

The So-Called “Romero Prayer”

[Below is the full text of a homily by Cardinal John Dearden, Archbishop of Detroit (1958-1980), given at a Mass for Deceased Priests on October 25, 1979 (his last time presiding at this yearly Mass before entering senior bishop status). It was prepared for Cardinal Dearden by Ken Untener, priest of the archdiocese, later bishop of Saginaw (1980-2004). The parts that were taken out and turned into a separate prayer or reflection are highlighted in bold and underlined, with the original words from Cardinal Dearden and the changes in brackets. If you read just the parts in bold, you can see why it is a mis-labelling to call it “The Romero Prayer” after the late bishop and martyr from El Salvador, St. Oscar Romero. Although the insights fit also with the vision of Oscar Romero, he did not compose it. Every word of it comes from this homily and so it really should be called “The Dearden Prayer” or, even more accurately, “The Dearden-Untener Reflection.” The homily was prepared with the following readings in mind. First Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:4-11. Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:31-33.]

When we look back on the life of a bishop such as Cardinal Mooney, and the lives of priests such as we are commemorating today, it is natural to think of all the things they did—the plans and programs they implemented, the hours and hours of dedicated pastoral work, the countless Masses, baptisms, marriages, the broken lives they helped to heal, the buildings they built... That is as it should be, for our predecessors labored long and hard in the Lord’s vineyard. They fought the good fight. They ran the race with energy and zeal, and we can look back with admiration and thanksgiving.

Today, I would like to look at it from a different perspective. I would like to reflect, instead, on all the things they didn’t do. At first that may sound strange, even a bit irreverent. But it is not meant to be so. Quite the opposite. It is meant to be very, very reverent. It is meant to remind us that what they were doing—and what we are doing—is so great, so sacred, that it could never be accomplished in a lifetime. We are about the Lord’s work, not our own. It is the Lord who builds the house, not ourselves. We are sowers of seeds, not reapers of the harvest. We preach the Kingdom begun, not the Kingdom accomplished.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is the Lord’s [God’s] work.

What all this comes down to is the realization that everything we do is incomplete. And we have to approach it that way, with humility, a sense of mystery, a profound reverence. That is not always an easy thing to do. There is something in each of us that makes us want to do a complete job and call it our own. We are driven toward wholeness. We want to experience the fulfillment of rounding things off nicely. We want to finish them, settle things before moving on to our next task. It can’t be done.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No sermon [statement] says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church’s mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

In our first reading we heard Paul speak of planting a seed, watering it, and then acknowledging that the Lord gives the growth. He spoke also of laying a foundation upon which someone else would build. Then in the Gospel we heard Jesus speak of a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, that one

day develops into the largest of plants. He spoke of a tiny portion of yeast that eventually affects a large mass of dough.

This is what we are about. 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 far beyond our capabilities.

The priest who has this perspective has the key to happiness and holiness. He can be happy, because he doesn't need success measured in this world's terms—and we seldom have success in those terms. He can be holy because he accepts the Lord's most basic formula for holiness: becoming like a little child, realizing that without the Lord we can do nothing, realizing that He is the vine, we are the branches. To say that what we do is incomplete is not to say that what we do is unimportant. It becomes even more important, because it is part of something greater than meets the eye. It is as important as planting is to the harvest...as a foundation to a skyscraper.

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. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the Master Builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

We celebrate this in every Eucharist. We hold in our hands the mystery of the “already” and the “not yet.” That is why, as so many spiritual writers have noted, priests invariably make the Eucharist the center of their spiritual life. Amid all the tasks and worries and hopes and dreams that are so incomplete, we celebrate the coming of Him Who is the Alpha and the Omega, the King of the universe. Everything comes together when we hold the Eucharist before our people and say, “Through Him, with Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours Almighty Father, forever and ever. Amen.”

These are the reflections that come to mind when we look back on the lives of the priests who came before us. The incompleteness of their work reminds us of the incompleteness of our own. At the same time, the value of what they did reminds us of the value of our own work, and of the care and the reverence that must attend each and everything we do.

I might also say that these are the reflections that come to mind when you are an old priest who just celebrated his 72nd birthday. They have been a source of strength and peace to me every day of my priesthood, and that is why I wanted to share them with you. The prayer of Simeon has always meant a great deal to me. It is not an accident that the Church places that prayer on our lips at the end of each day. No matter how incomplete our efforts may have been, despite our limitations, despite our failures, we can say with much peace and much fulfillment: “Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace; you have fulfilled your word. For my eyes have witnessed your saving deed displayed for all the peoples to see: a revealing light to the Gentiles, the glory of your people Israel.”

We can say that every night. And Cardinal Mooney and the priests of this diocese could say it when they died. May their souls and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.” **Amen**].