

Sunday 7 March, 2010

Archdiocese of Baltimore

John Carroll Lecture

Father – Brother – Friend
Bishop-Priest Relationships

✠ Wilton D. Gregory,
Archbishop of Atlanta

Our modern American society places a great deal of importance on relationships – perhaps more so than did any other previous society. And fortunately for all of us modern-day experts of all types have devoted significant serious and important consideration and research on the subject. Psychologists, sociologists, and all manner of social scientists have studied the issues of relationships from their most personal and primitive perspectives to the consequences of the relationships among peoples, nations, and cultures. So fundamentally important are our human relationships that we are now aware that even tiny babies apparently begin to be shaped and to be formed in their personalities from their earliest experiences of being held, touched, and caressed. Some studies might even suggest that the infant within the womb begins to sense a bond with the mother even in those first moments of life. The human person is designed to be in relationship with others on many different levels. We can all recall the importance of the special relationships in our lives, both those from our past as well as the life-giving relationships that we currently enjoy today.

Our theological knowledge of God Himself from the very beginning of the Church employs terms and language that signify relationships to be at the very heart of the Mystery of the life of the Triune God. God reveals Himself as a God of relationships. Through the revelation that we have from Jesus Christ Himself, we know that God lives in a perfect communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We also believe that because of God's own gracious design, we human beings are now invited to enter into a graced relationship with God through His Church and ultimately destined to be made perfect in the life to come where our mere mortal persons will be joined in complete joy and fulfillment in relationship with the Triune God.

Our calling to be in relationship with others is also wondrously and distinctively present in the Church. We Catholics belong to a unique family of faith that includes men and women from every age, culture,

nation, race, and background. The Church is the locus of our relationships with all other individuals of faith who are bound together in love and sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the Sacraments as we profess one faith in the Love of God.

While the Church enjoys the gift of oneness, we experience that unity in the midst of a variety of gifts and relationships that distinguish the different members within the Church. When those relationships are healthy and strong all of the members of the Church benefit. And conversely it is also true that when those relationships are in disorder and dysfunctional, the entire Church is negatively impacted. I would like to suggest that during this Year of the Priest that the entire Church would benefit by considering the importance of the relationship between bishops and priests in the midst of a local Presbyterate. The bishop-priest relationships and the relationships among priests have a profound significance for the entire Church and in each diocese. In point of fact, when the relationships between bishops and priests and among their own brother priests are healthy, happy, and well-grounded, the entire Church is the beneficiary of that grace.

The Sacrament of Holy Orders is constituted for the service of the People of God and when we in Orders are in right relationship among ourselves, the People of God are best served. When those in the Sacrament of Orders are in proper relationship, our prayer life, our apostolic endeavors, our personal lives are most effectively at the service of our people.

Every Catholic bishop that I know these days is habitually mindful of and frequently prays about his relationship with his priests. If those relationships as a matter of fact happen to be positive, favorable, and affable, then we bishops worry about how we might maintain and indeed strengthen them. If however they are uncertain, argumentative, and mistrustful, then we worry about how we might remedy, enrich, and solidify them.

Priests everywhere that I know are also concerned about those same relationships with their bishops. If they believe that they are fortunate enough to have an affable, sensitive, and thoughtful bishop, then they are concerned about his health, his age, and his potential for being transferred. On the other hand, if their relationship with their bishop is contentious, acrimonious, and distrustful; they frequently consider his age, his health, and his potential for being transferred. Our relationships are critically important for every bishop and for all priests. This year dedicated to Priests is thus a welcome opportunity and a reminder for bishops and priests to reassess our relationships with each other. And with the poignant events of the past decade still deeply felt among all bishops and priests – and indeed amongst all of the faithful, it would be more than appropriate to consider how we might all improve and

strengthen the spirit of unity and harmony within each local Presbyterate.

