

**Homily by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez**  
Funeral Mass of Father Bernard Ahern  
St. Joseph Parish, Jacksonville  
August 6, 2020

“The strife is over, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun . . . Alleluia. He rises glorious from the dead, all glory to our risen Head, Alleluia.”

This well-known Navy hymn was a favorite of Father Bernie Ahern, a Navy Captain. How fitting it is that we honor the glorious risen Lord in this last Mass of such a faithful priest, Father Bernie Ahern!

The Vicar General of the Military Vicariate, Joseph Dimino, wrote, “For the past 24 years Father Ahern has traveled the world bringing God and the things of God to the personnel of the Military Services. He has been outstanding as a Chaplain and most dedicated priest. Father Ahern has served with great zeal and in some very trying circumstances. I’m sure the lessons Father learned in the Navy will be most beneficial to the people of your Diocese.”

He was so right, and he brought best practices learned here and abroad – rich ecumenical experiences and multiple lessons learned in the Navy for 24 years to his parish in the Diocese of Albany, to the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville and especially to St Joseph Parish in Mandarin for the last 27 years.

As a military chaplain, Father Bernie witnessed a father's love for the servicemen and women. Father Bernie once said, "A priest first and foremost must be a man of compassion who has a genuine interest in and understanding of the people of God committed to his care. His sensitivity to peoples' needs and unselfishness made him very approachable and available. I guess the "good shepherd" idea cannot be improved upon."

All of us who went to confession to him experienced his Christlike compassion, the wisdom of life, and his great availability to be of service with haste. He ministered with authority because one knew he had such a vast experience of life and rich pastoral experience.

His contribution to our military services was significant. He was especially motivated to care for young men especially, once he confided: "Working with young men in the 19-22 age bracket, who are just starting life and uprooted from the security of family, is most challenging. These men face a rather different set of problems during this period in their lives. A priest has a real opportunity to be "father" to these young men."

In the early 60s, Father Bernie was stationed with the Marines in Okinawa, which was a challenging mission. Writing to his bishop in Albany, he told him: "I have enjoyed the past eight months in this strange land, working with young men who are exposed to the greatest temptations they have ever faced in their short lives. Thank God that our holy faith keeps so many strong enough to avoid the moral chaos that exists."

Fr. Ahern enjoyed the life of a chaplain in the Navy but his deepest desire was to be a parish priest, he once wrote:  
“As far as parish work goes – I feel that this is the essential work of a priest. I would die as a teacher or in an office job. I feel very sorry for priests who are so far removed from their specialty of administering the sacraments and tending to the flock that they do not really know what problems people face.”

Indeed, parish ministry occupied him for more than half his life. Thousands benefited from his rich paternity in the confessional, in spiritual direction and counseling, by his preaching and other sacraments. He was an instrument of great parish renewal here at St. Joseph. He was so knowledgeable and insightful about marriage and family life. In fact, as a priest, he witnessed a great closeness to his own family and remained in continuous communication with them.

For the last 30 years of his life, St. Joseph Parish was blessed by his shepherd’s care. Father George, Father Cody, and Father Thanh knew how helpful, available and generous he was.

St. Joseph was home for Father Bernie, a parish where he had buried his beloved parents. His pastoral zeal was seen in his support of multiple Christ Renews His Parish and Marriage Encounter retreats. He is so worthy of being the object of Jesus saying: “Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am, my servant will be, My Father will honor the one who serves me”.

Receive, oh Lord, this great priest and honor him with your life eternal. His life truly matters to us all, and his name will be

remembered for generations to come. He loved his country with a passion; for this country, he wished it would protect human life and religious freedom, a great nation in trusting God above all.

Throughout his entire life, he was deeply committed to promoting happy marriages, happy families as communities of faith and love, families witnessing virtue, and spreading the joy of the Gospel to the community at large. His destiny was not to have a family of his own, but in turn, thousands of families are together and in better shape thanks to his teachings, wisdom and guidance!

It is so fitting that this Mass is taking place in a most important Christological feast: the Transfiguration of our Lord. The event takes place as Jesus is about to approach his own death.

The Transfiguration where his face became dazzling as the sun, his clothes as radiant as light were signs of his future resurrection which his beloved Father would grant him. For the apostles who were to experience the failure of the Cross, the Transfiguration was the sign that suffering and death were only part of the real—the hope of glory. And that the victory of faith would overcome the tragedy of Golgotha.

In essence, Father Bernie was a man of God, a priest, a healer, a man of wisdom, an artisan of the culture of life and family, who has lived life to the fullest and truly a victory of life. Without any doubt, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will honor Father Bernie with life forever! Alleluia.