

Order of Saint Peter and Saint Paul – O.S.P. – and Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Being Restored to the Lord's Pleasure through a Rule of Life and Private Vows

The Lord called his Apostles and other disciples to take their delight in Him and through Him in the Father's love – the Holy Spirit – in spite of their sinfulness – or even opposition, as in the case of Saint Paul. They were so deeply astonished at Jesus' willingness to die in order to take on Himself the deadly consequences of their sins, that they were stunned; until the Holy Spirit set them on fire with the bright clarity of God's saving, life-giving love. Now they could obey Jesus, who also called them to then go out and proclaim the wonderful news that this new life – which is the beginning of eternal life with God – is for everyone!

This wondrously life-giving and intensely intimate relationship now restored with the Father through his Beloved Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within all who receive Him freely and willingly is what the Father deeply desires for us. It is why He sent his only-begotten Son among us as a man, and why He then sent the Holy Spirit to empower us to become children of God. This is what Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles and disciples all lived and proclaimed. This new life was the vitality of the early Church and continues to be such.

Sadly, the effects of the original sin are still at work until the end of the world, so that it continues to happen that even priests can find ourselves living out of a function rather than out of this new life our Beloved Jesus won for us. As I reflect on the past 12 years, it occurs to me that Divine Providence has led me through a gentle process of renewal in the original gift of Holy Orders and the way of life to which the Lord has called me. Out of fraternal love for my brother priests, I feel drawn to relate how this has occurred, in the hope that something in the telling may profit them.

The way has been a simple one in which this diocesan priest has rediscovered his vitality in the Lord, and in which others could find it for the first time. The process has been one of accompaniment and of association simultaneously with the Madonna House Apostolate founded by the Servant of God Catherine de Hueck Doherty in Combermere, Ontario, Canada, and with the Spiritual Life Institute, co-founded by Fr. William McNamara, OCD, and Mother Tessa Bielecki, SLI, in Nova Scotia (Nova Nada hermitage had to be surrendered to the relentless forest harvesting of the Irving multinational and the founders and other members had to move on for personal reasons), Crestone, Colorado, and Skreen, County Sligo, northwestern Ireland. The former is a lay apostolate founded for the restoration of all things in Christ, and the latter is an eremitical yet apostolic contemplative life founded to restore all men and women to a fully human life in order to be able to behold the loving face of God in every person and in all things – even in the city.

Over the previous several centuries, whenever a priest attempted to provide his fellow diocesan priests with a discipline of spirituality for their renewal, Church culture changed the movement into a religious order or congregation. The latter half of the previous century, diocesan priests complained that their seminary formation was too monastic, and many regretted this monastic style of spirituality seemed ill to prepare them for the demands of a busy life of ministry; such that they found themselves “high and dry” – experiencing various symptoms of breakdown in their life: in health, holiness and wholeness. Isn't it time that we reclaim our heritage?

Since Jesus Himself set Peter, Paul and the Apostles on their course of life and ministry, personally entrusted to Peter the task of strengthening his brothers, and after a few years – as an afterthought – sent him Paul to help him keep it in perspective; we diocesan priests could reclaim St. Peter and St. Paul as our models.

So let us see what we diocesan priests of “The Order of Saint Peter and Saint Paul” can receive from the Madonna House Apostolate and the Spiritual Life Institute that could enable us to reclaim our heritage through which our Beloved Lord Jesus very much wants us to find our delight and rest – as Saint Augustine put it – in Him. Simply put, the charism of the Madonna House Apostolate is to live out the life of Nazareth in a community of women and men lay apostles with some of the men ordained to serve the community and assist the local Church. The lay apostles, the staff, learned from Catherine Doherty to live a true life of faith: to believe in the real presence of God among us. God truly speaks in his Word. Jesus is truly present in his priest. God truly loves us through the love of people who offer their life, their service, their caring, their time for love of God and neighbor.

