

Jesus called Bishop James Sullivan to “come, follow me”

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Each Sunday in the Creed, we proclaim our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, who gives eternal life to those who place their faith in him. We proclaim in the same Creed our belief in the resurrection of our body. We too, in sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, will be raised up as Christ himself was raised. St. Paul, as an apostle, spoke this great truth to Timothy in his concern for the salvation of souls. “I bear with everything for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, together with eternal glory” (2 Tm 2:10).

Two thousand years later, that same message is proclaimed in our midst today, and was proclaimed by the life of Bishop Sullivan, a successor to the apostles. He proclaimed to us the great truth that Jesus Christ is Lord -- that in him, and with him, and through him alone will we share in eternal glory. Bishop Sullivan knew deep within his heart that it was Jesus who was to form him and that he had to learn from Jesus. This was so clearly reflected in his episcopal motto, “Lord, teach us.” He knew that it was to Jesus that he must turn, and that it was Jesus who would teach him.

That seed of faith was planted in his heart by God on the day of his baptism and his parents and family nourished that seed so that he could hear the call of Jesus, “Come, follow me” (Lk 18:22). He understood Jesus to be saying, “Follow me, not just as a disciple, but follow me as a priest. Follow me as a successor of the apostles.” He responded to that call and lived that call faithfully.

In the teaching of Jesus in today's Gospel, he speaks of the cost of discipleship, a teaching that can sound harsh to modern ears, but one that is filled with truth, even for us today. “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me” (Jn 12:25-26). Bishop Sullivan took seriously those words. They were not words that he just

heard, but they were words that he listened to in his heart and in his mind. He gave his total life to Christ and to the Church. Even when he was called to leave his home and his family, to leave the diocese that he loved to serve the Church of Fargo, he freely left them knowing that his first love was Jesus Christ and that all love flows from that love, and that, even with the distance, he would still be united with his family. He knew within his heart that our life on earth is only temporary, that our true home is in the New Jerusalem, in heaven with our God. Within that, we see that he was one who followed the Lord, who followed him no matter what the cost. He was a servant who loved the Lord and today he would want us to reflect upon Jesus Christ, to reflect upon the four great loves that existed within his life.

That first love was for Jesus Christ himself. He knew the Lord intimately within his heart and followed the Lord. His greatest desire was to bring Jesus Christ to others. That is the task of every priest, of every bishop -- to bring others to Christ -- and that was an urgent desire for him. He took hold of the new evangelization that was called for by John Paul II. He took that seriously, in the Opening Doors Opening Hearts program, by calling others to a deeper faith in Jesus Christ. He knew that he personally could not give eternal life, that it was only through Christ that eternal life could come about. And so, as a faithful apostle like Paul, he proclaimed that Good News of Jesus Christ and made that bold proclamation. He called others to intimacy with and to knowledge of Jesus. We too are called to that today, as we put confidence in Jesus who gives us eternal life.

His second love was that of the priesthood, the priesthood of Jesus Christ that he shared in, that he received the fullness of as a bishop. He gave of his total self to that call, to that invitation, to "come, follow me" (Lk 18:22). As with the call of the early apostles, he left behind his nets, he left behind his family and friends, to give himself totally, to make himself a total gift to Christ and to the Church. We know that a priest stands in the place of Jesus Christ, that he sacramentally re-presents to the Church today the head and shepherd, who is Jesus Christ. He alone is the head and shepherd of the Church and every priest is to be an icon of Christ, to be one who, like Christ, dies to self and lives for the Father; like that grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies so that it may produce much fruit. The only way that the priesthood will truly be effective is when priests die to themselves so that Christ may live, so that he may be proclaimed. Bishop Sullivan lived that great truth, and loved that truth.