This same topic obviously has no little consequence for the other members of the Church since as we have all recently witnessed to our great chagrin that when the relationships between bishops and priests are not in fact healthy and proper, the rest of the Church can be catastrophically and adversely impacted. The converse is also true, when bishops and priests are in right relationships, the People of God are better attended and more faithfully served by a clergy that is spiritually and professionally healthy and focused on the mission of the Sacrament of Orders which takes the care of souls as our primary concern and the ultimate source of our holiness and spiritual goal.

The relationship between bishop and priest in fact is the topic of my presentation today. I presume to do so in the presence of an audience comprised of many of those who are intended to be served and nurtured by bishops and priests who are in fact in right and healthy relationships so that the Ministry of the Church is properly exercised for the good of all of the Church. I dare to speak on this subject not because I am a recognized or certified expert with a long list of guaranteed ways to improve those relationships, but I do stand before you as one who has served as a bishop in three different dioceses and who has made far more than his own share of mistakes in reference to his relationship with his priests but who also has been blessed with some providential successes from the past and therefore I possess a little insight into the topic.

Whatever success in this regard that I might now claim comes from the gracious and generous willingness of the priests that I have served and in response to my efforts and my desire to engage them in healthy and life-giving ways. Each diocese has its own history and traditions regarding the bonds between bishops and priests. I recall a humorous exchange that I had with a Father Michael Maughan, SMA [RIP 2001] who had served for a number of years as a missionary in Africa and thereafter for many more years in pastoral work in the Diocese of Belleville.

I had invited all of the priests in the Diocese to come to my home for a dinner during my first year as Bishop of that local Church. The priests were invited to come in small groups so that I had an opportunity to meet them personally during the evening. Each group was self-selected and eventually almost every priest had dinner with me. As these events wound down, it became clear that a few priests had not been in attendance – among whom was Mike Maughan. I called and asked him to join the final group and he agreed. When he arrived that evening, I asked him: *“Mike, have you ever been to the Bishop’s home before.”* His response was classic: *“I’ve never been in trouble before!”* For some

priests, the only time that they would have a social or personal encounter with their bishop was for a disciplinary matter.

Some of my senior priests in the Archdiocese of Atlanta have reminisced with me – with a shade of nostalgia – about the pioneer days of our then still young diocese when the 30 or so priests would often gather at the Archbishop’s home on Sunday evening for an impromptu meal and get-together. Each local Church has its own customs and traditions. Yet each presbyterate must now consciously work on strengthening the bonds that unite bishops and priests and those among priests themselves.

As we now approach the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, those of us old enough to remember Church life before the Council must confess that some of the ecclesial issues that might not have been viewed as either controversial or noteworthy at the dawn of that momentous Church event have managed to become – especially during this last decade very consequential not only for bishops and priests – but for the entire Church.

I began my own priestly formation as a newly enrolled high school freshman seminarian in one of the two non-boarding seminaries in the Archdiocese of Chicago in September, 1961 as the Council was in its final preparatory stages and about to begin in the fall of 1962. We students prayed daily and at the beginning of most of our classes for the future success of the Second Vatican Council. At that particular juncture in history, there was an almost palatable spirit of enthusiasm and optimism that anticipated that extraordinary event in the life of our Church.

As teenagers, we prayed each day that the Holy Spirit would inspire all the Bishops in the work of renewing and directing the Church into the future that the Second Vatican Council promised to offer. During the past 50 years I have witnessed results of how our youthful prayers may well have been answered and some resultant situations that might well suggest that we should have perhaps prayed more fervently.

The Decree on the Pastoral Office of the Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus* and the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum ordinis* actually provide me with the three-fold relational descriptions that I have chosen as the title and the focus of this presentation. I consider that each one of these categories: *Father-Brother-Friend* offers a unique and valuable perspective on how Bishops and Priests ought to view and to relate to one another and as a

consequence of that relationship more effectively to serve the entire Church.

