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**James J. Bacik**

I want to thank Jim Kneese’s family for inviting me to concelebrate this funeral Mass for my lifelong friend. Jim and I grew up together as across the street neighbors, were classmates at St. Catherine’s grade school and Toledo Central Catholic high school, played sports together, and stayed in touch over the years, periodically competing on the golf course and sharing in joyful life events. Just days before his death, Jim left a phone message for me, saying he did not have many days left and wanted to express gratitude for our long-standing friendship.

Jim grew up in a strong Catholic family that faithfully attended the Latin Mass at St. Catherine’s Church every Sunday. His mother was a member of the Altar and Rosary Society that was in charge of cleaning the Church and making it look beautiful for special occasions. His father participated with Jim in the quarterly father and son communion breakfasts. When he was in the fifth grade, Jim became a Mass server, saying the memorized Latin responses and assisting the priest in the precise ritual movements. Throughout his twelve years of grade and high school education, Jim was taught almost exclusively by priests and nuns who encouraged him, mostly by example, to live his Catholic faith. After high school, Jim, along with some 15 of his male classmates (his coed graduating class was over 450), went off to various seminaries to see if they had a vocation to the priesthood.

This was not surprising since the church of Jim’s youth was highly clericalized. There was a sharp distinction between the laity and the clergy, who held a privileged position and were called, along with nuns, to what was considered an exalted vocation, a life of commitment and holiness that attracted idealistic young men like Jim. At that time, Catholic lay persons were treated as second class citizens, with a very limited role in the life of the church and with the obligation to avoid mortal sins that could lead to damnation. The priests did all the ministerial work: running the parish; doing all the functions at Mass, including the scripture readings, preaching the sermons, often unrelated to the readings, and distributing communion; instructing converts, usually one at a time; visiting the sick and administering extreme unction as part of the last rites for the dying. It was a highly clericalized church supported by faithful lay persons who attended Mass regularly and showed great respect for the priests, especially for providing them with the grace of the sacraments. It was commonly said that the role of the Catholic laity in that era was to “pray, pay and obey,” but it was a role most Catholics readily accepted as normal, while generously supporting their priests and overlooking their limitations and failures.

After less than two years in the seminary, Jim decided God was not calling him to the ordained priesthood, and he left to attend the University of Detroit where he earned a degree in mechanical engineering and met Mary Ann Bertemes, and eventually married her, in what one of Jim’s classmates, who knew what a marvelous person Mary Ann was, properly called “the best decision of his life!”

Earlier in the year 1959, during which Jim and Mary Ann shared their marriage vows at Mass in Cleveland, Pope John XXIII surprised most everyone by announcing he was calling the ecumenical council which came to be known as the Second Vatican Council. The pope wanted to renew the Church, to foster a new Pentecost, to open the window and breathe fresh air, to enter into dialogue with the modern world and to find new ways of expressing the traditional faith. At Vatican II, some 2,400 bishops from around the world met in annual sessions from 1962 to 1965 and produced 16 documents. The Council had positive things to say about the role of the laity in the Church. By virtue of baptism, all God’s sons and daughters are called to holiness and to participate in the mission of Christ who preached the good news to the poor, liberated the captives, healed the sick, exorcized demons, and definitively established the kingdom of God in the world. All Christians have the vocation to share in the universal priesthood of Christ, to live their baptismal vows in their everyday lives. In the Church there are no second-class citizens. All the baptized are equal members. All have a vocation, a calling from God to build up the Body of Christ and spread God’s reign in the world. All are called to holiness by following their unique path in life.

The significant changes in the liturgy opened up new roles for the laity: participating actively and intelligently in the vernacular liturgy they could understand; proclaiming the scripture readings; distributing communion and, by extension, taking communion to the homebound.

Fast forward in Jim’s life story to the year 2000. Jim is living in Frisco, Texas, where he attends the small parish of St. Francis of Assisi Church. The pastor of the parish asks Jim and his friend Charlie Donner to help build up the parish. They worked long and hard to establish an infrastructure that included a parish council and a finance council. They set up a plan for raising money and for building a church. Jim got very involved in the life of the parish, participating in Mass as a lector and eucharistic minister. He and Mary Ann regularly took communion to the housebound, taking time to visit and offer support. He served several terms on the parish council and the parish finance council. He shared in the RCIA program, sponsoring a woman he had invited to consider becoming Catholic. His warm, engaging personality served well in his work to get major donors to support the parish fundraising efforts. Today it is fitting that we celebrate Jim’s life in this large beautiful church, where around 7,000 people participate in the weekend liturgies and hundreds of ministerial groups enhance the life of the parish.

What amazing improvements Vatican II has made in the life of the Church: greater active and intelligent participation by those attending Mass; more personal attention to those who cannot get to church; wiser decisions about parish renewal; more practical approaches to fundraising; improved religious education programs; better marriage preparation; better formation for potential converts, and so much more. Jim’s life story is a marvelous witness to the practical significance of the Council’s renewed emphasis on the role of the laity in the Church.

Jim Kneese exercised his baptismal priesthood in many other ways as well. He used his considerable interpersonal skills to make effective deals for his employer, Dow Chemical. He served on the board of Big Brothers for over a decade and personally enabled some young boys to get a good start in life.

It was within the family setting that Jim made his most important and lasting contributions to spreading God’s reign of love and care. He and Mary Ann together made a happy, mutually enriching Christian marriage partnership. They raised five wonderful children who love and respect their parents and continue to practice the Catholic faith they received from them. Rick told me that his own goal in life is to be like his father, a loving husband and an understanding father. Jim’s children all noted the way their father always put others first before himself. One daughter recalled that when her Dad was very sick in the hospital, she saw he was praying the rosary and asked him if he was asking God for help and he said no, he was praying for the sick people in the hospital. The children were all so impressed with the self-sacrificing love their parents consistently manifested and especially the way their Dad wore himself out caring for their very sick mother over the last difficult years. I know something of the love Jim had for his own grandchildren since he periodically informed me in detail of their accomplishments. One of his grandsons told me that his grandfather was his greatest mentor, who taught him to keep his priorities straight – faith, family and care for others. So many people told me positive things about Jim. He was a true gentleman, a faithful friend, an honest businessman, an involved parishioner, and a loving family man. I always admired his perseverance, his constant effort to accomplish his goals and to be faithful in meeting his responsibilities, his absolute fidelity to his Catholic faith, his unquestioned dedication to his family. I knew him well enough to be aware of his faults and limitations, but I never doubted his steadfast commitment to live his Catholic faith as husband, father, grandfather, mentor, parishioner, colleague and friend.

It is good, fitting and proper that we celebrate Jim’s life at this funeral Mass, the Eucharistic liturgy which is so central in our Catholic tradition and in Jim’s spirituality. With Job in the first reading (19:23-27), we proclaim that “our Vindicator lives,” the merciful judge who forgives our sins. With Paul in the reading from Romans (8:31-39), we affirm that nothing, not anguish or distress, or worldly troubles or even death itself can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Drawing on the Gospel from Matthew (25:31-41) that I read, I am imagining Jim meeting his Lord and judge who says: “Jim, remember when you helped out a distressed colleague at work, you did that for me; when you spent extra time with a teenage boy battling a drug problem, you did that for me; when you took time to listen to your daughter who needed a receptive ear, you did that for me; when you expended all your energy to be present for your wife in her illness, you did that for me. Now my faithful disciple, James Kneese, take possession of the eternal kingdom where there are no more tears, where the deepest longings of your heart are totally fulfilled, where you join your deceased loved ones in the vast Communion of Saints, and where you live forever with God.“