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RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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“Don’t forget to smile: Put on a happy face”

Have you ever paid close attention to a waitress or waiter in a restaurant? Watch the way a good one serves. They do so with politeness, kindness, and with a smile. They even have to maintain that same temperament with annoying customers and patrons who treat them as subhuman by their tone and rudeness. A good waitress can anticipate the needs of her clientele and make them feel comfortable for the duration of the meal. A good waiter, even if he is “in the weeds” (i.e. super busy), he maintains his equilibrium without giving the appearance of being stressed. Obviously there is something of self-preservation attached to their diligence especially since the size of their tip depends on their effectiveness, but it is important to learn from good servers when you encounter them. Some of it probably comes naturally, but for most servers, what is at work is learned behavior and self-control. In other words, our human nature can put its best foot forward when it needs to even when the behavior of the one being served does not reciprocate – regardless of how we might feel or what we might like to do in response to bad behavior. On Saturday night, I was out to dinner with a brother priest and we had an exceptional waiter, and so I asked him the secret to his success and positive attitude. He smiled and said “being a waiter has made me a better person,” and then he paused and added, “and a better husband.” I invite each of us to begin to study these heroic men and women every time you are at a restaurant. They have a lot to teach us.

Each of us here are called to be “table waiters” as well, to offer true *diakonia* in service to the people of God. Are we not called to do an even better job? We are not waiting for tips; we are doing so for souls! It is hard to put on a happy face when we are having a bad day, but we must learn how to do so for the sake of our family. We are reminded by the prophet Nehemiah that “The joy of the Lord must be your strength” (Neh. 8:10). In fact, one of the dismissals in the Spanish Missal adapts this passage: “*La alegría del Señor sea nuestra fuerza. Pueden ir en paz.*” Notice this is not some superficial feeling or relying on our own strength of character but the deep abiding presence of the joy of the Lord. The emphasis is on “of the Lord,” it is His joy, His strength, His love, His mission – we are called to plug in to the source. Jesus tells us “Remain in my love ... that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” (John 15:10, 11). If we are daily connecting with him through the sacraments and through time spent in intimacy with Him, we will find that joy. This is what our years of formation at SVDP are all about. Am I able to be the missionary disciple that the people of God need? One who is able to spread the “joy of the Gospel” through my words and actions in my pastoral ministry in the house and in the parish?

The world needs our joy and our kind and gentle smile – if you do not possess joy right now as a seminarian, you are like a young engaged man who when describing his bride says that she is just “alright.” If that young man cannot find excitement, joy, and beauty in his bride before the wedding, forget about it! Because soon enough she will add a few pounds, they will have

disagreements, and then add the challenges of children and finances. If she didn't bring him joy before marriage, they are going to be in a lot of trouble. And so are you as a seminarian if you can't find the joy now! We each need to find the joy of our vocation, the beauty of the Church, the ability to "put on a happy face" for our bride even when we don't feel like it. If we don't learn now how "to be good waiters" and live our *diakonia* selflessly and joyfully, or you are stubborn and say you can't or won't, then after a few years, some bumps and bruises inflicted by bishops, pastors, and parishioners, you will find yourself in the same trouble as the young couple experiencing the "seven-year itch." The tragedy of being a bitter old priest is yours for the taking if you fail to discover the "joy of the Gospel." Joy in being loved by the Blessed Trinity, joy in the gift of being called by name into the service of the Church, joy in ministering to families, joy in dying to self and discovering true life, joy at being one of the only people in the world who can walk into situations of darkness, sickness, and death and bring light and hope (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 1 and 3). In a word, Jesus is our joy – He is our strength. If our countenance doesn't reflect this reality, then it is very difficult for people to believe us.

In just three days, Mother Teresa of Calcutta will be canonized by Pope Francis. She endured many bodily deprivations, spiritual sufferings, decades of darkness, she witnessed the worst poverty ever seen and got her hands dirty in the most unbelievable muck known on earth, she lived to 87 years of age and was faithful to the end with a smile on her face. She would remind her sisters that it was not about how one felt or about one's temperament, but rather a reflection of being in love with Jesus Christ and allowing His joy to radiate forth from us, a joy that the world desperately needs to see. Here are a few thoughts from our new saint, who experienced such darkness, about spreading His joy:

- "Every time you smile at someone, it is an action of love, a gift to that person, a beautiful thing." [...] "We shall never know all the good that a simple smile can do."
- "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless."
- "Joy is prayer; joy is strength; joy is love; joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls."
- From her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: "Let us keep up that joy of loving Jesus in our hearts and share that joy with all that we come in touch with. That radiating joy is real, for we have no reason not to be happy because we have Christ with us. Christ in our hearts, Christ in the poor that we meet, Christ in the smile that we give and the smile we receive."
- And my personal favorite that is even written into their *Constitution*: "Take whatever He gives and give whatever He takes, with a big smile!" (*Constitution*, #24). This thought is connected to Mother Teresa's sense of loving trust and total surrender – knowing that I am loved by the Father, I can truly surrender everything to Him and that begets joy deep within me.

Everyone around us needs the love, and joy of Christ – that is our greatest tool of evangelization. A brilliant person who doesn't smile might have all the answers but not the solutions to people's problems. Remember Fr. Gary Kastl's homily last week about when he had his face in the iphone at the hospital and the gentlemen called him out – "Hey preacher man, you are supposed to be here to bring us joy!"

