

Homily of Fr. Russell Governale, OFM Conv.

(Given during the Mass of Thanksgiving on February 15, 2015,
the day following the Ordination to the Priesthood of Fr. Gabriel Scasino, OFM Conv.)
(Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46) (1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1) (Mark 1: 40-45)

Fr. James (McCurry), our Minister Provincial; Fr. John (Koziol), the Guardian and the Pastor of this fraternity; Brothers; family and friends of Fr. Gabriel; good people of St. Philip Benizi Parish; and you, Fr. Gabriel – May God grant you peace!

It was in the year 2010 that I had the privilege to be asked to return to the ministry of Formation. That year, I was sent to Maryland to a little town called Forestville, and it was there that I had the privilege of being one of Gabriel's Directors of Formation. Fr. Brad and I were together.

It was during this time of re-entry into our community - it was the period, toward the end of that year where he began a novitiate experience. And there was one time that we were together there, in Forestville, where we had a certain "verbal volley". We've talked about this many times. One day, at the dinner table, Gabriel was waxing eloquently about some theological or spiritual topic. And it was a debate between some who may have thought like those who belong on the right with those who were thinking more like those who were on the left, and he kept going on and on and on regarding this topic. Now, that house in Forestville was very small and you could hear everything. If someone at the end of the corridor sneezed, the one at the end would say, "God bless you!" So, I overheard this conversation at the table and our eyes met, and I just asked a very simple question. I said, "Gabriel, does it really matter?" and he got very quiet, and the conversation shifted.

The next day at lunch, I was waxing very eloquently about another topic and, as I finished, Gabriel looked at me and asked, "Russell, does it really matter?" And my response was, "Yes, this matters. Not everything matters, but this does matter." What it showed me was how Gabriel was able to be reflective upon an experience and how he was able to consider another point of view. And many times since that day in 2010, we've "chatted" about that experience.

Yesterday, what happened in this church was something that really matters. A Franciscan Friar, you Gabriel, was given the gift of a share in the Priesthood of Jesus Christ. You were changed forever –

to act in the person of Christ. And this is something that matters very much. You received the Ordination, the mandatum, of Jesus Christ for us, His people, so that when you do what you do, you allow Jesus to act through you. For when you baptize, absolve, celebrate Eucharist, anoint, witness marriages, Christ is baptizing, and forgiving, and becoming really present, healing and witnessing union, through and in Him. Something that really matters to all of us...that really matters to the Church universal. Christ chose you to be His instrument of Salvation.

The readings today give us a glimpse into how priests are to be and act in the person of Christ. Both the first reading and the Gospel present a person with leprosy. This disease, although is not eradicated from the world today, is much less present than it was in the time of the Old Testament, or the time of Jesus, or even the time of our Founder, Francis of Assisi. Today, we call it by a different name – we call it Hansen's Disease.

The Lord told Moses and Aaron, his brother, the priest, what was to be done with a person with leprosy. These sores or scabs that they had were known to be contagious. And we know that back then, as in the time of Jesus, the time of Francis, and even today, if the hygiene is not well kept, the disease will spread. These rules, about how to treat a person with these sores or

scabs were given to Moses and Aaron by the Lord to protect God's people...to keep the people of Israel intact and healthy, as the people of God.

But we know that good-intentioned laws can sometimes go awry. By the time of Jesus, the leper was an outcast; the leper was considered a sinner. The lepers, following the law that we heard in the First Reading, needed to proclaim that they were unclean. They needed to stand at a distance. They needed to keep away...but Jesus shows us what to do.

Jesus, a Jew, knowing the law, would go out and touch this man. Knowing that touching a leper had consequences – it would make Him virtually unclean. But what was most important to Jesus, was that Jesus touched the man who sought to be made clean. Jesus, feeling pity, feeling compassion, goes beyond the written law to the Law of Love, and He heals the leper. He then tells the man, who is healed, to go and show himself to the priests.

Fr. Gabriel, during your Priesthood, many people are going to show themselves to you. Some are going to show you how they have been healed; others are going to show you their sores; and some are going to show you their wounds.

Your call now, as a priest of Jesus Christ, as someone who stands “in the person of Christ” is to reach out and touch the people who come to you, wishing to be made clean. Your mission, as is the mission of every man who is ordained a priest—is to touch God's people gently; touch people as Jesus did; touch with compassion, with the intention of healing; and touch with a desire to help others come to know God in a deep and interior way.

Jesus is our example, but we also have a spiritual father, St. Francis, who also knew how to do what Jesus did; how to follow Jesus and continue His mission. We know that St. Francis' conversion began when he got off his “high horse” and met the leper and embraced him. We know that for Francis, even the sight of lepers nauseated him. Yet when he embraced the leper, that which seemed bitter turned into sweetness of soul and body.

Friar Thomas of Celano, who was the biographer of St. Francis, stated that once Francis did this, as he wrote in Italian, said, “He began to stop adoring himself...”, and then he left the world—he left his self-centered world to be with those who were in most need of help, assistance and the message of the Gospel.

You, Fr. Gabriel, as a Franciscan Friar and as a priest, should never even mount a “high horse”. But we know that as sinful men, we sometimes are on high horses—our pride, our egos, our desires to do things “our way”. Let St. Francis be your example of how to follow Jesus and be Jesus' priest. Stay off the high horse and touch the lepers. It will be for their good and for yours – for what may be nauseating or bitter for you will change into sweetness of body and spirit for you.

St. Paul today tells us that whatever you do, do for the glory of God. Whatever you do, in word and sacrament, in jest or in seriousness, do it for the glory of God for you are now called to stand in His person.

After Jesus performed this miracle, we're told that he went off to deserted places. It will be very important for you, Gabriel, to go off to a deserted place each and every day – to be in a quiet place with God in prayer and meditation and to drink from the wellspring of the depth of the gift of grace that you have received. Stay close to the Eucharist—adore Jesus there, and you will become more and more like Him.

So, does it really matter?

Yes, Friar Gabriel, you matter to us, your family and friends.

Does it really matter?

Yes, Friar Gabriel, you matter to us, your Franciscan Brothers.

Does-it-really-matter?

Yes, Friar Gabriel, you matter to the Church, as its minister.

...and does it really matter?

Yes, you, Friar Gabriel, and all that you do, matters—because you do it in “persona Christi”.

So today, brothers and sisters, as Fr. Gabriel gives his first blessings, let him touch you with the touch of Jesus. Let the blessing of God, through His Father, Son and Spirit, minister to you and to me; let the blessing by this new friar-priest also be for you a source of sweetness in body and spirit.