

CELEBRATING THE GOLDEN JUBILEE OF PRIESTHOOD
OF ARCHBISHOP MARTIN CURRIE
CATHEDRAL-BASILICA OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND—FRIDAY, MAY 11, 2018

“I Love Being a Priest”

[Texts: Isaiah 40.27–31 (Psalm); Romans 12.3–13: John10.11–18]

I am pleased to celebrate with you the Golden Anniversary of your Archbishop Martin Currie's ordination to the priesthood. My own good wishes, Your Grace, join those of all present here—the Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Luigi Bonazzi, the Holy Father's representative in Canada, your brother bishops, fellow priests, the religious sisters and members of the lay faithful from the dioceses of St. John's and Grand Falls, your siblings, their families, your friends from far and near.

Many others who wanted to be here, but could not, join us in spirit. We all offer you sincerest congratulations, the assurance of our affection and support, as well as our prayers for your ministry.

The priesthood is lived in diverse ways by diocesan priests and regular priests. The exercise of priesthood has also been in a continual process of change and renewal in the period following the Second Vatican Council. Still, for all the shifts and movements, the role of priests remains vital to Christian discipleship in our parishes and dioceses.

The Fathers of the Council favoured the term “presbyter” as the designation of those who make present the fruits of the priestly ministry of Jesus. Old habits die hard, however, and the designation “priest” persisted.

What is more, the presbyteral ministry exercised in the Church embodies in a new way the saving features of the ancient priesthood from their biblical origins in Israel.

For “at its heart, the biblical priestly office was about community. Priesthood existed for the sake of the community’s safety and well-being, social cohesion and balance, as well as for its faithfulness and standing before God.” A Protestant biblical scholar, who laments the reformers’ discarding of the priestly persona, notes the richness of the biblical priesthood: priests, he said, lived and worked at the intersection of Israel’s vertical community with the LORD and its horizontal community with itself (Richard D. Nelson, *Raising Up a Faithful Priest*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

In other words, priests were guardians of the faith of Israel and, in the new dispensation of the extension of Israel’s role as the people of God, which is the Church, presbyters are guardians of the faith of the Church. They remain servants of the People of God through the high and low points of human existence: birth and death, marriage and sickness, reconciliation and communion, sorrow and joy.

Presbyter-priests build churches but, more importantly, they build faith communities. They laugh and they cry. Presbyters are often bone-weary and occasionally they overflow with exhilaration. They are leaders and servants. They are sinners and saved. Priests are the anointed of God. They are vehicles of the Holy Spirit. At the Last Supper, Jesus called the future presbyter-priests his friends.

I came to know the priest, Father Martin Currie when I was named Archbishop of Halifax in 1998. He was serving as Vicar General of the diocese and Rector of St. Mary’s Cathedral, both challenging tasks. I admired his frankness as he recounted to me what “the

boys,” his fellow priests, were saying about the way the new archbishop was going about his tasks. I would try my best to seek and follow his counsel.

Over the few years that we worked together, I came to treasure his confidences as those of a brother and a friend, a relationship we have maintained. I remember one time when we were driving together through Cumberland County after his transfer to the parish in Truro, he summed up his feelings, “Bishop, I love being a priest!” He repeated it then and on several other occasions, “I love being a priest!”

And that meant serving the people with zeal, despatch, and energy. One Saturday morning several months after my arrival, I was chatting with him in the doorway to the cathedral glebe house when the phone rang. He answered it on the first ring, took the news of the death of a relative of one of the priests in jig time, then excused himself to call three people on a phone-tree system so he could immediately transmit the message. The news touched on the life of a priest. The concern of the brothers for the priestly fraternity had to be honoured. “I love being a priest.”

