

**Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle A • February 7, 1999**

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 58:7-10

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Matthew 5:13-16

We go through manners into mystery.

Lent is coming! ...In just a few weeks time Ash Wednesday will be here and we will begin the most glorious season of the church year culminating of course in the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday. My purpose is two-fold today; to invite everyone to participate in the Rites of Christian Initiation and Holy Saturday Vigil and to explain some of the principles governing our prayer and church decorations as we prepare for Lent and Easter.

The Lord has blessed us with sixteen folks to be received into the Church this year – two to be baptized. At five of the six weekends of Lent we will be celebrating various rituals marking the journey of these Elect to the table and to the waters of rebirth. You will notice that in celebrating these various rituals – that of election and continuing conversion and scrutinies...our Elect and Candidates for full communion are not located up in the front here, but rather are situated throughout the assembly. This is not an accident. This is because you and I together – the gathered people – are the ministers of welcome and blessing. Hence those to be welcomed and blessed are in the midst of all of us who do these good deeds. Now as I say this keep in

mind that our church building, as most churches built before the Second Vatican Council, does not encourage this kind of prayer...our building is built in such a way that all that is holy and all that is done sacramentally appears to take place up here in the front. That's the way we prayed back in the 50's and 60's when our church was built. In those days the priest did it all. Now we all do it all together. The prayer has changed, and because the prayer has changed, the way we use our building changes as well – hence the reason for renovation of spaces...it's not just a bright idea of a few cronies in a back room in Rome – it's the prayer we're called to pray that shapes our space and tells us where to stand and where to seat those we welcome into the Catholic Faith. So at whatever Mass we attend during Lent, expect to see folks we're welcoming, not up here, but up and down the middle aisle.

These prayers we pray – especially during Lent and the Easter Vigil – these prayers also influence how we decorate for our various seasons. Since we together are the ministers of welcome and blessing, we have to have access always to the major symbols that we use in our worship. The most major symbol of course is one another – hence the reason for seating in new or renovated churches which enables us to see one another – but we must also have access always to the altar (the table) the ambo (the table of the Word), the chair and the baptismal font. These are the tools of our trade of welcoming and blessing. The altar, ambo, font

and chair don't belong just to the priest any more even though the building tells us they belong just to him. They aren't just his tools – they are ours too. So when we come to decorate for the various seasons, we cannot place things in front of the altar, the ambo or the chair or the baptismal font – because we the ministers of welcome and blessing have to get to them, have access to them – both physically and visually. You may have noticed at Christmas how we decorated in such a way that we always had access to these symbols. It meant that some Christmas decorations were not as numerous, but they did not pose an obstacle to our prayer and access. Hence the challenge to our committee who decorate – how to celebrate the colors of the season and yet still allow access for the prayer in a building not designed for the new way of praying to which we are called. During the Lenten season we shall place next to our baptismal font the pool we used last year, suitable for immersion – it will be empty until the Vigil – its emptiness will remind us that we all pass through death into life and of the coming feast of Easter when it will be filled with the life-giving water made holy by those who are baptized.

So important is the Easter Vigil in our prayer that folks will be using this entire space – all about the altar and sanctuary area to gather as we do baptisms and renewal of our baptismal promises...and all of us the next day on Easter Sunday will be invited to come to the water to refresh ourselves in it. So it is that however we decorate, we are to have access to the symbols that our prayer requires.

We hope to offer babysitting at the Vigil so folks with young children can still come. We hope to be able to make use of more than one building, celebrating the liturgy of the Word in one place and the rites of Baptism and welcome and the Eucharist here. I know

it's difficult for some, especially the elderly, to be out in the night and the moving around, hence the mass schedule for Easter Sunday morning – if you can, come to share the experience.

The question might well be asked, “What keeps other parishes from doing these rituals and following these principles?” And the best answer I can offer is it depends on two things: how that parish prays the Easter vigil and the rituals of initiation and the amount of training the priest and parish staff have received to lead that prayer. The plain truth is we're still being trained in all this and it will take time.

About the best description I've ever heard of what we're about in our ritual is from a writer, Flannery O'Connor, who described her craft as a writer as going through manners into mystery. “What I mean by this,” she said, “is that in my writing, I actually describe the mystery of God - but only indirectly. Instead I write about the tilt of a man's head; the color of a woman's dress, the way sunlight comes through a window...and by selecting certain of these details, these manners, I communicate the mystery of God.” Folks that's what we're about in all our prayer - passing through manners into mystery - and it comes down to such details as where a flower is placed, or where a Candidate for full communion is seated. Indeed, all our lives we pass through manners into mystery - I choose to marry one particular person rather than another; to work at this job in lieu of that; to live here instead of there – and through all these details we discover the face of God. I love to talk about these things, so don't hesitate to see me after mass or any time.

**We pass through
manners into mystery.**