Back to waiters and waitresses, the flip side of learning from them is, how do I treat them, speak to them, smile at them? How do I treat the maintenance man, house keeper, lawn mower, kitchen worker, etc.? What is my tone with people under my authority, or the poor homeless person, or the

Publix worker? Everyone, those we serve and those who serve us, so desperately needs us to radiate the love of Christ to them.

So how can we live this in our daily life? Brothers, this is about integration – not just about smiling or having a perma-grin on our face, but about realizing that our countenance and affect effect the people around us and make us either bridges or obstacles to others. Allowing our affect to be an extension of our teaching office by radiating the love of Christ as did Mother Teresa and the saints before her.

Please discern long and hard if you can do this or even want to do this. Remember the seminarian I spoke of who felt like a “circus animal” or that he was “on stage” all of the time, he failed to grasp the beauty of his vocation to be a missionary disciple who strives to live the joy of the Gospel. It is the Year of Mercy, and if we want people to turn to us for healing, counsel, and confession, then we must radiate Christ and His joy. No one wants to talk to the unwelcoming pastor or the severe looking associate. You see, there is a connection between our effectiveness and the way people perceive us by our appearance and countenance. How often I hear from the people of God about this priest or that priest – “If father would only smile... He looks so severe... Why isn’t father happy?... That priest has no joy.” Striving for this begins now – and I will use a line from AA which says “fake it until you make it.” Now is the time to work on greeting each other with a smile, because if you don’t do it here, the little old lady you pass on the parish property is going to be very hurt if you don’t smile and greet her. Remember the words of my waiter: “being a waiter has made me a better person, and a better husband.” Allowing ourselves to be formed makes us better people – more at peace with ourselves, more in love with life, and more effective spouses who can love the Bride like Christ. And besides, joy is the fruit of the active presence of the Holy Spirit within us (cf. Gal. 5:22) – so if He is truly working, it cannot be fake!

If we are really bringing Christ to others, then our entire lives will be marked with a special kind of joy that will make our words and actions believable. There is a story told by theologian Karl Rahner, S.J. in his book, *The Priesthood*, and it goes something like this: A priest friend of Rahner’s had a mother who was near death. One day she said, “Son, I want you to make us a dinner that we can share for the last time. Then I want you to pour us some champagne so that we can toast each other. Then, when I die, I do not want you to mourn or be sad.” “But, Mother,” said the priest, “Of course I am going to mourn when you die! How could I not be sad?” “But you must not be sad, my son,” said the Mother, “for no one will believe a sad priest.”

Obviously we are human and at appropriate times we mourn, are sad, have bad days, etc. In fact, I do not want to overemphasize this to the point of making you feel like you have to be fake or that you cannot be real especially in prayer, spiritual direction, and in your intimate relationships with friends. A tough day and tough times are understandable, but as Pope Francis would say a Christian or a worse a priest who is a sourpuss (*con cara de vinagre*) is inexcusable (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 85). The Pope is reminding us as does the book of Sirach: “The sign of a happy heart is a cheerful face” (Sirach 13:26). We must strive to work through our struggles and surrender them to the Lord alone who can bring us His joy and light in the midst of darkness.

And so in closing I offer a few challenges for your further reflection:

As you prepare for meetings with your formation advisor and examine the Human and Spiritual Formation Rubric, where do you need to be challenged and move from foundational to exemplary? Under “Maturity for Priestly Service” the following spectrum is offered – Foundational: “Often

appears anxious, agitated, frustrated, or depressed” and Exemplary: “Reflects inner peace and joy and confers that sense on others with whom he comes in contact.” OR Foundational: “Often complains about the external factors of seminary life, failing to see God’s grace at work in himself and in others” and Exemplary: “Lives in openness to transcendent values and grace; sees others in this light as well.”

How will you joyfully enter into your pastoral assignment after a difficult day in the classroom, or you are in the midst of writing a paper, or even in a vocational crisis? Will you be able to swallow your own problems, ask for the grace, and be Christ for others?

Does it make sense to you when I speak of hospitality as a hallmark of Christian charity here at SVDP and do you see is a direct link to one day creating a welcoming parish?

Let us pray for the gift of joy to be poured out upon us since it is indeed one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22). Beg the Father to pour out every good gift upon us for the sake of our own good and the building up of the Body of Christ – come Holy Spirit come! Finally, one last thought from Mother Teresa is the acronym “JOY” which stands for “Jesus Others You.” If we consistently make Christ our primary focus and put the needs of others ahead of our own, namely if we love the way Mother Teresa did, like Jesus did in “laying down His life for His friends” (Jn. 15:13), then His joy will be in us and our joy will be complete!

I close with the prayer that the Missionaries of Charity pray every day after receiving Christ in Holy Communion entitled “Radiating Christ”:

Dear Jesus, help me to spread Your fragrance wherever I go.

Flood my soul with Your spirit and life.

Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly, that my life may only be a radiance of Yours.

Shine through me, and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul.

Let them look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus!

Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine, so to shine as to be a light to others.

The light, O Jesus, will be all from You; none of it will be mine.

It will be you, shining on others through me.

Let me thus praise You the way You love best, by shining on those around me.

Let me preach You without preaching, not by words but by my example, by the catching force of the sympathetic influence of what I do,

the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to You. Amen.