What does the Madonna House Apostolate have to offer us diocesan priests? Well, let’s have a closer look. When I first arrived there as a seminarian in December 1979, I didn’t realize I had been battered a bit by some of the speculative theology around at the time. It was very critical of how faith had been lived in the past, but was short on how it could be lived in the present. At Madonna House it was tangible. Jesus was here. I felt the love so intensively it was almost too much to bear. It wasn’t the “I’m OK you’re OK” narcissistic merry-go-round that stalls one in front of the mirror. These people were living a difficult life, in dormitories at close quarters, in a true sense on display, with no place to hide. Each person’s faults were quickly “on the table” for all to see and filed down on the daily grindstone of manual labor, prayer, meals in common, recreation, study, and family life.

The overall effect was and continues to be one of wholesomeness – people become more who our Father intends them/us to be. A priest can so need to be accepted by the people or be so afraid of being rejected by them that he no longer wants to accept any deference to his priesthood and tends to say, “Just call me Pete – none of that ‘Father’ Peter stuff.” At Madonna House, a priest very quickly realizes that the respect and reverence shown by the staff to priests is actually glory being given to Jesus, our Eternal High Priest before the Father.

Jesus is present, loving, teaching, praying, preaching, directing, and presiding Eucharist in each priest. When he sees himself for the first time through the clear eyes of faith of this community, he “gets” it, perhaps for the first time. How shallow, worldly, and utterly phony all those arguments now seem in the city, that keep going around about the need to knock priests off the pedestal. They’re not only off it, they are pulverized into the ground beyond recognition and out of sight! Enough already!

What does the Spiritual Life Institute have to offer diocesan priests? This new band of apostolic hermits – in existence for about 30 years – are living in a way accessible to generations today the high adventure of the Ascent of Mount Carmel. Their charism is to plunge deeply into the contemplation of the living God – the One thing necessary – and emerge to attend to those whom He draws to them as retreatants at their hermitages or as fellow pilgrims of the absolute as they go on the road and publish in print and other media. In a society that boasts of its tolerance and demands it of others, yet shows increasingly such intolerance of the Gospel, it is refreshing to meet, hear, read, or spend time with a band of women and men so utterly in love with God in Jesus Christ, with human beings and creation.

I discovered that I no longer wanted or needed to be apologetic about being Christian and Catholic, or about being a priest. The inner fire of both lay apostles and hermits rekindled my own original call to holiness tucked away in the memories of my youth. Their love and support encouraged me to a fresh and bold resolve to live the life of Nazareth and to openly undertake the Ascent of Mount Carmel and encourage others to do so as well. In recent years, since they live their vocation with “no holds barred” and live contemplative life “to the hilt”, the hermits have been “sifted like wheat” and some sadly left their desert. I am not dismayed by their departures, only regretful, and all the more inspired by their companions, who remain faithful to their high ideals and bear the torch ever higher.

The Genesis of the Order of Saint Peter and Saint Paul

Until today – Friday, July 6th, 2002, “The Order of Saint Peter” was just an “in-joke” among diocesan priests as an answer to people who are always pressing us to tell them what order of priests we belong to. Since diocesan priests owe their calling to the process begun by Jesus who called the 12 and accepted other disciples – who in turn called others to assist them – a process basically carried on uninterrupted until today; it seemed a logical thing to claim membership in that process or order begun by Peter, since Jesus called him the rock (petra) on which He would build his Church.

Today I visited with a married couple, my friends, a local young priest, and upon returning home with the couple I found myself wondering at how many young priests I have known who struggle with many of the same issues – prominent among them being the difficulty in fitting in or being accepted by one’s pastor and other priests. At the same time I found myself marveling at the help I have received over the years which allowed me to find my place – not worrying overly much about being accepted but taking the initiative to accept other priests – who in turn and in time came also to accept me and even appreciate my fraternal love.

I beheld growing within me the intuition that the Order of Saint Peter is no joke – it is very real and actually owes its tradition to both Peter and Paul – the one the Lord prayed for and the other He seemed to add as an afterthought. It certainly never occurred to me that I would have anything to do with the promotion of such a thing as a vision of spirituality for diocesan priests, so I began to wonder whether I wasn’t letting myself get carried away by fancy.

Then it was as if I was being reminded of the history of grace that has made up my life until today – seeing highlights in the mind’s eye, and there was a strong impulse within me to write them down – as though we must be careful no to let any of God’s marvelous graces fall to the ground, but carefully conserve them and then ponder them in our hearts, like Our Lady, until they bear all the fruit intended for them by God.

