

Put God First - and feel the Love!

By Bishop Victor Galeone

This month marks the 40 th anniversary of the death of Archbishop Joseph Hurley, the sixth bishop of our diocese. What a debt of gratitude we owe him! During his first 18 years as bishop, the Diocese of Saint Augustine comprised the entire state of Florida, excluding the panhandle. The Church in Florida would never have achieved its present status, both in numbers as well as influence, had it not been for his foresight in inviting the Irish missionaries to our shores and purchasing invaluable parcels of land for eventual parish development.

In order to meet the mortgage payments, these land purchases warranted an exceptionally high assessment tax - sometimes up to 50 % of the parish offertory income! The pastors would complain, "But, Your Grace, we barely have enough to pay the electric bill, and here we are buying mosquito-infested marshes!" Yet on those so-called mosquito-infested marshes, there now stand many of the finest parishes in the state. Archbishop Hurley, thank you!

Against this backdrop of the sacrifices made by our forebears, I would like to address the theme of the Annual Parish Stewardship Appeal. This year's theme is **Put God first - and feel the Love!**

In the parable that Jesus told about the wedding feast which the King had prepared for his Son, the invited guests who had rejected his invitation, were faulted because they had made light of God's love: "I'm too busy with my farm, with my business, with my wife - I cannot attend the wedding."

Too busy for God? Whenever we make pretexts in our lives for putting others before God, we are like those invited guests. Our sin, like theirs, consists in making light of God's love. In doing so, we cut ourselves off, not just from God, but from our future happiness as well!

Let's now examine how we can respond to the Lord's invitation to become more a part of his kingdom here so that we'll be part of the eternal celebration in heaven. Let's focus our attention on three areas:

- **How important is God in our lives?** How much time do we devote each day to watching TV? Or surfing the Net? Or exercising? And how much time do we devote to prayer?
- **Do we reach out to others?** When invited to give a hand at our parish or to some community activity, do we volunteer? Why not?
- **What are the priorities in our checkbook?** Someone once asked how we would make out on the Last Day, if we were judged by the status of our checkbook. An interesting question. After all, we do spend our income on those things/persons that we're committed to, whether it's our spouse, our children, our entertainment, our political party, etc.

Regarding the last point, I would like to challenge all of us once again to give serious thought to tithing - 5% to our parish and 5% to other charities. If we're still hesitant to take that step, then let's make the attempt to give *at least one hour of our weekly income* to our parish.

I want to close with the remarks made at the end of the funeral Mass for Bernard Fussell, who was one of the most promising seminarians of our diocese. Bernard was a second-career seminarian, making him somewhat older than his peers. He died quite suddenly on August 15 th of cardiac arrest.

At his funeral the following week, Msgr. Keith Brennan, the rector of St Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary, gave the following tribute in Bernard's memory:

"Over the last few days, we have laughed and cried as we shared our own individual recollections and personal stories about our relationships and experiences with Bernard: his friendship, his love for family and friends, and his deep love for the priesthood, and most especially for His Lord...

"One of my favorite recollections, though, was told to me by Sister Dolores LaVoy... Sister Dolores shared that one day in conversation with Bernard, she asked what he had done before entering the seminary. Bernard told her that he had worked for a bank. She asked him what he did at the bank. Bernard then explained that he had been employed by the bank for many years and had worked his way up to the position of assistant vice-president before leaving. He then went on to add that back then, he had it all: a big house, a nice car, and expensive clothes...but he knew that something was missing. Now he had none of that; he lived in a 10' x 10' room, slept in a bed that was too small [Bernard was 6'5"], and had no private bathroom, and yet, he was never happier. What was most important for Bernard was that he had discovered his call to priesthood, and had a deepening relationship with the Lord, and that brought him tremendous joy.

"For those of us who had the fortune to know him as a friend and a brother, Bernard was a living example of the joy of knowing the Lord and living the gospel message. As he taught us in life, so may we also learn from him in death. The most fitting tribute that I believe we can make to the memory of Bernard is to learn from his example: that true joy doesn't come from what we *have*, but rather what we *do* - which in Bernard's life can be summed up in one simple word: Love."

How true! His love for God and for everyone he met! Let us imitate Bernard's sterling example. **Put God first - and feel the Love!**