



Giving Bishop Connolly Back to God

The following is an expanded version of the homily given at Bishop Connolly's Burial Mass in Baker City on 1 May.

All of us would say that Bishop Connolly was a man called by God. But as young Thomas lived his way into his vocation, God's call to the priesthood was by no means as clear to him as it is to us looking back. His "burning desire" as a boy to "have a beautiful ranch someplace" was not to be realized. Instead, he was raised in town, on his father's lumber yard in Tonapah, Nevada. Early on, his life did not take the turn young Thomas wanted it to take.

At age 11 he learned another, harder lesson about how life can turn away from where the heart wants it to go. In February 1933 Thomas' older brother was diagnosed with leukemia. "That did something," he remembered sixty years later. "You know, we all thought that we were . . . big strong people . . . [But] Dad couldn't do a thing. My mother couldn't do a thing. We prayed and tried every doctor we could. There was nothing we could do." A year later his brother died. Life had taken a turn young Thomas did not want it to take.

Two years after this up-close encounter with death, "it came time for me to decide whether I was going to the seminary or not." He decided to go. But years passed and "[n]o clear light came." "I didn't know whether I wanted to quit and go home, or

whether God was . . . or wasn't calling me," he later recalled. "If you want me to do this," he told God, "then you will have to make it possible." God did. Upon Thomas' ordination as deacon the words of the Prophet Isaiah sounded in his heart: "Here I am . . . send me."

At last Thomas Connolly was sure of his calling, but he had not heard the end of it. It turned out that there was to be a further call *within* the call to priesthood. Twenty-four years later he was named bishop—just as the winds of change from Vatican II swept through the Church. "In 1971, being bishop was a different . . . thing than it had ever been," he would recall on his 25th anniversary. The new style of exercising authority downplayed the importance of *telling* people what to do and instead exalted the value of *inspiring* them to do it. "That wasn't an easy . . . thing to handle," Bishop Connolly reflected years later. "I asked myself, 'Are you capable of shifting gears that much . . . to lead the church in the direction that . . . the Holy Spirit wants it to go?'" His answer was both humble and realistic: "All I could say was that I would try."

Having said "yes" to his episcopal vocation, Father Connolly received a new *mission* when he became Bishop Connolly. "The title of Bishop is one of service, not of honor," he was told at his ordination, "and therefore a Bishop should strive to benefit others rather than lord it over them." For nearly thirty years Bishop Connolly's unflinching fidelity to his service-oriented title much endeared him to his flock. "It impressed me that he'd sit in the sage brush and eat pan bread!" one woman recalled on his 25th anniversary. And a young father remembered the Bishop's behavior at the first Family Camp: "I watched him carry the kids

piggy back up the hills, play volleyball so competitively that we called him 'Spike' . . . and generally join right in. I was impressed by his playfulness. The kids loved and admired him. We have been so lucky that he was there, really there, for us." Not for nothing had the Bishop chosen his episcopal motto: "I am spent and will be spent for you."

Episcopal ordination brought a second responsibility also: to "be mindful always of the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep and is known by them." To this mission of mutual recognition Bishop Connolly devoted himself in strikingly memorable fashion. As one lady put it, "The most common thing I've heard people say about him is, he remembers people's names." There were hundreds of names to remember from the retreats he gave in abundance through the decades of his ministry. He much enjoyed these retreats because "I get a chance to work with people on a more personal basis, to get to know them better." He hoped to go on doing so in retirement: "I'd love to have a nice retreat house someplace, in a beautiful spot, where I could meet and encourage people in their own prayer life . . . [w]here they could put aside the cares that they normally have . . . and just consider who they are in the presence of God and who God is." Like the Good Shepherd who says, "I know mine, and mine know me," Bishop Connolly wanted nothing more than to tend his flock to the end of his days.

It was not to be. In his last five years the Bishop's memory departed him. He had known and been known by so many for so long, but at the end to know and to make himself known exceeded the reach of his powers of mind. He could know and be known no longer. As his unknowing gaze fell

upon visitors, it provoked in them (as it may have provoked in him) the question the Prophet Isaiah gives voice to: "How long, O Lord?" How long until the return of recognition?

It is a question each of us must face, for at the hour of our death, St. Paul assures us, "knowledge . . . will be brought to nothing." Our memory will turn to dust. Therefore, Jesus promises, "I am going to prepare a place for you"—a place of remembrance. "And . . . I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be."

Until then "I know partially," St. Paul confessed. But "when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away" and my emptied memory will be filled to overflowing. "[T]hen I shall know fully, as I am fully known." I shall know, and be known, "face to face." I will remember myself in full for the first time in the life-giving presence of the Father who has never forgotten me.

In a beautiful coincidence Bishop Connolly died only days after Francis Cardinal George of Chicago, who as Bishop of Yakima in the '90s highly esteemed his neighboring bishop's kindness and consideration. "The only thing we take with us when we die," Cardinal George once said, "is what we have given away."

That insight came to mind during the homily at Bishop Connolly's Vigil Service in Bend. Father Rick Fischer recalled the day that Bishop Connolly conferred the priesthood on him in Ontario many years ago: "When he imposed his hands on me at ordination, he left them on my head for a long time, as if he wanted to give it *all* to me"—all the priesthood he could give. That image gets to the essence of the Christian life and priestly

ministry of Bishop Thomas Connolly. He did not hold onto his priesthood; he did not keep the gifts of Christ to himself. He gave them away, to us, the sheep of his flock, over and over again. In doing so, in giving them away, he made them more and more his own. We can be confident that he took them with him when he went to meet his Lord.