

### Vigil for Rev. John Phillips

Pastor, Holy Faith Parish, Gainesville, Fla.

Most Rev. Felipe J. Estévez, Bishop of St. Augustine

Friday, October 25, 2019

Dearest Family of Holy Faith Parish – Father Emmanuel, Father Clyde, Deacon Michael, and all the staff – you know so well how loyal John was toward you and how you were treated as a family – and parishioners – I join you today in solidarity as we mourn the passing of your beloved pastor, Father John Phillips. You have lost a good shepherd, and I have lost a dear friend and one of my most effective advisors and collaborators, whom I have known for more than 30 years – since the time he was a seminarian. He was our brother, our father, and our companion on our journey of faith. Judging from the number of people who have come to pay their respects, this good and faithful priest left a legacy of love and compassion in the hearts of people that will never be forgotten. The choice of the image of the Heart of Christ as the principal image of the parish is congruent with what was major in his leadership: the love of Christ urges us!

And while we gather to grieve our loss, we do not grieve as those who are without hope. We grieve *in the certain hope* that we will all share the Resurrection of Jesus Christ whose *victory over death* we celebrate every time we memorialize a loved one who has gone before us. I do not know how many funerals Father John performed in his 32 years of priestly ministry – there must have been hundreds! But he announced this same hope of Resurrection to countless others, and he certainly lived that virtue very personally, as evidenced by his constant smile and his deep sense of humor.

Many people did not realize that Father John was a convert to Catholicism. How blessed we were that Father John followed Christ's call to enter the church and ultimately to pursue a priestly vocation. His biography shows a personal journey that was marked by many gentle influences leading him step-by-step from his baptism at age 14, to his conversion at age 23 in St. Augustine Parish led then by Father Robert Baker, to his priestly ordination at age 31. It is a remarkable journey of faith that is perhaps more varied than most of us who have been born into the Catholic faith. He came to faith by a deliberate choice and through many pathways that might have led him in other directions.

But Father's docility to the Holy Spirit is what impresses us most about him. He was always open to what God wanted of him, and he never questioned God's judgment. I am reminded of him when I read the beautiful hymn called *Lead, Kindly Light*, written by the newly-canonized St. John Henry Newman, who was also a convert to the Catholic faith. Cardinal Newman's writings must have influenced Father John as they have so many others who have taken that long road to Catholicism. The first verse of the hymn could be Father John's spiritual testament:

*Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom,*

*Lead Thou me on!*

*The night is dark, and I am far from home,*

*Lead Thou me on!*

*Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see*

*The distant scene; one step enough for me.*

This, I believe, is the story of Father John's spiritual journey: taking things one step at a time, trusting in the Lord's guidance, lovingly embracing all that God asked of him. That was the witness of a beautiful and holy priest whose life we celebrate even as we grieve for him.

I met John when I was rector of the Major Seminary. He impressed me by his humility and kindness and transparency in sharing his weaknesses. He was highly esteemed by Bishop John J. Snyder. In my first year as ordinary of this diocese in 2011, I consulted Bishop Snyder on choosing a Vicar General. He gave me FatherPhillips' name as his choice. I did not ask John to do this service, for I did not want to overburden him with travelling long distances for meetings, but I appointed him dean of the very extended Deanery of Gainesville.

He excelled as a dean and revealed his magnificent talents in human relations, in guiding difficult situations with such tact and prudence, in providing incredible availability of presence to multiple events. He only said no to a call of mine once. It was to become a pastor of a very large parish on the East coast of Florida. Today, I understand better his position: it was his great loyalty to the parishioners of Holy Faith and his realization that the parish hall was an important priority that needed his care. You all know how this project brought him such deep satisfaction for its magnificent completion.

A very important aspect of a priest's spiritual journey is his ministry assignments. God always gives special graces for the priest in every place he is sent. For a diocesan priest, each parish is an important step on his spiritual journey. After two short parish assignments as a parochial vicar, Father John was made pastor of Holy Faith in 2002. And it seems incredible to me that this was both his first parish as pastor and also the last assignment of his faithful priestly life. It was at Holy Faith that he lived out the majority of his priestly ministry.

The people of this community were truly blessed to receive *the full gift of his mature priesthood* for 17 years. Even though he died very young by today's standards, we know that God does not judge us by the number of our years but by the quality of the life we put into those years. Certainly, Father John flourished in his priestly vocation and gave everything he had in his care for all during his time at Holy Faith.

He was, in every way, a dedicated servant priest reflecting a Franciscan humility and one of the kindest men I ever knew. His compassionate heart extended not only to his parishioners but also to the poor, suffering, and marginalized people in our community and beyond such as a school in Guatemala, the Comboni missions and many others. He wanted Holy Faith to be a *Parish of Compassion* at the heart of Gainesville, and it became that kind of parish thanks to his leadership. And I will always be grateful that he was such a fervent advocate for victims of abuse as well.

Psalm 103 from our readings tonight reminds us that we all need God's mercy and that Father John's heart of compassion is indeed the very *heart of our Heavenly Father*:

As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.  
For he knows how we are formed,  
remembers that we are dust.  
As for man, his days are like the grass;  
he blossoms like a flower in the field.

A wind sweeps over it and it is gone;  
its place knows it no more.  
But the LORD's mercy is from age to age,  
toward those who fear him.

Father John seemed to pour out that compassionate heart in his wide and dedicated service to all here and throughout the diocese.

But Father would also be the first to remind us that our true home is in Heaven: to be with the Lord of glory. As important as it is to care for the material and earthly needs of our brothers and sisters, it is also important to help them get to the endpoint of the journey where Christ has gone to prepare a place for us. His ultimate concern, as it is for every priest, was for the salvation of all, and I am sure that Father John prayed diligently every day for his people and everyone in the world. As pastor he wrote the prayers of the faithful for Sunday masses. His heart was that big, and his vision was one of eternity expected joyfully by liturgical praise.

It is fitting to come back to the hymn of St. John Henry Newman, which ends with these most comforting words of hope:

*Lead, Saviour, lead me home in childlike faith,  
Home to my God.  
To rest forever after earthly strife  
In the calm light of everlasting life.*

Rest in peace, dearest friend, Father John, faithful priest of God, beloved pastor of the Holy Faith community, admired and highly respected by your brother priests, may St. Benedict and St. Francis lead you to the Lord Jesus who you loved so dearly.