vocational call to be “fishers of men” – and that indeed we friars are not just fishermen, but we are also the humble little fish in God’s Church, where Jesus himself is the Big Fish.

We went to Rome together for the canonization of St. Maximilian Kolbe in 1982. Fr. Raymond was very familiar with the Eternal City – from his student days of many years before. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, our Province would send its most gifted student-friars to do their priesthood preparation in Rome. Thus, as young friars, Friar Raymond and his classmate Friar Donald Kos were sent to our Seraphic College in Rome. They arrived in the weeks just before death of Pope Pius XII, and the election of his successor Pope John XXIII. So it was that Divine Providence let Fr. Raymond be formed for the Priesthood in Rome at the dawn of a new era in Church history, which Pope John XXIII would call a time of “aggiornamento” – the opening of the windows of the Church to the new winds of the Holy Spirit, the days just before the Second Vatican Council, which would renew the life of the Church, its religious orders, and the world – opening up a new era of evangelization. Fr. Raymond would absorb all these changes, without ever losing the depth of the Catholic and Franciscan traditions in which he was so deeply immersed. He became ever afterwards a pioneer of balance between the old and the new, and that profound pioneering balance has characterized all 60 years of his Priesthood.

Please take notice today of the chalice which Fr. Raymond will be using at Mass. This chalice was given to him at the time of his Ordination in Rome. It has the wedding ring of his father welded on the base. Because of his contacts in Rome, even as a student, Fr. Raymond had

somehow managed to get this Ordination chalice consecrated by Pope John XXIII himself, who actually offered Mass with the chalice. The chalice remains a tangible sign of the beautiful mysteries of the faith which Fr. Raymond's priesthood has witnessed and taught in the 60 years since then.

I mentioned our Franciscan Saint Maximilian Kolbe. Shortly after St. Maximilian's canonization, the man for whom he had sacrificed his life in martyrdom at Auschwitz – Mr. Franciszek Gajowniczek – came to visit our friary in Granby. Fr. Raymond was the guardian in Granby at the time, and I was overseeing Mr. Gajowniczek's visit. Afterwards, I would coordinate several more of Mr. Gajowniczek's speaking tours in America. He never forgot his first impression of our Fr. Raymond – a man of laughter. Mr. Gajowniczek once said to me: *"I never heard any Franciscan laugh like the guardian of Granby!* He spoke in Polish, and then tried to imitate Fr. Raymond's unique laugh: *"Bwa-Haw!!"* – with a Polish accent! Also, and most importantly, Mr. Gajowniczek noted that he saw in Fr. Raymond: "a man of love". All of us here today have noticed in our jubilarian that same love – a love without limits, like St. Maximilian Kolbe.

So, we might ask ourselves today: What is the secret behind this legend whom we are honoring on his 60th jubilee? God Almighty surely has always been the secret force animating Fr. Raymond, but also there are also human influences from the earliest days of his life, which began forming him to be God's instrument of love in the Church and the world.

On the wall of Fr. Raymond's room in the friary, there hangs in a frame a pair of scissors – sewing shears. They belonged to his mother Margaret Borkowski, who was widowed when Raymond was only three. In those days before social security, she had to go to work in a sewing factory to support her two young children. Like the poor widow of today's Gospel, Margaret Borkowski taught her son Raymond (and her daughter Dorothy) to be generous towards God and neighbor. Like the faithful widow of Zarephath in today's first reading from the Old Testament Book of Kings, Margaret's sacrifices were rewarded by God: *Her jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry.* Margaret put her own small coins – "the widow's mite" – into the collection basket every Sunday at the parish church in Throop, Pennsylvania. Eventually, like the Blessed Mother, she gave her only son to the Church and to the Franciscan Order, to live out his vocation as a friar and priest.

The elderly Margaret Borkowski was still living at the time of Fr. Raymond's 25th jubilee many years ago in Trenton, New Jersey. A local politician who was not Catholic gave a laudatory speech, which he began by addressing Fr. Raymond and his mother in these memorable words: *"I wish to congratulate Fr. Raymond and your lovely wife..."* Indeed, the whole church erupted in "bwa-haws" of laughter, then as now. Though the speaker did not understand that Fr. Raymond had a vow a chaste celibacy, the rest of the church understands his lifelong commitment to live and minister in imitation of the chaste celibate Jesus Christ.

Today's second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews helps us understand the motive for the priestly vow of celibacy that Fr. Raymond has lived in an exemplary way. Christ the High Priest entered the sanctuary as a chaste celibate offering himself in sacrifice to his Heavenly Father – making himself available for a love-mission, not just to one wife and one family, but to all families and all peoples until the end of time – a non-exclusive love spreading to everyone everywhere.

Look at Fr. Raymond now – after sharing in Christ’s High Priesthood for 60 years – and think of how God has used him to touch the lives of thousands of families on three continents. Today we are joining Fr. Raymond in giving thanks to Jesus Christ for: all the children whom Fr Raymond has baptized during these 60 years; for all the penitents he has absolved; for all the sick and dying whom he has anointed; for all the couples whose marriages he has solemnized; for all the people to whom he has given Holy Communion; for all the living and dead whom he has offered Mass over the span of six decades.

A 60th anniversary is normally called the “diamond” anniversary, or “diamond jubilee.” The image of a diamond is surely an appropriate one for today’s occasion. For 60 years our legendary Fr. Raymond has been a diamond-caliber friar and priest – a multi-faceted, sparkling gem of Divine Love in the midst of the Church and the Franciscan Order – in our midst! Let me conclude with the words of the Jesuit poet Hopkins about Christ the “immortal diamond.” The same diamond image has well suited our beloved Fr. Raymond – from the day of his Ordination through this present moment:

*“In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is,
Since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch
Matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.”*