

**First Mass of Fr Raphael Schaner
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
August 17, 2019
Fr. Ignatius Peacher, O.Cist.**

There's probably a question coming to your mind as I stand here, 'Why isn't Fr. Raphael preaching?'" There is a tradition in many places that at the newly ordained priest's first mass, he doesn't preach but asks another priest to give the sermon for two reasons – one, the newly ordained's first time to celebrate the mass as the main celebrant, asking someone else to preach is one less thing to worry about. The second reason is newly ordained needs a pep talk, an exhortation as he begins his priestly ministry. It's an honor for me to do this for Fr. Raphael.

As some of you know I'm the novice master here in the monastery, and six years ago this month, Fr. Raphael, Br. Francis, and two others were my first novices. The novice master is the mentor of the new monks who have just entered and are in their first year in the monastery. This first year, the novice year is unique, amidst the radical change in his life, the novice monk is discerning whether God is calling him to live a monastic life in this particular monastery. To support that discernment, the discipline of the novice year tries to eliminate many distractions and make the year like a retreat to pray and to listen to God's promptings. So when Father Raphael's brother Luke was getting married in California during Fr. Raphael's novice year, we had a dilemma. Novices don't leave the monastery during their first year, except for short outings in the vicinity with the other monks. However, in the latter part of the novice year, the novices get a week of vacation, not with family but a group of 4-5 monks travel often to Colorado or New Mexico for hiking and relaxation. So the solution to the dilemma was that the novices' vacation that year would be to California. I, Fr. Thomas, Fr. John and the novices flew

to San Diego in July for a week of vacation which included Luke and Lauren's wedding at their parish church and a reception party at the home of Fr. Raphael's parents.

As some of you know Fr. Raphael grew up on a farm. I believe it was the day before the wedding that we visited the much talked about Schaner farms. When we arrived, we parked the car on the driveway between the orange grove and the house. There were surf boards on the front lawn from one of Paul's recent trips to the beach. After saying hello to the family, we got in the pick-up truck and 15 yr old Joe, Fr. Raphael's little brother drove us around the farm. We saw the avocado trees, carrots, onions, garlic, we plucked kumquats off the tree and ate them. It was a wonderful week in California and helped me understand better the upbringing from which Fr. Raphael came. I recall, Fr. Raphael, that you told me that the parables in the gospel that used imagery from agriculture were easier to understand and more rich having grown up on a farm. One of those images comes to mind as you begin your work as a priest. It is from Luke chapter 10:

“After this the Lord appointed seventy[-two] others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. He said to them, “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.”

Fr. Raphael, the Lord has called you from the fields of California to work in his field, not to harvest fruit or vegetables or grain but to harvest a people for God. There have been signs of your potential of attracting many people to do charitable works, to pray, to grow in virtue. God has given you a gift that is plainly seen at the prep school. May God increase his harvest through your hands as a priest.

Today's gospel passage about the earth on fire doesn't seem to go well with the image of harvest. As we've heard in the news in recent years, brush fires and forest fires burn homes, crops, farmland. The fire which Jesus speaks about is different than the fire that destroys. Jesus speaks of the fire of love of God and neighbor that burns within his sacred heart. He wants us to have that same fire burning within our hearts, and not a tepid or lukewarm devotion to God. The fire which Jesus speaks about is like the fire that Moses saw on the burning bush in the desert. It burns but does not consume. Love of God does not destroy us or disfigure us, rather it brings out the best and most genuine in us. Love of God does not consume what is good in us, but it does burn away sin, pettiness, to purify and perfect us. We can even say that the fire burns away what is good but not necessary for our vocation. For a monk and a priest, this fire of love for God must burn brightly and in doing so burns away what is not necessary for his vocation. It is well known that there are certain sacrifices that come with the priestly vocation which can be painful at times. In these sacrifices, the priest imitates Jesus, the one true priest who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to win back the people he loved.

In celebrating the mass, the memorial and re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice, the priest stands as Christ. At the consecration of bread and wine, the priest speaks the words of Christ, "This is my body which will be given up for you". We make these words our own, each one of us who participates in the mass joins their sacrifice to Christ's. But in a special way, Christ's words become the priest's words because the priest lives more closely to the way Jesus did. The priest offers his body and its biological potential for marriage and family to God to be able to stand at the altar and offer the sacrifice of the Mass. From a certain perspective, this sounds too difficult, too much sacrifice that could only lead to sadness. Yet, the fire of love for God that

drew us to the priestly vocation doesn't destroy us. In fact, when we love authentically, love makes even sacrifices for that love a joy.

Fr. Raphael, I offer you these two images from the gospel –a worker gathering God's harvest, and an ardent love which impels the worker to work, to sacrifice for those he loves. The priest's task is to continue Jesus' work on earth and share his sentiments and loves. In today's gospel, Jesus reveals to us, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" Fr. Raphael, this is one of your tasks as a priest – to enkindle the love of God in your students and others to whom you minister.

God has called you to his vocation and given you the grace to accomplish it. It is a gift that comes from a demanding master. The master of the harvest wants thirty, sixty, a hundredfold for the seeds he has sown. At the same time, it is a joy to work in the vineyard of the Lord, knowing that we can have a share in doing God's work of salvation. Fr. Raphael, God has called you to a priestly and monastic vocation, and he gives you his grace and sends you as one of his workers. *Ita missa est.*