

Reverend Christopher Michael Riehl

Homily by Fr. J. David Carter

November 16, 2022

We come to the final moments of the Funeral Rites for our brother Christopher Michael Riehl, Priest of Jesus Christ. The truth of faith that comes to me at this moment is that of Divine Providence. We are here today, at this moment, for this reason, because God in His infinite wisdom has seen fit for it to be so. And God does not make mistakes. God did not make a mistake when Christopher was born - God knew Him "before he knit him in his mother's womb". He did not make a mistake when he was baptized into a covenant with the Lord. "He hath clothed me with the garment of salvation." God did not make a mistake when he moved his heart to say yes to the call of the priesthood. "You are a priest forever, according to the Order of Melchizedek." And God did not make a mistake when he called him back to himself. "The death of his faithful ones is precious in the eyes of the Lord." It is true that this moment is a sad one. We have lost a son, a brother, a friend. We ask if it could have been another way, but the author of life has said otherwise about the death of this priest. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." But if we allow the light of faith to pierce the darkness of our grief we can see the hand of providence in the present moment. Our brother, ordained for the Diocese of Knoxville, had been living for some time far from us. Through the providence of medical services made available on this side of the mountains, in his last days he came back to the diocese of his incardination. Here, among the people he served for so long, he was able to be ministered to by the ones to whom he once ministered. There is further providence in the timing. He died on the feast of St. Leo the Great - I'm sure our brother, lion that he was in this life, is smiling at that. He loved God and His bride the church with the fierceness of a lion. May the saints now welcome him home into the eternal city, Jerusalem. He died just after his birthday and just a few days shy of his 13th priestly anniversary. His birth, his vocation and his death all coalesce in this life into one moment. If you look with the eyes of faith you see a certain fittingness to this - they are no coincidences. They are manifestations of providence. In fact, even today, in the sanctoral cycle of the ancient calendar, which he was so fond of, the Church celebrates St. Gertrude. St. Gertrude was one of the patron saints of Fr. Riehl. His paternal grandmother was named Ann Gertrude Riehl and her life of faith, even though she died when he was still relatively young, had an impact on his own assent to the faith and vocation to serve as a priest. With the eyes of faith we can see the hand of providence surrounding us and sustaining us.

For us who believe, the working of divine providence happens most poignantly through the priests of the Church. The greatest mystery of the priesthood of Jesus Christ in this world is that God chooses fragile and broken human beings to be agents of his providential care for us. A priest touches the lives of many. I'm sure there are many here who can trace a spiritual line that intersects with Fr. Riehl's ministry. I myself received the fruit of his priestly service - the only time I have ever been anointed was when I had pneumonia and a high fever a few years back. It was providentially a time when Fr. Riehl was staying with me at my parish. He was the one, then, to minister to me the sacrament of healing according to God's providence.

God's providence is not opposed to the cross of suffering. In fact, suffering is the crux of God's bold statement of providence for all mankind, when Christ was crucified in atonement for our sins. Because the cross is at the center of every priest's life, he too must suffer and often be a sign of contradiction. Sometimes he comforts the disturbed and sometimes he disturbs the comfortable. All of a priest's life, forms a part of God's plan for the salvation of the human race. He is the means by which God chooses to

dispense His sacramental grace. And this is a great mystery indeed. The priest is the one who draws God and man together in an intimate friendship through sacramental bonds.

We must all die. To die well is to die in friendship with God. I believe that Fr. Christopher Riehl died well. He too was a recipient of the ministry of his brother priests. He was anointed at least seven times before his death. I was also privileged in my last conversation with him, when he had come out of his coma, to hear his confession and speak the words of absolution to his believing heart. How blessed that moment, how healing it was for him, but even for me. How providential. It is a source of hope to me and I pray for you as well, as we pray these words of absolution now and as we lay our brother to rest until the last day comes.