

## “All In”

11-11-18 : 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Fr. Brian gave you most of the important details of what has happened since this past June and where things are at now. I know that people may have more questions and if anyone wants to talk individually, I'd be happy to do so. While I am grateful to have been cleared of the false accusations against me, I know I am not completely without blame in all this. Some people have said that perhaps I should have made an announcement when I first arrived at St. Michael's last year, that there had been this incident at my previous parishes. In hindsight that looks like it would have been a good idea. Although the Archbishop and Fr. Brian will say that it is their fault for not forcing the issue, it was really my reluctance that led to the decision not to say anything. I hope you can accept that there was never the intention to “hide” the truth. As you can imagine, this whole situation is deeply personal. As I had only just arrived, it's not easy to share something so intimate. But now I'm happy to share some things, not so much about what happened, but what I've learned.

This week will mark eleven years since I was ordained a deacon. Many people are not aware that a priest actually makes his promise of celibacy at the time you are ordained a deacon, not at priesthood ordination. The archbishop asks,

“In the presence of God and his Church, are you resolved, as a sign of your interior dedication to Christ, to remain celibate for the sake of the kingdom and in lifelong service to God and mankind?”

The desire to be married was very strong in me and it took a rather long journey to get to ordination day. But when the day finally arrived, I was in love with God and was happy to give myself totally to him in the gift of celibacy. I had never doubted that I made the right choice. I would normally tell people that, even if Pope Francis allowed priests to get married tomorrow, I wouldn't. I was confident and didn't really think anything could shake that.

As you can imagine, this whole incident has been very humbling for me, but one of the most important things I learned was that I was actually too confident. I stopped being careful about guarding my heart, thinking that I was “past that,” that nothing would ever shake my commitment to priesthood. Then I met a special new friend. While my intentions were innocent enough, the end result was that we got way too close emotionally. I was still committed to priesthood and celibacy but, all of the sudden, the idea of celibacy and giving up marriage was no longer just an idea. It's one thing to say “no” on your ordination day to the future possibility of being married. It's quite a different experience reaffirming that “no” when there's a wonderful person you care so much about standing right in front of you.

Many people have told me, and perhaps you're thinking it now, “Father, this just shows that you're human.” If you had any doubt that priests are human, well, I'm happy to dispel this myth. I and all priests are called to an incredible life, pointed toward the supernatural, but we don't stop being real men. I am ultimately a miserable sinner just like everyone else, in need of God's mercy and saving grace. We're all in this together. To paraphrase St. Augustine... *for you* I am a priest, but *with you* I am a Christian.

Perhaps it's ultimately not too hard to imagine that a priest has human qualities just like everyone else. But I don't think people imagine their priests struggling spiritually. At least when it comes to prayer and God, people somehow expect their priest to be the expert. People turn to us for answers in the most challenging moments of life, almost expecting that we have a simple answer all ready to go for the most

perplexing of life's problems. "Why did God allow my child to get so sick? Why did God take my spouse from me? Why do bad things happen to good people?" The best I can do at these times is just be with people and hope they know that I care and understand a little of their pain.

People have told me that everything I have gone through these past years will serve to make me a better priest. Sometimes I wonder... but if it's true, I think it must be in that people will be able to see in me someone who understands their problems because I too have struggled. One of the important things I've learned is that we should not try to struggle alone. I've come to understand the need to get professional help for myself and for others. I learned about co-dependency and how sometimes even a good desire to help someone can be a way we seek to fulfill our own needs. And I've learned a lot about grief and loss. There were so many losses all at once. I began to feel that God had abandoned me. I began second guessing everything I had done. I thought I had been doing what God wanted. What seemed so good, had now turned into a complete disaster.

This is when I knew I really needed help. I tried different counselors here at home and, as Fr. Brian mentioned, I even went away for several months to an intensive counseling program. I made a 30-day silent retreat. I just wanted to find healing and peace. Coming to St. Michael's last January I felt like I was finally starting to be able to move forward, but then this past June the Facebook accusation came out and I sunk to a new low and was on the point of despair. Sometimes the mental pain gets so great that you would do anything just to stop the pain. Some of you have been there. I can truly empathize.

When preparing young couples for marriage, I always tell them, there will come a time in your marriage when you are at the end of your rope and you are ready to leave. You don't feel in love anymore. You protest, "This is not what I signed up for." There will come a day when everything else is gone and the absolute last and only thing keeping you in your marriage is the knowledge that you made solemn promises to God "until death do you part." These last months, my own words seemed now to be turned around and aimed at me. I was really considering what I would do if I were not a priest, and it made me very sad, because I didn't make a backup plan when I became a priest. This is my marriage, my lifetime commitment.

In a beautiful gift of Providence, a song came on the radio. I often listen to Christian music in my car and a song began playing called, "All in" by Matthew West. It was about going "all in" for Jesus and holding nothing back. I knew at that moment that I had a choice. I could leave... lots of priests do it. People would understand. But there was a choice; what if instead of leaving, I make a total recommitment? I felt like I had nothing left to give. I didn't even feel like I loved God anymore. Yet this song had me thinking that, instead of leaving, I could recommit myself to the promises I made to God in happier times. This is what we see in our readings today. Are you down to your last bit of flour? Give it to God; go make a cake. Are you down to your last two coins? Give them to God. Trust completely. We sometimes ask how much we ought to give to God. Give it all. It's all his. That's what our readings teach us today and that's what I decided to do.

This is really when things finally started to get better. I was referred to a good Catholic doctor who assured me that there was no way that I could handle all this trauma on my own. There were some kind of "receptors" in my brain that were overloaded and beyond my control. He referred me to a knowledgeable and compassionate Catholic psychiatrist who worked to find the right medication to help me. I've never been depressed in my life, so it was very humbling to admit I needed this help. Then I finally found the right counselor to help me. She is a wonderful Catholic who has been so helpful. I have been especially

grateful for the love and support so many friends and parishioners but, most especially, my family. My mom was very wise in all this. At one point when I was distressed over all the suffering our family was going through because of me she simply said, "We have received a lot of praise and attention just because our son is a priest. You have to take the suffering too. It's just part of it." Like Mary, mothers suffer a lot when their children suffer. But I also know that no suffering is wasted. It may take until heaven to figure out exactly how God works all this for good, but this is our great hope.

I consider it more than a bit providential that my return to public ministry is taking place on the 243<sup>rd</sup> birthday of the United States Marine Corp and on Veteran's Day weekend. My dad is an Army Veteran and my best friend is a retired Marine officer. Although God did not give me the physical attributes of a Marine, my friend honors me by calling me a "spiritual Marine." I know I have not been a very good Marine lately. I've lost battles I shouldn't have been in and made countless tactical mistakes. But I also know that I'm not done fighting. You never really lose until you quit, and I don't intend to quit. We are all in a battle that the enemy will ultimately lose and we will win if we just don't give up. I resolve today that I'm committed to doing my best to keep fighting, for my soul and yours. I can't promise you that I'll be the perfect priest or never fail again. But I promise you this, the fight is worth it, and I am ALL IN.