

Second Sunday of Lent (March 12, 2017)
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

The phone call came two Sundays ago, as I was driving toward Short Pump on Gayton Road. It was a request from a family – could you come and anoint dad? The elderly man was in hospice care, and the nurses were telling the family that the end was near.

So I drove to the nursing home. I had met this family on more than one occasion. The elderly man had been a parishioner here since early in our parish's life. I had previously seen him at the hospital, in great spirits, and with a big smile on his face.

But when I walked into his room at the nursing home, I could see how much had changed. He was asleep on the bed. His son stood by his bed. Dad had declined a great deal, and he was less and less able to speak with his children and grandchildren.

The time came for us to celebrate the sacrament. When we began, the gentleman opened his eyes and smiled just a bit – so we knew that he was aware of what was happening. I anointed him with the oil of the sick. His son and I prayed the Lord's Prayer.

And although it is not officially part of the ritual, I usually sing something to conclude the anointing. So I closed my eyes and started to sing: "Be not afraid..."

Before I fully realized what was happening, I heard another voice, singing with me. It was a pleasant voice, a bit soft but still strong. I opened my eyes and realized: the man I had just anointed, the man who was very close to death, had started to sing with me. So we continued: "Be not afraid, I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest."

There he was, a man already making the transition from this life to eternal life, singing the core of his faith: *be not afraid*. And in that moment, he *wasn't* afraid. In fact, on his face was a big smile. I thought to myself: he's *radiant!*

In today's Gospel, *Jesus is radiant*.

And like the man I anointed a few weeks ago, Jesus's radiance happens as death is near. This whole scene of the Transfiguration takes place *as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem... to die*.

Jesus knows that his death is coming. He spoke honestly about the cross to his disciples.

And, with death is in the air, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain. He becomes

radiant before their eyes. Everything about him, from his clothing to his face, is transfigured by something glorious.

Remember, these are the same three disciples – Peter, James, and John – who will see Jesus sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. They will see him arrested. They will see him die.

Yet Jesus says to them, “Do not be afraid.” They will see the worst happen to him, but in this moment of transfiguration, he is giving them a glimpse of what the resurrection will look like. He is encouraging them to have faith, to believe that not even death can rob him of his dignity. He is showing all of us what our future holds, if we *listen to him* and *follow him*.

Like anyone who is facing suffering or death, Jesus had a choice to make. He could have chosen to be focused on his own pain.

But instead, he chose to do what so many noble souls have done even as death hunts them down. He radiated love. He radiated faith. Everything about him was proclaiming: *Be not afraid*.

On that mountaintop, God gave us a glimpse of how the terrible tragedy of Jesus’ death was going to be transformed into something glorious on Easter morning.

And if God can do that for Jesus, God can do that for us. God sent Jesus to die and rise for us. That risen Jesus is walking beside us. And because of that, God is saying to us that no matter what suffering is ours, no matter what cross we are carrying, God can transfigure *our* dying into glorious *rising*. So the message for me and for you is: *be not afraid*.

Jesus knew that God was not going to give up on him. That man I anointed had faith that God was not going to give up on him. There is no one on earth that God is willing to give up on!

So – if *God* does not give up on people, why do I give up on people? So often, I give in to my fears. I conclude that there are people for whom there is no hope, there are situations and problems that cannot be changed. I listen to my fears.

But, Transfigurations happen all the time.

Which brings me back to that gentleman in the nursing home. He was able to sing “Be not afraid” at the end of his life, because he had experienced the power of God’s transfiguring love throughout his life! He knew that he didn’t have to be afraid during his dying, because God had taught him not be afraid during his living! And he chose, he chose, to use his time here on earth to make a difference in the lives of other people. He did not give up. Instead, he gave... generously... and with gladness.

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PARTICIPATION IN THE ANNUAL DIOCESAN APPEAL

Throughout the diocese this weekend, Catholics are being invited to participate in the holy work of transforming people's lives and people's circumstances through the Annual Diocesan Appeal.

If you are a long time member of the parish, you know that we do this once a year. We have the opportunity to talk about the ways in which our diocesan church is working generously to transform and transfigure the lives of our neighbors. Following the example of Jesus, we refuse to give up on people. Instead, we give, and give generously.

This year, the money raised by the annual appeal will provide much needed assistance to transform the lives of people right here in southern Virginia. The appeal will support expanded campus ministries at the numerous universities in the diocese of Richmond. The appeal supports ministries to migrant workers, African Americans and those in prison.

The appeal supports the education of future priests, and helps to provide direct assistance to neighbors who cannot feed their families or pay for heat in the coldest months of the year. And, as always, a significant portion of your gift to the annual appeal comes right back to Saint Mary's, so that we can make lives more radiant and hopeful right here on Gayton Road.

Now, you may recall that, about 18 months ago, we participated in the *Living Our Mission* campaign. That effort, which was focused on building *long-term endowments* for the future, enabled you to make a pledge which you would pay off over five years. You were very generous to that campaign, and you are paying your pledges with great faithfulness.

This annual appeal is not the same thing. The annual appeal raises money that is needed right now so that we can minister to people immediately. So we are asking you to prayerfully consider a pledge to this annual appeal today.

Many of you have already received a mailing from the diocese about the appeal. If you have already sent in your pledge, I thank you.

If you have not had a chance to send in your pledge, or if you have not received a mailing, today is your lucky day!

This is everybody's favorite part! In your pews, right now, there are appeal envelopes, along with little pencils that we liberated from a local golf course. Please pass them out in your pew. One envelope per household. Please don't steal the pencils at the end of mass! If you need more,

raise your hands and ushers will assist you.

On the front of the envelope:

- + name, spouses name address, etc.
- + circles at bottom: already, making today, still praying. Not able to.
- + turn over and open flap.
- + upper left – levels of giving. This year. Over next ten months. Circle the \$10,000!
- +payment options – PLEASE NOT CASH TODAY - upper right – credit card
- +Lower left – checking auto with, or stocks
- + lower right –options for on line, receive a bill, check (CDR), legacy

Seal and collect.

I know that it is a bit awkward to actually do fundraising paperwork in the middle of mass once a year. Believe me, priests don't like doing it. But I am also aware that, with every envelope that is filled out, and every gift that is given, there is a person somewhere in Virginia whose life will be positively changed because of you. With every generous gift that is made today, someone in Virginia will have hope tomorrow. Your participation in the Appeal will help to transfigure someone else's life.

Your giving helps other people to hear the powerful message from Christ: Be not afraid!

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