

A Good Shepherd Returns to His Lord

As we celebrate Pentecost, and with it the birth of the Church in power and in grace, I'm grateful to God for the work of the Spirit in our lives. From the moment of our conception, the Father breathes into us the spark of life and the gift of his love. By welcoming his Son into our hearts, we receive the guarantee of God's abiding presence. Anointed and equipped for a mission, we dedicate ourselves to the transformation of this weary world. Sustained by the promise of eternal glory, we proclaim the Good News.

At Pentecost, I look back with thanksgiving at the Spirit's work in my life.

Of all my memories since childhood – and by far most are very positive – the most sacred one of all comes from 12 years ago. At that moment, I was kneeling before the altar at Annunciation Cathedral in Stockton, on Friday, December 8th, at 8:00pm, alongside two fellow deacons. Bishop Montrose stood tall, as did countless other priests, as he led them in the imposition of hands at the celebration of priestly ordination. Looking at the oil of chrism glistening in my hands, I thanked God for bringing me to a place in which the Bishop could understand and appreciate my long, at times convoluted, spiritual journey. He had welcomed me to this diocese.

Last Sunday afternoon, I stood beside his bed at Stockton's Hospice care center. Now, he was the one receiving the blessings. The oil of anointing had already rested on his forehead and hands, as Bishop Blaire and others prayed for a peaceful passage from this life, and this ministry, to the next.

The Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, whose members had known Bishop Montrose in the City of Angels before he came here in '86, now stood in vigil beside their former shepherd. He was silent, clearly at peace with his God and with himself. In fact, even as I prayed a farewell blessing for him, I sensed that he was praying for me. And so I asked him to remember me, together with all the priests he had ordained, in a special way from the gates of paradise. Yet I left fully expecting to see him again.

Wednesday morning, May 7th, I returned before 8:00. He was gone. As I stood silently in his empty room (or were there angels there?), I regretted having taken the blessings of my life-in-Christ for granted. Bishop Montrose, I believe, never did that. He never lost his childlike delight in the Lord, nor his humble appreciation for God's infinite grace and mercy.

The Sisters and I had wondered which day God would choose. Would he take Bishop Montrose home on his 85th birthday, May 13th? I thought so, since his entire ministry was influenced by the message of Our Lady, who first appeared in Fatima on that day. Would he pass away on the 25th year of his Episcopal ordination, May 12th? Would it be Pentecost, May 11th, since he'd been a constant promoter of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal?

This year Mother's Day would also be Sunday, May 11th. But what about Mexican Mother's Day (and, incidently, my birthday) May 10th? After all, he welcomed the people of Mexico, and of all Latin America, with the love of Christ. No, the Sisters predicted, the Lord would choose the anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood. And so it was. At 12:20am May 7th, having served his Church as a consecrated minister for 59 years, he rested.

In that Hospice Center were several guardian angels. One of the women who works there bears the name of "Angel", and her name is true. She had just lost her Bishop, Lewis D. Stallworth, Sr. the week before. The death of these two great spiritual leaders in Stockton, so close together, reminds us all of the responsibility we have to listen to, and pray for, our shepherds.

May their lives inspire us, also, to fulfill our mission to the people of God.

That evening, in Mass, we heard these words of St. Paul the Apostle: "And now, behold, I know that you all, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no longer. Therefore I call you to witness this day that I am innocent of the blood of all; for I have not shrunk from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Take heed to yourselves and to the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as bishops, to rule the Church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will get in among you, and will not spare the flock...Watch, therefore, and remember that for three years night and day I did not cease with tears to admonish every one of you..." (Acts 20:25-31). It might as well been Jesus himself speaking.

In fact, in that day's Gospel, Jesus prayed: "Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, just as we are one. When I was with them, I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and none of them was lost, except the son of destruction...But now I am coming to you. I speak this in the world so that they may share my joy completely. I gave them your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world any more than I

belong to the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the Evil One...Consecrate them in the truth...As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth.” (John 17:11-19)

Remembering that these words were also the theme of my ordination, I thanked God, as I read that Gospel, for the life of Bishop Donald Montrose.

All this will be driven home on Monday, as his casket rests exactly over the spot where I prostrated myself before the altar twelve years ago, on the day of my ordination. May I offer the Church even a portion of what he gave. Pray for us, Bishop Montrose, that we may be worthy of our calling.

Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, May 10, 2008