



AMERICAN NATIONAL
CATHOLIC CHURCH

**Homily Delivered by
Rev. Fr. William J. Freeman
On the occasion of the Mass of Thanksgiving of
Rev Fr. Phillip Litchenwalter, OSD
Pastor, St. Catherine of Siena American National Catholic Church
St. Louis, MO
November 20, 2011**

My name is Bill Freeman and it was my joy and honor to be ordained to the Priesthood with Fr. Phillip yesterday by Bishop Lucey. I am from Arlington, VA and my ministry is to the sick and dying. I am a hospice chaplain working at an in-patient center for terminally ill folks with less than two weeks to live --- often much less. I work with patients, and with family members.

As I arrive at the center, I sit in my car and pray that God increase I decrease. I remind myself that it is His ministry, not mine. I pray that God will take away my arrogance. I say the prayer to Fr. Mychal Judge, the namesake of my ministry and the first death on September 11, 2001:

Lord, take me where you want me to go.
Let me meet who you want me to met.
Tell me what you want me to say,
And keep me out of your way.

Let me tell you about Mary.

I had been visiting with Mary last month for about a week. She had the wonderful, genteel charm of a true southern belle, even wearing lipstick and earrings in her hospital bed when she could.

Cancer had ravaged her body and dementia often clouded her mind.

As a Catholic, she loved the rosary and had a devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

We prayed the rosary during many of my visits. Sometimes we'd say the prayers together, other times she'd listen to the soothing words-- so familiar and so important to her.

During one of our visits, she asked me what I thought dying might be like. Like so many at the end of life – she knew she was dying.

“Mary, I think it’s like closing your eyes to this world and immediately opening them up on the other side where you’ll find yourself wrapped in the loving arms of God the Father. There will be no more pain, or worry. And all those folks who have gone before, they’d be there for you.”

I told her that I was going to be ordained a priest and that I would be praying to her that I would be a good and holy priest.

That was the last time I saw Mary. She is gone now.

Yet, in the depths of my being, I know that she’s in the tight embrace of a loving God and is joined in the communion of all the Saints.

The dying have so much to teach us about living – about what’s important.

Ask a man who is being wheeled into transplant surgery or a woman facing chemotherapy for the third time what’s on their mind -- and the answer will always involve people they love. **Always.**

All of us are a heartbeat away from death.

Let’s face it -- our relationships are our most precious possessions.

Everyone knows that all relationships – even the most loving – have occasional rough spots. We assume that people we love know that we love them, even if we’ve had our disagreements and tense moments. Yet when someone dies, we can have the gnawing doubts.

It’s incredibly important to state the obvious.

When you love someone, it is never too soon to say:

- I love you

It’s never premature to say:

- Thank you
- I forgive you
- Please forgive me

The dying are teaching me so much about living.

They present us with two questions?

- How much love have you been able to give and receive?
- How much service have you rendered?

Love God; love people.

How much love have you been able to give and receive?

For me, the message here is to live life fully engaged -- compassionately, joyfully

For too many of us, we live life as if it were a dress rehearsal. Live life fully. Eat desert first! On your tombstones, have written "Used Up," "Spent."

For lots of reasons,

- We calculate our time,
- Hold on to our possessions, and
- Keep folks – at least some folks -- at a distance.

It is so very easy to keep people at a distance who have hurt us – it is so very hard to forgive.

I carried a true hatred for two people for fifteen years due to what I felt was a huge injustice they caused me.

And I rehearsed that hatred nearly everyday – for years – like sipping on a fine wine. And I couldn't get out of that box.

Last year, I learned from a very wise woman by the name of Betty, a simple prayer to say when those thoughts come to the surface:

"Bless them, change me."

And I said it – again, and again, and again.

And you know what? Slowly but surely my thoughts of hatred turned to thoughts of acceptance for what had happened – not making the past right – but making my present complete.

Forgiveness is as much about us as others. I learned to experience a completion – slowly to be sure - but a movement to becoming whole.

The other lesson that the dying are teaching us is "how much service have you rendered?"

And service grows out of love; the challenge is to grow a big heart.

We've heard today's Gospel many times before – we know the punch line and we know the reality of poverty, hunger, and the brokenness of the world. We see TV ads.

We get it.

For me the service challenge – and why the Gospel message just doesn't work -- is that we don't see ourselves as related.

It's us and it's them.

Imagine if:

- The hungry was your Aunt Jean
- The stranger were your cousins from Mexico

- The sick was your partner Pat
- The imprisoned was your sister Denise who keeps on stealing to support her Meth habit?

Our belief around this table is that we share a common God, a living God, a God who is walking with us through the experience of life – who is rejoicing and suffering with us.

A God who invites and never coerces. And as we share a common Father, we are brothers and sisters.

How much love have we been able to give and receive?
How much service have you rendered?

May these questions loft in this sacred space,
May we carry these into our lives.

And we turn our hearts to thankfulness . . .

We recognize the love, support and generosity of Phillip’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lichtenwalter,

We witness the love, support and generosity of Scott Lankford, Phillip’s partner. Scott, we honor you.

We stand in awe at the leadership of Rev. Anne Kelsey, Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, and her commitment to create an “oasis” here in St. Louis and for welcoming St. Catherine of Siena parish – not just into this wonderful space – but also into a ministerial partnership.

We honor our wonderful bishop, George Lucey, under whose leadership the American National Catholic Church is daily witnessing to the extravagant love of a living God.

Bishop as I’ve said to you before, thank you creating a door where I always found a wall.

So my brother Phillip – we step into tomorrow continuing to respond to the call God etched on hearts as young boys so very long ago.

With the oil of yesterday’s ordination still fresh on our hands, let us remind ourselves of the words of Martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero:

We plant the seeds that one day will grow

We water seeds already planted
Knowing that they hold future promise

We lay foundations that will need further development

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities

We cannot do everything,
And there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it
Very, very well.

We may never see the end results,
But that's the difference between the master builder and the workers.

We are workers, not master builders
ministers, not messiahs
We are prophets of a future not our own.