

The world needs priests with compassion, mercy
By Bishop Milan Lach, SJ

One week ago we suffered a tragedy in Las Vegas. Hearing awful news such as this is likely to make us fearful and sad. Similarly, the death of a close friend or relative can bring about the same sadness.

The Gospel passage of the raising of the widow's son (Lk 7:11-16) offers Christ's response to tragedy. We hear about the tragic death of a young man. It is tragic because, as a young man, his life and bright future ended all too quickly. But tragic also for his mother, for she had but one son and was widowed.

We can imagine that this was an extremely sad procession to the cemetery. It is at this point that Jesus Christ enters the story. He draws near to the procession to see the situation of this poor woman without any hope after the loss of her son.

Jesus does a beautiful thing. He has compassion for her, he feels sorry for her. He desires to be close to these people in their time of need.

How important it is to be close to people in their time of need. It is easier for us to carry our troubles and crosses if we share them with others. It is the same with our joys. When shared with one another, it multiplies.

This is the approach of Jesus, an act of compassion and mercy. It is a beautiful thing to receive mercy from one another, from our spouse, from a teacher, from a priest, from our sons and daughters, from our parents. We need mercy in our life, for we are weak and poor. How difficult it is to live without mercy and forgiveness. It is enough to look at society and see what a world without mercy looks like.

Jesus performs a great act of mercy, raising the widow's son. He is raised during the funeral procession. Can you imagine the fear and horror experienced at the sight of this miracle? The Evangelist Luke shows Jesus here to be the Lord of the living and the dead.

At the end of the narrative we read the exclamation, "God has visited his people" (Lk 7:16). Just as Christ is near to those suffering in the funeral procession, Jesus Christ, our God, is with us! We are never alone. Jesus is also with you in your difficulties, in the deaths in your life, in your losses, in your ambitions, in your friendships.

With the ordination of Father John Russell, we are witnesses to God's act of compassion for his church. It is a gift to the Eparchy of Parma of our entire Byzantine Ruthenian Church in the United States. This is a day of joy and hope for our church because God does not forget us. God remembers us and wants to give us the gift of the priesthood of Father John.

What does it mean to be a priest in today's society, so full of anxiety, fragility, and uncertainty?

Jesus uses priests as his tool. The Gospel story about the raising of the young man shows us who priests are supposed to be for their families, their communities and the world. Priests must have compassion and they must not forget their people. People want to see Jesus in the life of a priest, in his words and work. They want to hear from the priest, "I am with you, I am for you, and I have time for you! Because people are not for priests, we are for them."

Each day we receive is a great gift. This ordination day is a great gift for us here, because we can be sure that God is with us, as long as there are priests among us. Through the Eucharist, confession, and the sacraments we can rest assured that we are close to the mercy of God.

We need priests, the world needs priests. Yet the role of the priest today is not readily accepted. There will be a lot of news on TV, but not the news of this new priest of Parma, because the world does not want to accept priests or the Gospel of peace and of love. But the people in this world desire love, hope, and peace. Who is able to give love, peace and hope? Jesus Christ alone, who makes himself present in the preaching of the Gospel and in the sacraments of the Church.

Jesus Christ is the Lord over death and can lift us from our sadness, if we allow ourselves to live every moment with God. God bless you.

This text is based on Bishop Lach's homily at the ordination of Father John R.P. Russell Oct. 8.

*As published in Horizons, Oct. 22, 2017.
Sign up for the Horizons e-newsletter.*