In his teaching, Bishop Sullivan taught clearly from Christ himself, in season and out of season. He taught the dignity of human life, the dignity of the unborn child, the dignity of the human person. That dignity stems from our faith in Jesus Christ, that we are created by and are truly images of God, created in his image and likeness. As a faithful priest, he taught the hard teachings and did not back

away from them. He presented them clearly and helped others to come to know those teachings more fully. He lived the priesthood and abandoned himself to Christ and to the Church so that wherever Christ took him and wherever the Church called him, he would go to serve the call of every priest, to serve Christ.

That brings us to the third love and that is the Eucharist. Bishop Sullivan was one who had a deep desire for, a deep love for, and a deep faith in the Eucharist. Our Lord reminds us, in John 6, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:56). “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (Jn 6:53-54). What an awesome and wondrous promise Jesus gives to us in the Eucharist. We are called to place our faith in that promise, to believe that, every time we receive his body and blood, his soul and divinity, he truly abides in us and that he gives to us the gift of eternal life. The early Church Fathers proclaim that faith so clearly. Paul himself proclaimed that faith and that belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

My dearest brothers and sisters, Bishop Sullivan would want nothing else but for you to have a deep love for the Eucharist, for you to know and to believe in your heart that Jesus is truly present, that he truly abides in you. He, too, like the apostle Peter, proclaimed that great truth and promise of eternal life that is given in the Eucharist. In that difficult teaching that we are told about, Jesus turns to the twelve and asks them “Will you also go away?” (Jn 6:67). The response of Peter is, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69). It is eternal life that Jesus so desires to give us. It is his desire that we know that life and walk in that life.

One could see his deep devotion for the Eucharist when he began the Walk for Life each year. As Bishop Sullivan processed with the Eucharist through the streets of Fargo to the abortion mill, to proclaim the dignity of human life, to pray for the conversion of the hearts and minds of the people of our society and the world, he desired nothing more than for them to recognize Christ in the Eucharist and to recognize the dignity that Christ himself bestows upon us and upon every human being, including the unborn.

His fourth great love was for the Blessed Mother. He knew Mary -- knew her well and loved her well. He took seriously the words of Jesus from the cross, “Behold, your Mother” (Jn 19:27). These words were not addressed just to John, but to every disciple, “Behold, your Mother.” My dearest brothers

and sisters, Bishop Sullivan knew well that every disciple knows the greatness of Mary, that she is truly blessed.

When one meditates upon the title that God himself, through the mouth of the angel, bestowed upon her, "Hail, full of grace" (Lk 1:28)...she **is** full of grace, for the Word made flesh rested in her womb and grew within her womb, just as each and every one of us grew in the wombs of our own mothers. Yes, her maternity is a great mystery and a miracle. Her maternity is one that is full of grace, of the glory of God, and she will lead every disciple who turns to her to that great truth of Jesus Christ. She points to him as she bows her head and says, "May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Bishop Sullivan would want nothing more than for each of us to know Mary as our mother, to love her as he loved her, and as he loved his own mother.

These four loves of Bishop Sullivan we celebrate today. They are all rooted in the great mystery of Jesus Christ. We celebrate the promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ and proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah in that first reading from the book of Isaiah. The Lord promised to us, "The web that is woven over all nations; he will destroy death forever" (Isa 25:7-8). My sisters and brothers, we proclaim today in this funeral liturgy that great truth, that even though our brother, James, lies in death; his life is changed, not ended. He lives with God forever. He has entered into that eternal life fully promised by our God. And though there is sadness within our hearts, we know that it is the Lord God who will wipe away the tears from all faces. In his great love and in his compassion for us, he wipes away those tears with gentleness, with love. And we too can cry out with joy and with confidence today, with deep love for Jesus Christ, "Behold our God, to whom we looked to save us! This is the Lord for whom we looked; let us rejoice and be glad that he has saved us!" (Isa 25:9).

Bishop Sullivan knew the Lord. His life exemplified that knowledge. His deepest desire for us who gather for his funeral today is that we too will know and love Jesus Christ and follow him to the fulfillment of that promise given to us by our Lord, that we will share in eternal life and that we will live forever in the heart of the Father.