Paternal-Filial

The Ordination Ritual for Priests is overflowing with many references of the Bishop as a *Father* to his priests as indeed we bishops are and must always strive to become ever more perfectly so. That paternal-filial relationship is perhaps most immediately appropriate for our young priests as they begin their sacramental ministry. They are, after all, inexperienced, enthusiastic, optimistic, and usually more than a tad naïve and the bishop obviously should see himself in his relationship to them as generative, encouraging, wise, and probably a little protective.

This paternal-filial relationship over the years should usually continue to develop much as the natural relationships between sons and fathers do as young boys pass from childhood, through adolescence and finally into manhood and through each of these stages of growth they relate to their fathers in new and life-giving ways that are satisfying to both fathers and sons.

I have been graced with many such personal supportive paternal-filial relationships that have enriched my own life well beyond my humble ability to express. From my first encounter with Monsignor John M. Hayes my childhood home pastor, to the cherished relationship that I enjoyed with Joseph Cardinal Bernardin who ordained me his Auxiliary bishop and then served as the best possible example of Episcopal service that I could have ever imagined, I have been blessed to know great priests who cared for me lovingly as their son. They have set very high standards for me to emulate.

Bishops and priests when reflecting on this paternal image must now also be aware that not every one of us, especially in today's environment, may have had the grace of a perfect or even supportive paternal-filial relationship within our own personal family histories – if such a reality as a perfect relationship ever did exist in any age. Unfortunately within our own contemporary society the paradigm of the paternal-filial relationship increasingly does not always result in a universally positive memory for everyone.

Where that is the case, bishop and priest each must acknowledge and candidly admit that we may have to reconsider what any genuinely healthy and loving paternal-filial relationship must entail in our lives today. As men of Faith, we must also focus upon that one paternal-filial relationship that is perfect in each and every respect – that is the relationship between Jesus and His Father. It is that model that must be the ultimate guide and paradigm when we consider how bishops and priests are to live as father and son in the Church.

American culture itself, today however is additionally an operative factor in the model of paternal-filial relations. In those contemporary cultures now represented in the many different societies throughout the world and that are now represented in most American dioceses where fathers may regularly be distant and not directly engaged in the daily development and lives of their children, we might not have the paradigm that serves us well in our present-day American context.

American fathers are increasingly expected to take an intimate and active role in the lives of their children. Fathers in our American society regularly change diapers, they learn how to cook – and often become quite good cooks – frequently they bring their kids with them to the shopping malls on errands, and even, on occasion, become *stay-at-home dads* where they assume an even greater involvement in the lives of their children. In many of the other contemporary cultures any of those tasks would be unthinkable – not because fathers in those societies do not love and cherish their children, but because their cultural roles are quite different in scope and context.

When my young priests tell me and that they want and expect me to be a *father for them* – as they often do – I might well have to ask them, according to the standards in which cultural matrix – as Jesus and His Father who are perfectly united in love – or somehow as a substitute or surrogate father or a prolongation of the relationship that they might have had with their own fathers?

Bishops, as much as we might truly love our priests we cannot nullify or substitute for an unfortunate paternal relationship – neither should we attempt to rectify a regrettable personal history nor should we be blamed for such painful histories. In all humility, we all realize that we can never measure up to that perfect Father-Son relationship that Jesus enjoys with His Heavenly Father. Yet we can and must love our priests with the heart of a true father. And our priests have every right to expect that of us. Of course that perfect relationship that Jesus enjoys with His Heavenly Father does include complete submission and total obedience as a sign of the Son's love for His Father. And we bishops also suspect that such complete and perfect submission and obedience may have occurred only once!

It is no mere coincidence that the title that Catholic priests have carried within the Church for many centuries is the title *father*. That title bears within itself a vital reminder and summons that we priests stand in relationship within the entire Church as the father of a family. The bond that links a bishop with his priests as father cannot – indeed must never – exclude the relationship that the Bishop has with the entire Church

which is comprised of all of his sons and daughters equally worthy of a father's love, concern, devotion, and protection.

I need also now confess that I have found tremendous joy beyond my imagings in watching my young sons grow in their priestly ministry, in their confidence as youthful ministers of the Gospel, and in the development of their expertise as Servants of God's People. Perhaps I find in that satisfaction a similar joy that biological fathers discover when they witness their children develop into those fine people that God wants them to become and that they do become in conformity with God's grace.

Brother

The fraternity of the Priesthood is as well a clerically known and cherished phrase that there is that seeks to describe the way that priests are related to one another and to their bishop. Fraternity is a warm and obviously manly term of endearment. Fraternities within our cultural context can also indicate that rowdy, unkempt, and often unruly way of relating to each other that harkens back to college days and the domiciles that might often house the youthful and boisterous male students. But usually those boisterous friendships also managed to establish the foundation for friendships that endured for a life-time. Fraternities were and still provide moments of transition from young adulthood into mature, professional, and enduring relationships. To belong to a fraternity is to be identified with a group of men who have shared both adventure and growth. In its best sense, a fraternity is an association of men who have transitioned together through important events of maturation, growth and commitment to shared ideals and goals. In that sense, the fraternity of Priests can be a happy memory and cherished aspiration in the life of a Presbyterate as they recall seminary experiences and the early adventures in ministry. The elder members of the fraternity are [or should be] sources of wisdom and good example. The younger members regenerate [or should] the enthusiasm that Priests share for the ministry of the Church bringing with them the bright-eyed energy and zeal that their elders may have forgotten.

All the members of the Presbyterate belong to a single fraternity – those who are native sons to the diocese, those who come from other places and backgrounds, and yes – even the bishop. Establishing a fraternity among the priests of a diocese is a challenge when the members of the presbyterate come from so many different cultures and ethnic communities. Each priest carries within himself the image and ideal of priesthood that he gained from his own personal heritage. Yet a presbyterate must congeal in such a fashion that individuals are respected and the people of God are well served according to the cultural circumstances operative in the diocese.

The bishop must be a brother among brothers. This sense of fraternal love is critical between priests and bishops and for the health and holiness of the local Church. Priesthood offers us a fraternal bond that links us all to Christ and to each other and ultimately all for the sanctification of the people entrusted to our care.

Brothers do not always agree! Any one fortunate enough to have a brother and to be a brother knows exactly what that reality means. Brothers love one another with a sincere and yet often times a quite competitive love. Brothers help one another to grow up, to develop skills, and to learn what it means to be a member of a family. A bishop is a brother to his priests and like any fraternal relationship – at times it can be a test for both.

Because a bishop is a brother, he can be challenged and tested as any brother can be and we usually are with some regularity. Because a bishop is a brother, he can be assertive and competitive in prodding a brother priest as we must frequently do. Because a bishop is a brother, he can be expected to be a source of support and a trusted confidante as we must always be. A bishop is a brother to his priests when he realizes that they belong to the same family and share a common Father and are loved by the same Mother.

This fraternity is not intended to overlook or displace the larger familial reality that links the entire Church together as God's family but rather summons all the ministers within the Sacrament of Orders to better understand and live out the responsibilities that flow from that Sacrament for the pastoral care of the entire flock of the Lord.

The fraternity of the Presbyterate experiences difficulties when it becomes insular and forgets its purpose of service to the other members of the Church. Just like a college fraternity that loses focus and runs amuck of the rules and regulations of the larger university community. A Presbyterate is a fraternity so that it can jointly and lovingly serve the needs of the entire People of God. Priestly fraternity was never intended to be an exclusive club whose sole purpose is simply to maintain the prerogatives and privileges of the club.

One of the saddest commentaries of the entire Sexual Abuse scandal that has so devastated the Catholic Church during the past decade has been the revelation that the poor judgment and lack of proper oversight exercised by some bishops resulted in the violation of the young but also in far too many cases some members of a Presbyterate knew or suspected that one of their brothers was engaged in inappropriate or at least questionable behavior and they did nothing to confront or address that situation with the individual or with some one in authority. Some priests may have excused their failure to act with the earliest question of

the fraternal bond: *Am I my brother's keeper?* This lack of honest fraternal concern frequently meant that children were harmed, the Presbyterate was humiliated, and the entire Church was subjected to some of the harshest criticism that we have known since the days of open anti-Catholicism of the late 19th Century.

