

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Oct. 21, 2018)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

You could smell the salt water from his house.

You know what that's like. You make a long, summertime drive down Interstate 64. Finally you step out of your car at Sandbridge. You take a breath, and you can smell it. The salt water. The sea breeze. Finally... you're on vacation!

Well, when Nunzio Sulprizio was born in 1817, you could smell the salt water from his family's house. They lived in the beautiful seaside town of Pescara, Italy. But his young life was full of hardships.

When Nunzio was three, his father and his sister died.

Nunzio's mother died 25 months later. Little Nunzio went to live with his grandmother and he attended a local Catholic school, where he learned more about Christ, and came to love the Eucharist.

Shortly after his grandmother died, Nunzio was admitted to a hospital in Naples because of problems with his leg.

He spent months in bed. The patients around him, most of whom were much older, loved talking to Nunzio. This young man shared joy with others!

On days when his leg felt ok, he walked around and helped to care for other patients. He did whatever was needed. As he went to bed each night, he looked at the little crucifix on the wall. That's where he found his strength and joy. He knew that Jesus, who had suffered, was with him in his suffering.

Nunzio Sulprizio died of bone cancer at the age of 19. The people of Pescara and Naples have considered him a saint ever since.

And last Sunday, in Rome, this teenager from that seaside town was canonized. "Saint Nunzio!"

I am telling you his story because, if you read anything about last Sunday's canonizations, the headlines were probably about another man - Oscar Romero. When Romero was named archbishop of El Salvador in the 1970's, the rich and powerful were pleased. Romero was known

to be a pious man - someone who wouldn't rock the boat.

But then, one of his dear friends, Fr. Rutilio Grande, was assassinated because he dared to speak out on behalf of the poor. And something changed in Archbishop Romero. Within days, his preaching started to challenge the powerful people.

In 1980, after dozens of Salvadorans were murdered by the military, Romero preached a sermon calling on Catholics in the military to stop the violence. He knew that this kind of preaching was risky. But the Gospel demanded that he not keep silent.

On March 24, he celebrated mass. After his homily, the archbishop stood behind the altar in silent prayer. Then shots rang out, and the archbishop lay dead on the floor. Last Sunday, he was canonized in Rome. Oscar Romero – saint and martyr.

Someone else was canonized last weekend: a woman name Nazaria Ignacia. She was born in Spain, but her family moved to Mexico because of money problems.

She joined an order of nuns to care for the elderly. Later she started her own order of nuns, and she became beloved because she stood up for the rights of workers. And she was a pioneer in speaking out for women's rights in a macho culture. She died in 1943.

A man from El Salvador. A woman from Spain. A teenager from Italy.

What do they have in common? Well, they understood that holiness is something that *all* of us can do... or better yet, holiness is something that all of us can BE.

The teenager from Italy teaches us that holiness is not something that we should put off until we are older. Young Nunzio realized that he could experience Jesus, and share the joy of Jesus, in a hospital in Naples.

And young Nunzio teaches us that holiness is not something we'll achieve once we've gotten everything else in our lives worked out. Lots of people tell me, "Oh, I will get serious about prayer, but right now I am too busy with my studies, or my work, or raising my family, or buying my house." People tell me, "I'll listen to God, when I have more time."

Well, 19 year old Nunzio realized that the time to listen to God is *right now*. And the place to listen to God is *right here*. And the reason to listen to God is NOT that you've gotten your act together – it is precisely because you need God to get your act together!

And Nunzio teaches us that suffering does not have to make us selfish. He looked at the little

crucifix by his bed. He remembered how Jesus, even during his crucifixion, was kind to his mother and to the thief hanging beside him. So Nunzio was kind to the people in the hospital, even though his leg was full of pain. He served, even as he suffered.

I think this 19 year old saint from Italy is telling you –

“Do it today! Love God today! Serve God in your neighbor today! Today is the gift that God has given you!”

And Sister Ignacia? She teaches us that our faith leads to service, and service will cost us something. She started out caring for the elderly. But she also realized that the Gospel is not just about *charity*. It is about *justice*.

She started out as a quiet young nun caring for old people. But the Gospel compelled her to strive for justice where workers were mistreated, and to proclaim the God-given dignity of women. A woman saint, who thought about the political life of her day in the light of the Gospel. She sought to serve, even when service was hard. Don't you think we could benefit from more saints like that, right here in Short Pump?

And Romero is the bishop who underwent a major conversion later in life. He thought he knew who Christ was and what kind of service Christ wanted from him. Then he came face to face with the reality of suffering, and he saw how people are oppressed by violence and poverty.

He refused to stay set in his ways. So many of us hope that our faith will stay just as it was, back when life seemed simpler and the answers seemed clearer. But those who are holy are always willing to learn something new, about Christ and his Gospel. And they are willing to serve Christ and his Gospel in new ways, even if those new ways cost us something, or cost us everything.

Romero gave his life, at the altar. He knew that fidelity to Jesus was what mattered most. He was willing to pay whatever price might be asked of him.

When James and John approached Jesus in today's Gospel, they at least had *one* thing right. At least they understood that being close to Jesus is what matters most in life. Being with him. Being in his presence. You and I are made for communion with the Lord. That's what brings us authentic joy and fulfillment.

So they were “sort of” right when they told Jesus they wanted to sit next to him in the kingdom. What they missed was the foundational fact: we discover God in our life when we become humble enough to serve our neighbors. We experience the Lord's presence when we stoop low enough to wash each other's feet.

Christ is not just waiting for us to meet him 'up there,' in the clouds of heaven. He's inviting us to work side by side with him, down here, in the nitty gritty, daily work of humbly caring for each other.

The 19 year old from Italy was dying of bone cancer. But he used his short time on earth to serve the other patients, and bring them joy.

The nun from Spain was joyful, even as she did the hard work of justice.

The murdered archbishop understood that, if Jesus asks us to give ourselves away, we will find the greater joy of discovering him.

In Rome, Pope Francis declared some official saints last Sunday. A woman. A man. A teenager.

This Sunday, in Richmond, we need faithful Christians, holy people, too. We need saints, right here, who are men, women, teens and children.

We need saints who *look like you*.

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