

Sermon Delivered at the Funeral of Father Anselm J. Werner. O.Carm.

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Text: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart" Matt. 11, 29.

At the funerals of priests, you probably have noticed that, usually and very properly, the funeral sermon treats of the dignity of the priesthood. In order that all may understand the honor being paid to the departed priest, the funeral sermon usually reiterates this truth: that there is no office so exalted as that of the priest. This truth becomes evident when we consider only one privilege of the priest — the awesome privilege of offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The truth becomes more clear when we consider also the priest's dignity as a mediator between God and man, for he is the instrument of God, the funnel through which God pours His graces into souls, at baptismal fonts, in confessionals, and on deathbeds. Certainly no other man is given as much power, as much dignity, as many precious privileges as the priest.

But somehow, before the body of the meek and humble Father Anselm, all this talk of dignity seems out of place. If Father Anselm were consulted, I think he would say in his humble way, "Don't; please don't talk of the dignity of the priesthood at my funeral."

Accordingly, we will not dwell long on that point. Father Anselm fully realized the dignity of his priesthood, but he knew also that at his death his dignity would not matter except in so far as it had a relation to these questions addressed to him by the great Judge of priests and people alike: "Have you used or abused your priestly dignity? Have you been true to the obligations inseparably connected with your priestly privileges?"

Father Anselm has already answered these questions, answered them triumphantly, with Our Lady as his witness; and so let us turn now from the thought of the priest's dignity to consider another truth about the priesthood which was often the subject of Father Anselm's meditation and conversation.

That truth is this: that the priest is obliged to become nothing less than another Christ. The priest must, if he be a true priest, so closely resemble Christ that he becomes a duplicate of Christ, Christ's double. However far short of that ideal any individual priest may fall, the fact remains that the accepted priesthood brings with it the obligation of becoming another Christ. That's the truth taught first by Christ Himself, taught by the Church in all ages, taught in our time by Pope Pius XI, who said, "The priest must approach as closely as possible to the holiness of Christ whose vicar and representative he is."

The priest is not commanded to be an author or an orator or a builder, but he is commanded to be another Christ.

What virtue, above all others, makes the priest another Christ? Is it chastity? No, chastity is indispensable, but it must yield first place to the virtue of charity, love of neighbor. When we think of Christ, we think first of His gentleness, kindness, and meekness. Christ did not say to his

priests, "Stand always on your dignity." He said, "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart." And on another important occasion, He said, "By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you love one another."

How did Father Anselm's life square with all this? He measured up perfectly to that ideal. He was pre-eminently Christlike in all relations with all his fellow men. He was the most gentle of men. His very walk and manner were redolent of gentleness and humility and meekness. I never heard him speak ill of anyone. He was completely forgiving; he bore no grudges. I do not believe he had an enemy. He lived for others. He had a big, warm heart, so burning with the fire of charity that the ice of desolation in other hearts was melted by contact with him.

Like his Master, Father Anselm loved children. Christ said, "Suffer little children to come unto Me," and Father Anselm, in every parish to which he was assigned, knew every child in it by his or her first name. He was ever at home with the children, and they with him. He might have said of himself, with the poet Francis Thompson, "Look for me in the nurseries of heaven." Like Christ, Father Anselm "went about doing good." He was Christlike in his devotion to the sick. All his life, he was remarkable for his kindly ministrations to those who were ill. As a pastor, he did not habitually leave sick calls to his assistants; he went personally to the bedside of sick parishioners, and that not once but often in any prolonged sickness. Who the sick parishioner was did not matter; the poorest of the poor, in time of illness, received from Father Anselm a particularly generous portion of his time and attention and Christlike kindness. In countless sick rooms in this Northern Valley, his presence was like a ray of heavenly light; and I know of no other priest of whom so many people speak so frequently and so affectionately, because of his kindness to their sick or to the survivors in a family into which death had entered.

Father Anselm did a Christlike work, not only in the sick room, but also in the confessional. He loved to hear confessions. In the confessional, he was a model of Christlike patience, sympathy, and helpfulness. Even in his advanced age — in fact, up to the very day before he left for the hospital— he heard confessions here at the Little Flower devotions, as he did every Tuesday of the year. Father Anselm, therefore, will be remembered long and lovingly for his Christlike devotion to the people, not only in the sick room and in the confessional, but also in the Priory parlor where people brought to him in perfect confidence their difficulties and troubles, seeking his sympathy and prayers and ever finding what they sought.

"Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart." In a recent book, there is an attack on priests. It is said in that book: "Priests are chaste, yes, but chastity makes them cold, selfish, proud, arrogant." Father Anselm and priests like him are the answer to that accusation. He was not cold, but warmly affectionate, burning with the charity of Christ towards all. In him, selfishness did not exist, nor pride, nor arrogance. He was a supremely humble man. Every Tuesday afternoon and evening, he knelt back there in a pew with the people, reciting with them the Little Flower novena prayers. He put on no airs' it was not in him to be pompous. Like his Master, he was meek and humble of heart.