Under those circumstances true priestly fraternity was misconstrued as a protectionist relationship that forgot or denied the other relationships that belong to the heart of God's family. A spiritually sound fraternal relationship among priests is never an *us against the rest of the Church*, but always an *us in the service of the Church*.

Friend

Married couples enjoy a unique relationship that brings life, joy, and holiness to a man and woman. This treasured union is also one of the most ancient symbols of the love that Christ has for the Church. The spousal union enjoys sacramental dignity and plays an irreplaceable component in the generation of human and ecclesial life. I have often marveled at listening to how husbands and wives describe their bond of love. Often they resort to proclaiming to the entire world that not only are they each other's spouses, partners, and colleagues in establishing a family and a home, but they are each other's best friend.

Friendship in the marriage union is often listed as the fundamental way that their love has drawn them together. It is the same type of friendship that Christ Himself must have intended when in Saint John's Gospel, he bestows upon the twelve the gift of His friendship. Friends know one another deeply and personally. Friendship establishes a reciprocity that suggests a mature love and respect.

Friendship is based ultimately upon disclosure – the revelation and acceptance of the intimacy of one's heart to another person. Friendship allows one to remove the barriers of initial camouflage and privacy so that a person sees another without disguise. Husbands and wives over a life-time of sharing come to know one another's strengths and weaknesses, dreams and fears, hopes and promises. Friendship is a gift that comes with time in a mature relationship. Sons and fathers who have the grace of a long and mature relationship often become best friends in addition to the biological relationship and the same is true when brothers enter those experiences of adulthood that transcend and transform their earlier youthful rivalry.

Bishops and priests should strive to enjoy such an adult relationship that is also a spiritual reward that comes with knowledge of one another, collaboration with one another, and trust in one another. The prescribed responsorial refrain proposed to be sung during the sign of peace at the Ordination of Priests refers to the Johannine text: *No longer do I call you*

servants but my friends because you know all that I have done among you. Friendship of this sort is a gift from the Lord and represents a goal to be achieved between bishops and priests – the fruit of a mature love and respect one for the other. Such a friendship does not blur the individual responsibilities or obligations that each has within the Sacrament of Orders, but strengthens the bonds that should tie one to the other.

Bishops and priests enjoy such a friendship as the result of their prayer with and for one another. As they stand together around the Lord's altar and even when they preside at the Eucharist individually we must pray for one another and imagine what the Lord is calling each of us to become with and for one another. The Chrism Mass becomes a highpoint in the life of each diocese when dramatically bishops and priests renew their promises of fidelity in service to the Church. At that moment, we also need to reaffirm our love for and care for one another in Christ.

Bishops and priests enjoy these three relationships not as isolated moments but as increasing encounters of grace throughout the years. Obviously, human relationships do not develop in a never-ending progressive and intensifying manner. There are peaks and valleys that represent moments of challenge and advancement. Yet when bishops and priests learn to love and respect one another, they do pass from initial paternal-filial bonds, through the fraternal expressions of trust, to those experiences of friendship that married couples so often describe as the pinnacle of their long years of trust and love for one another.

Such a friendship is dependent upon the individual. It must respect a person's ability to engage another and it may not always be achievable. Some priests may not be comfortable encountering a bishop as a friend. Some bishops may not be able to have such a friendship with every one of his priests and ultimately may be fearful of being considered partial in his treatment of his priests.

When the Church of Christ is served by bishops and priests who may have developed strong and lasting expressions of care and affection, every one in the Church benefits. Parishes are well served, the young and the old are edified, the sick and the lonely are comforted, the stranger is welcomed, the poor are ministered to, and above all, God Himself is praised within the Church that He loves most perfectly and completely.