

ACPD Mardi Gras Ministry Awards, February 23, 2020

Reflection given by Fr. Ed Mikolajczyk as he accepted the St. John XXIII Award

Good Evening. Before I begin, I want to express my gratitude and appreciation to the Association of Priests and Deacons for being the recipient of this prestigious award. I also want to recognize and thank the other two nominees, Fr Jerry Boland and Fr. Bill Corcoran. They reflect the dedication and commitment that the presbyterate represents in ministering to the people in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Jerry and Bill are wonderful role models as pastors whose main focus is to nurture and shepherd the needs of their parishioners,

I was a young boy when John XXIII was elected Pope. At that time, the church seemed to have all the answers. Everything was black or white, with very little gray in between. Pope John XXIII was a man who was small in stature, but he packed a mighty punch that enabled the church to open its doors and invite the laity to participate. He had a vision of church that was welcoming and inclusive encouraging more lay participation and leadership with the hope that the church would be more progressive in its efforts as it moved into the future.

I am a product of Vatican II. The changes that were made during this time, helped form me and become the priest I am today. Since I was in 6th grade, my dream was to become a priest. I owe a lot to my parents, Norbert and Bernice, to my two brothers Michael and Donald, to all of my aunts, uncles, cousins and friends who supported me in my journey to be a priest. They instilled in me the values that are important in life: be respectful, responsible, hardworking trustworthy and remaining faithful to God.

I am also grateful for the leadership and guidance of Bishop Jack Gorman who was the rector at Mundelein during my time as a seminarian. He helped prepare my classmates and I for what was awaiting us out in the parishes. He challenged and reminded us that if we were going to be effective in ministry, you had to get to know your parishioners by being among them, working with them and leading them. As Pope Francis reminds us, you have to be the shepherd who smells the sheep and allows them to get to know you at the same time. This is how I have lived my priesthood every day of my life.

I would not be the priest I am today if it were not for the role models I had before me.

Monsignor Frank Lesniak was the pastor of my home parish. He lived a very simple life, but taught me the value of sincerity and humility. He was a priest's priest. It wasn't all about you. It was caring about the people in your parish that was important. Take the time to be present to your people and minister to them. Nurturing them and preparing them to grow in their faith should be a priority.

I am grateful for the support and guidance I received from Father William Murphy, the retired pastor of Queen of Martyrs. He was a character, but you knew where you stood with him. He never held back. He told you like it was. You may not have agreed with him, but he respected you. He taught me that if you were going to be a good pastor, you had to listen to your parishioners. Hear what they had to say and look at the bigger picture. They will respond to you if you are honest and upfront with them. Communication is key. Be yourself and they will put their trust in you. It was great advice. He was a wonderful inspiration to me and I treasured the time I spent with him.

The class of 1973 has been an inspiration to me. They have helped me to grow in my priesthood and have helped me to understand the importance of being compassionate and being there for and with your people. I learned from the best. Fr. Jack Daley, Fr. Dom Grassi, Fr. Jim Noone, Archbishop Wilton Gregory, Monsignor Ken Velo, and Fr. Bill Malloy just to name a few. They have supported and challenged me to go outside of my comfort zone and help me realize the strengths I possess.

I can't say enough about the people in the parishes I ministered in. They have taught me the true meaning of priesthood. From my deacon Parish of Mary Queen of Heaven in Cicero, to St. Walter, St. Linus, Assumption, Our Lady of Victory, Queen of Martyrs and presently Our Lady of the Woods, I have been truly blest. They have affirmed and encouraged me along the way. They are a gift that I treasure and value every day.

I was fortunate during my priesthood to teach at our high school seminary Quigley South and Archbishop Quigley for twenty years. One part of formation was helping the students understand the meaning of PIES: Physical. Intellectual. Emotional and Spiritual. These areas were stressed and reinforced everyday enabling the students to realize the importance of maturing and growing and helping them to succeed in the future. Incorporating PIES into my life helped me to be a better teacher and priest.

John XXIII centered his papacy on being pastoral and inclusive. His plan and vision for the church was to be collaborative and engaging. A church that was alive, thinking ahead and moving forward. For me, the ACPD is an organization that has tried to echo the efforts of John XXIII. It has been the spokesperson and the voice of the presbyterate in difficult and challenging times. For the past 53 years, it has dealt with issues that confront the church: Social Justice, Prejudice, Right to Life, Gun Violence, and Immigration to name a few. There are no easy answers.

The Church has been challenged over the past years. Appointing more women in leadership positions, the declining numbers of people going to church and fewer vocations are staring us in the face. We could ignore what is happening around us or we can do something about it.

I have always been an optimist, trying to see the good in whatever situation arises. John XXIII was a man of hope. He invited the priests and laity to look at things differently, to be open to the Spirit and to plan for the future. I have tried to incorporate these values in my priesthood. John XXIII had a vision that enabled the church to move forward. I realize there is still a lot to be done. The church is in a different place and time, but the challenges have not changed. The church of the future needs to incorporate the vision of John XXIII. Including more women in leadership positions, being more collaborative in decision making and finding more creative ways in administering our parishes just to name a few.

Thank you for tonight. I am humbled and honored to receive this award. I love being a priest. It is the essence of who I am. For me, priesthood was a dream come true. Next to my birthday, the date of my ordination is most important to me. It is a reminder to me of how blest I am and what a gift you are to me. This recognition tonight inspires me to continue to do what I am doing realizing the love and support I receive from you. Being part of the Presbyteral Council for the past 15 years has enabled me to be proud in what the presbyterate has to offer the Archdiocese of Chicago. I pray that as we look to the future, we can continue to grow in John XXIII 's vision of church enabling us to be the people of service and ministry we are called to be helping to make a difference in the world.