Oh, my dear friends, when you read, as you will read increasingly in the future, such attacks on the priesthood, remember Father Anselm. He was the type of priest we are all taught to be: meek and humble of heart. Pray that we may all be like him, and by "all" I mean lay people as well as priests, for the command "Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart" was addressed not only to priests, but to all Catholics, and when priests and people all practice that counsel, then together we can convert the world.

Father Anselm built no buildings, wrote no books, but he did what is more important; he built in the hearts of the people a renowned respect and love for the priesthood. It is priests like Father Anselm who keep alive in the hearts of the people reverence for the priesthood as the most beloved body of men on earth.

Father Anselm was not only a priest but also a Carmelite, a member of the Order of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. He was a professed Carmelite for over half a century. He wore the habit of Our Lady for 56 years. I wish there were time to tell you of our memories of him as an ideal Carmelite. As it is, I can merely sketch the picture with a few broad strokes.

A true religious is remarkable for love of his Order. Father Anselm had no other interests except the interests of Mary and Mary's Order. Whatever tended, anywhere in the world, to the glory of the Order rejoiced his priestly, Carmelite heart. There was no jealousy nor envy in him. His big heart had no room for those small emotions. No matter which one of his brother priests achieved a notable success in parochial or other work, Father Anselm considered that success his own, regarded it as a contribution to the glory of the Order, and unselfishly rejoiced and sincerely congratulated his brother priest.

Two vows distinguish a member of any religious Order: poverty and obedience. Let us look at his observance of poverty. He was utterly unworldly in his desires, in his dress, and in his few possessions. He never had a car. His wants were few and simple. One of the saddest of sights is to see a religious who has given up the world reaching out to take back something of what he has given up. That was never true of Father Anselm. He was a model for the rest of us in the perfection of his practice of poverty.

Let us examine his practice of OBEDIENCE. The vow of obedience makes two principal demands upon a religious. First, that he accept cheerfully the work assigned to him by his Superior. Father Anselm, in the forty-seven years of his priesthood, was very frequently changed from one parish to another, and he accepted each transfer uncomplainingly. Like his Master, he was obedient, obedient even unto death, as is evident in his last journey from the hospital to Niagara Falls. Secondly, obedience requires fidelity to the rule which, among other things, means prompt response to the bell which, at interval each day, summons Carmelites to our private chapel for religious exercises. In his long life, Father Anselm was never late for such exercises, never absent.

That was true to the very end of his life. He suffered much these latter years. Like his Master, he bore a cross; he knew how to suffer. His pain did not keep him from the chapel exercises. He

had suffered one stroke, and later lost one eye, and a less perfect religious would have asked and easily obtained a dispensation excusing him from those daily chapel exercises. But dispensations were not for Father Anselm. To the end, he never missed one chapel exercise; and I can tell you that his example won the open and unstinted admiration of every priest in the priory. His example was to the rest of us both a reproach and an inspiration.

But he was not satisfied merely to go to the chapel for our common exercises. When he thought no one would notice, he would steal into the chapel alone for private devotions. He did not know it, but I saw him there daily for one hour in the morning, one hour in the afternoon, and for nearly an hour in the evening. There he knelt, saying the Rosary or reading from his favorite simple book of devotion, the Little Flower prayerbook, which he always kept close at hand.

What was his preparation for Mass, which he said here in the church? He spent a full thirty minutes in the priory chapel before he came over to the church. That was his remote preparation. Here in the church, in the sacristy, he gave fifteen minutes to his immediate preparation before Mass; and after Mass, nothing ever interfered with his full fifteen minutes' prayer of thanksgiving. Oh, he was indeed a true priest of God, a true religious, a true Carmelite, a Christlike priest in every department of his daily life.

Why have I said so little of his devotion to Mary? For two reasons. First, it goes without saying that his devotion to her was, of course, his distinguishing characteristic as a Carmelite.

Secondly, his childlike love of our Lady was a feature of his life too intimate and personal for public description. We may, however, be permitted to say that his devotion to Mary was something rare, indeed, and beautiful and lovely. Our Lady of the Scapular was as real to him as any earthly mother could be to a son. He never tired talking of her to the people, he never tired of talking to her in private prayer. How fitting it was that he who loved Our Lady so deeply should die on a Saturday, the Saturday after the Octave of the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel— Saturday, the day we devote in a particular way every week to Mary.

What sentiment, chiefly, do we Carmelites feel as we bid farewell this morning to Father Anselm? Is it sorrow? We will miss him, yes, but in the light of his life, in the light of the Christlike life of this priestly brother of Mary, how could grief predominate? How could we fail to rejoice that he has finished his course, gone to his reward, safe now and secure, happy and at peace. Putting our grief aside, then, we rejoice this morning in his happiness which is now complete and permanent and sealed in eternity.

And now, in taking leave of Father Anselm, we say to him: "Father Anselm, we bid you farewell— for a time. We hope, by following your example, to be with you eternally in heaven. Meanwhile, as you bask in heaven in the sunshine of the smile of Our Lord, of Our Lady, of the Little Flower, of all the Saints of Carmel, now your constant companions — and as you rejoice in their companionship — do speak to them of us whom you have left behind. Speak to them of us, priests and people; ask your heavenly companions to help us to recall often those words

that so well summarize your life, and which we hope will henceforth be our rule of life, the words of Our Lord: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart."