***50th Anniversary of Ordination: June 2019***

My first written assignment as a young Jesuit novice in 1956 was to prepare a short sermon on the passage in Matthew 19 where Peter asks Jesus “What reward do you have for us who have given up everything to follow you?” The answer is that those who have left homes and brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers for His sake shall receive a hundred-fold.

A payoff of 100 times what I’ve put on the table? If anything, that’s understating my experience in the islands! As I try to explain to friends back in New York, it’s not the lagoon waters or the evening skies that bedazzle newcomers to the islands. It’s the sense of belonging and being cared for. So I stand before you today to thank you, and so many others, for adopting me into your families and bringing me into your homes. I thank all the others as well– Chuukese and Pohnpeians and so many more—for the same. And, of course, to the Lord who has been true to his word in the blessings he has showered on me, and upon all of you.

Gary Bradley, a Jesuit who had spent a few years on Saipan, “warned” me long ago what to expect in the Marianas. He said that at the first novena he attended, he sat at a table by himself while everyone else greeted other members of the family. “Let people at novenas do their family thing,” he seemed to be saying. But he added something else: “The generosity of people is simply embarrassing. You will never feel unsupported.” I’ve found both remarks as true on Guam as they were for him on Saipan.

During my early years in Chuuk I kept a poster on my wall that declared “The Whole World is My Parish.” It was a reminder of why I left Buffalo in the first place. Jesus’s disciples, as we just heard, were told to preach the gospel, not just to those towns within easy reach of us, but to the very ends of the earth. We are not limited by how much gas we have left in the tank any more than by national boundaries. The word was to go the ends of the earth!

When I returned to Micronesia just a few months after my ordination in 1969, it felt that I was indeed moving to the edge of the globe. The first moon walk occurred that summer; the youth revolution was at its height. It was the Age of Aquarius–all things were possible. Just keep tuned to what is happening!

At my first mass that summer I had proudly proclaimed that “no group of people is too distant to have a claim on the Lord’s love or our concern.” Brave words, but I knew that the islands were remote and disconnected in those pre-Internet days. Would I survive in a sleepy backwater–a marvelous home, but far away from where the action was?

(*Personal stories: village shower, and getting sick after dinner, and finding cigars missing*)

I guess you can say that I did survive–and so did my belief in what I spoke at my first mass. I feel that mission, and the sentiment that inspired it, every bit as strongly as when I first volunteered for the mission in Micronesia.

We are, all of us, a transplanted people, a group of wanderers, people always on the move, a pilgrim church. As a Jesuit friend of mine constantly used to say: “We have here no lasting city”–a good reminder to all of us not to get too settled and cozy in our temporary home.

The job of us priests is to remind you that God continues to walk alongside us and that the Spirit of God is being poured out on you and all mankind. As we march on, all of us–with our different cultures and languages, and even our various political stripes–will become a single people. We shall join hands, all of us, and say from the bottom of our hearts “Our Father.”

Back in 1969, I felt impelled to modify my friends’ expectations on me in this new ministry of mine. What is a priest? Not the keeper of the keys to the kingdom. Not one has a hot-line to God. Not a member of a privileged caste or aristocracy in the church. But a human being like yourselves. A frail vessel, easily chipped or broken, and yet an individual who has somehow been chosen to minister to God’s people–all of you. A man aware of his own weakness, but expected to reconcile others with their Lord. One aware of his own selfishness, but still charged with presiding over the sacrament of unity in the church. One often struggling with doubts of his own, but still expected to lead the congregation in its declaration of faith.

Don’t expect the impossible of your priest, I warned my friends 50 years ago. I still prefer gin and tonic to iced tea. I still let the wrong expression slip out just as frequently as before– especially when I’m losing on the basketball court. Nonetheless, my adoptive families, I’ve found, have been understanding and supportive of me along the way. These hundreds of brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers have been surprisingly tolerant of my quirks and given me the courage to move forward.

So on we go... together... as a single people-–stumbling now and then perhaps, but regaining our footing... always with confidence in the One in whose name we gather to become what we’re called to be: a light to the nations, a symbol of love and peace for all.

How about that! The Age of Aquarius lives on, after all!