Msgr. Currie—often simply called Father Martin—knew the poor who frequented the cathedral precincts and panhandled the parking lot. Naturally, they would touch him up too and at some stage, he worked out a deal with them. They would come once a week, and he would give each five dollars or so and that would be it ‘til the next week. And there was reciprocity. One day, the microphone from the altar in the cathedral disappeared, so he enquired if anyone knew who had taken it and asked them to put the word out on the street that, if it wasn’t returned promptly, there would be hell to pay. Someone took it back that afternoon, no questions asked. “I love being a priest.”

When Father Martin Currie became Bishop of Grand Falls in December 2000, Halifax was jubilant. Everyone I spoke to thought he was the perfect choice. After all, he came from Sheet Harbour where people made their living from fishing or forestry work, where people valued family life and socializing. The new bishop fit in in no time in Grand Falls, made a point of learning and employing Newfoundland phrases, and he was always ready for a scoff. “I love being a priest.”

One of Father Currie’s formative experiences in being close to people as a priest came during his years in Chiclayo, Peru, the archdiocese of Halifax’s mission until the early 1980s. After his episcopal ordination, we decided to visit his friends in La Vittoria, where he had been the pastor and other places where he knew fellow missionaries, Oblates and Sisters of Charity. One of many stories involves his penchant for eating and dancing.

At one meal, they served “cuey,” known in English as a guinea pig. Its skin was tough, so he discreetly put it in his pocket. But when he got up to do a traditional dance that uses a handkerchief, the skin went flying through the air to his embarrassment. “I love being a priest.”

I could go on, but I’d like to turn to the Scripture readings for this evening. The Gospel chosen for this Mass of Thanksgiving is, appropriately, that of the Good Shepherd. After the resurrection appearances in the Easter season, the Church turns to the Gospel of John and passages in which Jesus tells of the intimacy He shares with His disciples. Christ is the good shepherd who knows His sheep by name and guides them to safety and secure pasture. In his turn, the Lord calls the priest to be a shepherd of His flock. This is what our jubilant, with his great capacity for

remembering folks and their relatives, has faithfully lived out for fifty years! “I love being a priest.”

The second reading from Romans tells us about the humility in which a Christian is to live. No one should think of himself or herself more highly than they ought. We must realize that we all— together—form the Body of Christ, and each of us makes a unique contribution.

Paul’s teaching ends with several exhortations: “rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer,” which are fitting for Archbishop Martin. For he has suffered in many ways, exteriorly and interiorly, as during his ministry he has faced the travails of the purification of the Church in Newfoundland, what Paul describes as “my daily concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11.28).

Who can forget the great concern shown Archbishop Martin on the Rock when he was overcome by carbon monoxide poisoning in his house and spent weeks in the hospital? Or the physical pain he endured when his car hit a moose in Newfoundland and a deer in Nova Scotia!

The Solemnity of the Ascension is the final phase of Eastertide that we will celebrate this Sunday. This mystery entrusts to us Christ’s evangelizing mission and recalls for us that Jesus has brought His full humanity and all His experiences on earth to dwell in the presence of God. The marks of Jesus’ sufferings remain, but they are now glorified.

This feast reminds us that all that is good in our lives of faith continues in eternal life with God in heaven. All of our sufferings endured in patient hope, He will transfigure and cover with glory.

We can find a hint of this truth of our faith in the text Bishop Martin chose as his spiritual motto as a bishop, “Dominus fortitudo sperantium.” It comes from Isaiah 40.31 and may be translated, “those who hope in the Lord will have their strength renewed.” Moreover, the text goes on to promise, “they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” “I love being a priest.”

Bishop Martin, may you always delight in the religious and laity, but particularly in the priests with whom it is your vocation and privilege to work, as you did earlier in the dioceses of Halifax, Grand Falls, Saint John, New Brunswick, and as you have done since 2007 here in the Archdiocese of St. John’s.

May your companion priests be truly “friends in the Lord.” May Our Lord continue to draw you to His side in labouring for the Kingdom and may Our Lady protect you always with her sheltering mantle.

And, to sum our sentiments up in a Newfoundland saying, “Long may your big jib draw!”