

“Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,
but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail;
and once you have turned back, you must

STRENGTHEN YOUR BROTHERS.” (Luke 22, 31-32)



December 14, 2010

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

It struck me one evening several years ago that the words of Jesus to Simon are also his words to me as a bishop and his words to you as my brothers in the Lord. I began to consider sending the priests of the Diocese of Joliet a periodic message of encouragement, and the idea seemed right. I thought of my own experiences as a priest, situations I have faced and face still, interior struggles I find myself engaged in, moments of unexpected grace, lessons learned by the hardest, the joy that arises from loving and serving God’s people, and the intimate link between priesthood and the cross – and as I thought about all these things and more, I sensed the Lord saying to me, “Strengthen your brothers.”

Thus from time to time, as I did in the Diocese of Joliet, I will send you a simple meditation on various aspects of our priestly lives. Most would not be connected to any particular occasion but would be reflections on situations we face, goals we strive to achieve, and graces God extends to us.

The context of the gospel verse on which I base the theme of these reflections is the Last Supper. In the course of the meal, “an argument broke out among them about which of them should be regarded as the greatest.” Jesus identified himself as the servant in their midst. Knowing that shortly Simon would turn away from him in denial, Jesus also knew that he would “turn back,” and having turned back, he was to strengthen his brothers.

To personalize that context, let me say that the reflections I will offer are from one who must “turn back” every day from his own denial, short-sightedness, selfishness, and fear – to be strengthened by the Lord. Perhaps you feel at times as I do – astounded that the Lord would choose me for his extraordinary work. And yet he has chosen us all.

This thought brings me to the painting you see copied at the beginning of this letter, “The Annunciation” by Henry Ossawa Tanner. It is found in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

First a word about Tanner. Born in 1859, the son of a minister, he was reared in an affluent African-American family. He began a career in art in 1876, which took him from his childhood home of Philadelphia to Atlanta, Paris, the Holy Land, and back to the United States. Eventually he was celebrated world-wide, but especially in France, where the French government honored him with several national awards.

I came across Tanner’s “Annunciation” several years ago when I visited a bishop-friend who was ill. There was a framed copy of the painting hanging in his chapel, and it captivated me immediately.

What caught me was the peaceful, attentive expression on the young Mary’s face and the depiction of an ordinary, unadorned room, complete with rumpled sheets and nightclothes. Even the light suggesting the presence of the angel is subtle and peace-filled, as if this apparition, though astounding and surprising, was intended not to frighten but to fulfill. It could have been anyone’s bedroom, and yet it was Mary’s. It could have been any young woman, and yet it was Mary. It was Mary’s moment, the Moment that would define her response to the extraordinary grace she had already received.

On December 20 we will find these words from a sermon of St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the Office of Readings:

You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion...

Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race.

Answer quickly, O Virgin... Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word.

Tanner's painting and Bernard's sermon make me reflect on something that has been rolling around in my heart the past few months: God calls me to cooperate trustingly with his plan – even though the full lines of that plan remain a complete and utter mystery to me, even though he often leaves me shaking my head in wonder. It will not surprise you that I am thinking in particular of my appointment as Archbishop of Seattle! Since September 7, the day I received the call from the Apostolic Nuncio, I have realized in a new way that what God asks is that I allow myself both figuratively and literally to be “moved” by his will, that I learn to float easily on the tides of his providence, that I cast objections and second-guessing aside and say, simply, “Yes.” I hope and pray that the lesson will sink in deeply and thoroughly.

I have also been pondering my response to invitations from God to place myself at his disposal in the seemingly routine events of every day. Situations I have faced thousands of times before – passing a stranger on the street, attending a meeting, returning a phone call, preparing a homily, visiting the hospital – might be the moment for which the person before me has been waiting, the moment God will use to make himself known to him or her.

Am I willing to place myself at God's disposal in those moments as well as the big Moments? Will I trust that they also are part of the unfolding of his plan and that he asks me to consciously cooperate as generously as I can?

God has used the books of Fr. Walter Ciszek, S.J., to pose these important questions to me. *With God in Russia* and *He Leadeth Me* chronicle the 23 years Ciszek spent in Soviet prisons and Siberian labor camps after being arrested and convicted of being a Vatican spy during World War II.

Reading the first book I was constantly amazed at his strength in the face of the distressing conditions in which he lived those 23 years. I found myself asking again and again, “How did he do it?” “Could I do it?” The second book unfolds his simple and persuasive secrets: daily Mass; committed prayer; and the fact that each day, to each person and in each circumstance, one moment at a time, he handed

himself over to God to be used as God wished. He did this because he saw the circumstances of each day as God's will for him.

To predict what God's will is going to be, to rationalize about what his will must be, is at once a work of human folly and yet the subtlest of all temptations. The plain and simple truth is that his will is what he actually wills to send us each day, in the way of circumstances, places, people, and problems. The trick is to learn to see that – not just in theory, or not just occasionally in a flash of insight granted by God's grace, but every day. Each of us has no need to wonder about what God's will must be for us; his will for us is clearly revealed in every situation of every day, if only we could learn to view all things as he sees them and sends them to us (He Leadeth Me, p. 39).

What he wanted was for me to accept these situations as from his hands, to let go of the reins and place myself entirely at his disposal. He was asking of me an act of total trust, allowing for no interference or restless striving on my part, no reservations, no exceptions, no areas where I could set conditions or seem to hesitate. He was asking a complete gift of self, nothing held back. It demanded absolute faith: faith in God's existence, in his providence, in his concern for the minutest detail, in his power to sustain me, and in his love protecting me. It meant losing the last hidden doubt, the ultimate fear that God will not be there to bear you up (p. 77).

Mary's Moment, and her Response, changed everything and became the paradigm for a disciple's every moment, a disciple's every response. In the stuff of today's appointments, the rumpled chaos of our rooms and offices, in the chance meetings that punctuate the day, in our celebration of Mass and our times of prayer, in the irritating and the unexplainable, in the painful and the peaceful, we encounter God's will – our moment, our opportunity to respond. To borrow St. Bernard's image, who might be awaiting our response to God's invitation to cooperate with his plan today?

Sincerely in Christ,

Archbishop Peter Sartain