You will know and judge them by their fruit

Pre-eminent among these spiritual fruit is the gift of avoiding become just a functionary – or to put it positively – the gift of entering, with full realization of what is happening and joyful deliberation, into an intimate life with God that is actually the beginning of eternal life right here and now on earth.

The next most prominent fruit would have to be the boldness and true humility to admit to myself what is happening to me and to share this joyful news with brother priests and the people I am called to serve. The enthusiasm and infectious nature of the good news is what characterized the climate within the early Church – what we could call the “charism” of the Order of Saint Peter and Saint Paul.

Their letters exude their enthusiasm for God’s love for them, which came to them in the Person of Jesus, and which they need to announce to the whole world – it’s good news that just cannot be kept silent – they felt that if they did not proclaim it they would burst or die. Their letters also show their concern over any misguided attempt to distract others from this essential character of the salvation won for us by Jesus, our Savior and our Lord: it is freely offered to all – only repentance is needed and a willingness to live a life of love modeled on that of Jesus Himself.

It is a life of love for both God and neighbor, with all the practical applications that issue from these two loves, which are one. Like Jesus, we remain in communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit through prayer and worship, and we also attend to our neighbor and the work that arises from God’s call and our response and effort to daily do his holy will. All those who accept this new life are in turn called to spread the Good News.

So, perhaps in what the Lord has done for me there might be something to help other struggling diocesan priests to open up to restoration by the Lord to the dignity and riches of this inheritance and extricate themselves from the many traps reducing them to little more than functionaries – caught in the anxiety and frustration of the micro-manager. Even those who are doing well in the life of faith and ministry could be blessed by the realization that they are, in effect, members of the Order of St. Peter and St. Paul. Whether or not they have recourse to Madonna House Apostolate or the Spiritual Life Institute, or to one of the numerous paths to reform, conversion, and renewal in the Church, men and women today need to encounter Christ in priests who no longer live, but Christ lives in them!

The Latest Update – 070122

Until now I have not shared these thoughts with more than a few brother priests, and have not heard anything from them. It remains to be seen whether such reflections have a value for any other person than me. At this point, there are no obvious signs that priests are searching for a spirituality to sustain them in their life and ministry. It is true that over the years I have heard so many say almost as a complaint that there is no explicit spirituality of the diocesan priest.

Around 20 years ago the late and fondly remembered Bishop Leonard J. Crowley gave a talk to us his priests about exactly that, the spirituality of the diocesan priest. Mostly, he shared with us what we tend to experience ourselves, namely that diocesan priests are to discover Jesus as their pearl of great price, contemplate Him in their lives and in the ministry they carry out, and live in the hope of the Holy Spirit reproducing the life of Jesus in them through the love they give to all those the Lord in his mercy sends to them or puts on their path. Most priests seem to have found or are finding spiritual food for their journey in this way, in the very midst of their life and ministry, in the contemplation of the Lord and in the daily exercise of pastoral charity. This is the thrust of the late Pope John Paul II's encyclical on the priesthood Pastores Dabo Vobis.

As I read the signs of the times, beginning in my own life, I see most obviously how the Lord has been drawing me to learn from my younger brothers, and in particular, He has drawn me to learn how to make use of some of the media in order to communicate to the faithful and those who are searching for God the fruit that fall in my lap, as it were, from the Lord's hand. To be specific, I have activated a website for the posting of audio files of my homilies and various written reflections, mostly in the form of pdf files. In addition, I have resumed an English web log or blog, and since I have begun to serve in a bilingual parish, I started a French blog as well. The addresses are as follows:

Website: <http://fathergilles.net/> **English blog:** <http://fathergilles.blogspot.com/>
French blogue: <http://labbegilles.blogspot.com/>

As Jesus illustrated by his parable of the sower and the seed, now is as good a time as any to drop this particular seed on the ground and allow it to find its way into the earth of human hearts, where it can soften with the moisture of divine grace and send down deep roots for a harvest yet to come. I do so filled with gratitude for the love of the Blessed Trinity and their many graces, confident that what they have given will live on to bear much fruit. No word from the Lord remains lifeless.

*“For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there
Till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who
Sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.”*

Isaiah 55:10-11