

Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
Gospel: Mark 6:7-13
Our Lady of Dallas, Abbey Church
July 15, 2012
Fr. Ignatius Peacher

The mystery of the priesthood has lately been on my mind because of two happy events that took place in recent months.

Earlier this summer, one of the elderly Hungarian Fathers gave an impromptu speech in which he told us about his life as a Cistercian priest. He recounted how unexpected it was for him to come to live in Texas, and yet at the same time he had dreams about building a monastery and school here in his new home. He marveled at how God's providence had made his dream a reality. To close his speech, he said that he was happy to hand it all over to the next generation. We who heard this speech, were moved, among other things by the generosity and joy of handing on something so special, but we also felt the weight and responsibility of what has been passed on. It was a reminder of the hard work, faith and God's providence that made this monastery.

A few weeks later, while visiting my parents, my family and I visited a priest in a nursing home. We first met him when he was the pastor of our parish and since then has been a family friend. Now in his eighties, his health has deteriorated so that he can no longer walk and he must live in a nursing home. He decided that he wanted to give me his chalice and he wanted to do it now in order to enjoy the act of giving as opposed to waiting till his death. He explained to me that his chalice was given to him by his family at his ordination and it was done with some difficulty because of their financial situation. The chalice symbolizes his more than fifty years of priesthood and his family's sacrifice. Again I felt the weight of this unmerited gift that was being passed on to me.

Both of these events brought to my mind an image that comes from Graham Greene's novel, *The Power and The Glory*. The story takes place during the Mexican government's persecution of Catholics

in the early 20th century. The main character of the story is a priest who decides to remain in his diocese despite the dangers. He is far from perfect but he continues to administer the sacraments all the while fleeing the police who are trying to hunt him down. Towards the end of the book, the priest is finally captured and sentenced to death. The lieutenant who has been chasing him for years unexpectedly feels gloomy now that the last priest has been put under lock and key, for he thinks to himself he will miss the excitement of the chase. Just before the priest was arrested he took refuge for 24 hours in the house of a pious Catholic family. After the execution of the priest, the young boy of the family thinks back on this strange guest and marveled that a clandestine priest had been in his house. But then the boy thought sadly, "he was the last, there were no more priests and no more heroes." After pondering it over, the boy reluctantly went to bed and as he lay there, he heard a knock on the front door. Since his father was not home, he knew he had to go to the door. He unlocked the heavy door and a stranger stood in the street, a tall thin man. He named the boy's mother and asked if this was her house. Yes, the boy said, but she was asleep. He began to shut the door, but a pointed shoe got in the way. The stranger said, "I have only just landed. I came up the river tonight" and suddenly lowering his voice he said to the boy, "I am a priest". "You?" the boy exclaimed. "Yes", he said quietly.

This is how the story ends, with an unexpected and amazing conclusion. Just when everyone thought the last priest had been captured and killed, another one pops up unexpectedly. The conclusion of the novel is a manifestation of the Pharisee's words in the Acts of the Apostles, "if this comes from God you will not be able to destroy them." The image of a new priest surprisingly showing up out of the blue and surpassing great odds came to my mind when the Hungarian father gave his speech. The Hungarian priests came to Texas fleeing persecution by the Communists and unexpectedly filled a need the bishop of Dallas had at that time. In more recent memory, that is, ten years ago, the future of the monastery was in peril because no one was joining. Then in 2003, three young men entered the monastery, and for the next five years three young men joined each year. It was inexplicable; After years of a drought of vocations, suddenly candidates for the priesthood for this monastery were knocking at the door and coming in.

In the gospel, Jesus sends his twelve apostles out two by two. He instructs them and gives them authority to continue the work he was doing. Jesus still sends certain men to do his work. God continues to move incognito through history planting the seed of a priestly vocation in the souls of certain men. The tiny thing that is planted by the example of a priest or by preaching will grow if the person allows it. Somewhere, in unknown places, God's word is ripening in certain souls. Then without notice and from an unanticipated place a vocation opens up and blooms. Jesus says, "the spirit blows where it wills...but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going; so it is with everyone born of the Spirit." We do not understand how God chooses, but we do know that God continues to call and to send priests. A priestly vocation begins as all truly fruitful things begin in this world as something small and hidden. God himself conformed himself to this law with his work in this world. What happened in the unimportant corner of Galilee, when Jesus began to send that small group of men out with his authority two by two has remained and grown. The empires and government that have persecuted the Church have come and passed away, but the quiet presence of God has overcome the impossible and persisted.