

HOMILY FOR THE VIGIL OF ARCHBISHOP GEORGE NIEDERAUER

MISSION DOLORES BASILICA, MAY 11, 2017

Most Reverend Robert McElroy

The encounter of the disciples with the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus is one of the most penetrating passages in the scriptures, pointing emphatically to the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the foundation for our discipleship, our life of pilgrimage on this earth, and of our destiny with the Lord. It is also a passage which is singularly appropriate for our prayer and reflection tonight. For on the Sunday before his death, Archbishop Niederauer celebrated his jubilee mass at Nazareth House, and the reading of the day was the journey to Emmaus. Thus in a very real sense the words we have just heard were for Archbishop Niederauer the last Gospel of his earthly journey.

But the journey to Emmaus is a fitting centerpiece for our prayer for Archbishop Niederauer on an even deeper level tonight because it encapsulates so profoundly the central rhythms of the life and death of the great man of faith and service whom we are entrusting to our God. When Archbishop Niederauer wrote a book summarizing his vision of Catholic spirituality, he gave it the subtitle "imagining your life with God." The whole of George Niederauer's life on this earth, the whole of his priestly service to the Church and the whole of the witness to the resurrection which he provided for us during his last months of life can best be seen as an embodiment of that theme of imagining our life with God. The Gospel of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, with its four distinct moments of encounter with the Lord Jesus, delineates the ways in which Archbishop George Niederauer imagined and entered into life with God and brought others with him.

The first of these moments of encounter lies in the pilgrimage of two disciples of the Lord, deep in conversation about the events of the passion and death of Jesus, pondering their future and wondering where God was calling them to journey. The appearance of Jesus in their midst, his conversation and call to them, and the power of his words elicit their plea, "stay with us." And in that moment the disciples forge their life-long commitment to the Lord Jesus as servants and friends.

More than sixty years ago the Lord Jesus came to two young disciples, raised by their families in faith, studying at Saint Anthony High School in Long Beach. As they discerned their vocation in faith and in priesthood, both of them beseeched the Lord, "stay with us," and in one of the marvelous grace notes of their lives, George Niederauer and William Levada embarked upon paths of discipleship in service to the church which were to crisscross over a lifetime of shared friendship, shared mission and shared gratitude to God. It was in this early encounter with Christ at Saint Anthony's, then Stanford and Saint John's Seminary, that Archbishop Niederauer found, as his favorite author Flannery O'Connor so eloquently described, "the hidden love that makes a man give up his life to the service of God's people." And in that hidden love George Niederauer began to understand that his mission in this world was to construct his priesthood imagining life with God and listening carefully to the voice of God at every moment.

The second movement in the encounter of Emmaus is the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples about the nature and meaning of God's action in their lives and in the world. Jesus interpreted the scriptures for the young disciples journeying to Emmaus and opened their eyes with wisdom. He was teacher and guide. For more than thirty years George was teacher and guide to two generations of priests and seminarians in Southern California. He taught them to imagine their lives suffused with God, and taught them also that our God is filled with kindness and mercy, challenge and comfort, mystery and joy. The great literature and beautiful movies which he so treasured were not only a source of wisdom and perspective about the human condition and discipleship in Christ. They were also a testimony to the reality that God's grace is intertwined with the whole of the created order and with the complex beauty of the human soul. One of the most powerful and illuminating ways in which I came to know George Niederauer over the past decade was in encountering his former students who spoke to me about the profound impact which he had made upon their lives. In the depth of his acuity about the human condition, his intense love for God, his treatment of every person he encountered as a treasure more precious than silver, and in his grace-filled humor George Niederauer taught Catholic faith in all of its fullness.

The third great moment of encounter in the Gospel account of the road to Emmaus is the celebration of the Eucharist. Jesus breaks the bread and gives it to the disciples, and in that moment the disciples recognize that the Lord is truly in their midst. It is in that moment that the disciples understand that they are tied to all believers by the grace of God which forms and demands unity within the life of the Church. As bishop, George Niederauer forged unity and love in the Eucharistic communities of Salt Lake City and San Francisco. His great gift to his priests was to constantly raise their eyes to the Lord so that they might be ever more effective

sources of faith and grace for their people. Archbishop Niederauer truly embraced the image of the church as the pilgrim people of God, struggling in this world to live by the Gospel in often excruciatingly difficult situations, and marching together unsure at times where God was leading, but committed nonetheless to ennobling our world while acknowledging our failings. His outreach to the ecumenical and interfaith communities forged ties of friendship, faith and love. And his testimony to Catholic social teaching in the modern world bore both the welts of opposition and the ferment of grace which are inevitable in a world which wants the church to be hard where she is tender and tender where she is hard.

In summarizing the central insight which drew him to the literature of Flannery O'Connor, Archbishop Niederauer wrote: "How wonderfully different O'Connor was from us. She thought that the name of Jesus, the Reality of Jesus, belonged everywhere, indeed was everywhere." Archbishop Niederauer, too, believed that the reality of Jesus belonged everywhere and indeed is everywhere. And all of us in the local churches of Utah and San Francisco are much the richer for that belief.

The final moment of encounter between the disciples on the road to Emmaus and the risen Lord is the culmination of the Gospel: "Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight." The story of Emmaus is a resurrection story. It points primarily to our future union with God rather than our life on this earth. And in that reality we find the fulcrum for our prayer and remembrance tonight, our celebration of Archbishop Niederauer's life on this earth and much more profoundly his new life in heaven.

In these last months the archbishop testified in his suffering and in his peacefulness, his anguish and his grace, to the depth of his faith in Jesus Christ and his welcome embrace of the Lord who disappeared from this earth and yet has never left us. It is the risen Lord that a young George Niederauer and Bill Levada found in their youth; it is the risen Lord whom Father Niederauer proclaimed to his students at Saint John's; it is the risen Lord whose presence Archbishop Niederauer pointed to in the local churches of Salt Lake and San Francisco. And it is the risen Lord whom George Niederauer knows face to face.

The archbishop spent the whole of his life committed to the project of imagining his life with God, and leading others to that same mission. Now he no longer imagines. He knows.