

Bishop John M. D’Arcy
On the Occasion of His Memorial Mass
Basilica of the Sacred Heart
Feb. 7, 2013
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One day I solemnly informed Bishop D’Arcy that I was going to start my own church. I do not remember what the proximate occasion of this deliverance was – I was disgusted with something or another in the Church that I cannot even remember now – but I continued on to say that I had all the necessary qualifications, I could teach, I could preach, I could counsel people, I could preside at liturgies, I could run an organization, I could do practically everything except die on the Cross for the salvation of the world though I didn’t mention that part. Friends, in retrospect – it is not recommended to say this to your local bishop. It is not, as they say in administration, a “best practice.” I now regret saying it. But I don’t regret it because Bishop D’Arcy rebuked me or remonstrated with me, at least not overtly. His response was, “But John, you just taught a great summer course!” Of course part of my own distemper was that I was thinking that I had managed to blow yet another summer teaching, instead of working on a research project, so Bishop D’Arcy’s response initially only increased my irritation. But Bishop D’Arcy, by his response, in a nice way, was trying to say, “Come on John that’s all I need to deal with, you going on of all things about starting your own *Church!* Why don’t you grow up and realize you do have a place in the one Body and it is one that I and other people value even if you yourself seem to have contempt for it.” In other words, he called me out, but not in a way that embarrassed me but in a way that I could hear, in a way that encouraged me and pointed out my gifts.

I tell the story not only because it illustrates Bishop D’Arcy’s characteristic pastoral style, but also because it shows how deeply and reflexively Bishop D’Arcy was committed to the ecclesiology of Vatican II. He was telling me that even if I did not value my position as a layperson in the Church, and even if I had such an impoverished estimation of the baptismal priesthood, he, the bishop, did not. It dawned on me that I had for a minute forgotten he *was* the bishop and that was the only reason I could say such a thing. He was profoundly non-clerical. And yet, friends, if I am to be entirely honest with myself, I said it not in spite of the fact that he was a bishop, but *because of it*. Though he was my friend, something dark – and adolescent – inside of me *wanted* to hurt his feelings as bishop, even though part of my dishonorable intention, I think, was to hurt his feelings *as* bishop. In my defense I have to say I didn’t consciously realize that until he replied as he did, and I noticed there was in fact an unmistakable note of hurt in his voice, despite his encouraging message. It was not a feeling of personal injury – I had failed in that – but something else, unexpected and I still think about this

– I had offended his love for the Church, which he thought I had shared. He thought I had genuinely loved the people of God just like he did, he thought I had my eyes fixed on the good of souls and the strengthening of the brethren, just as he did; he thought I cared about ministering to the least and the little, just as he, who had suffered through countless photo ops on endless evenings after Confirmations, did, and who would never imagine he had “blown” a summer by teaching young people or had even thereby made any particular sacrifice worth noting. In other words, he thought I was a Vatican II Catholic too, who truly valued these gifts and these leadership practices wherever they were found. Who was being clerical in this transaction? Obviously, it turned out, me. He had actually thought we were friends because we shared a love, not for office but for the one Body, crucified and suffering even now. He had thought I too was here to serve, and not to *be* served. It was his love that caught me up short in that moment, revealing to me my own faults not to shame me or judge me but with the intention of increasing my own resolve to love.

The dimensions of Bishop D’Arcy’s love for the Church began more and more to come into focus for me, and had the effect of making the Church come more and more in focus for me. How many times did Bishop D’Arcy talk about his parents who had immigrated from Ireland and founded a family here? Certainly enough times so that – and don’t tell me YOU didn’t find yourself thinking this too, even the most sympathetic listener thought, in spite of him or herself, are you going to tell that story AGAIN? But he was ever the teacher, and he taught by repetition. His stories were like mysterious Zen koans, raised up again and again for contemplation of a message that was at once in the words but transcended them. By speaking, as a bishop, in such unstinting and in such an obviously devoted way about his parents, and not only that he had fond memories of them from growing up, or that they had done their job in the Church as married people by producing a priestly vocation and a bishop to boot, as though that were all we were good for, but rather, think about it – he presented them as a continual object of contemplation for himself, like a living Ignatian exercise, such that even he, as bishop, could and did everyday still learn from their example and hoped to live up to it. This story, repeated pedagogically, little by little taught every married person who heard it to appreciate that they too had a teaching function in the Church; they heard on the lips of a bishop not a treatise of their own worth and dignity, but a living impression of it. They –we – learned to feel appreciated, to feel as though indeed we were not second class citizens in the Church, that in fact their example and their commitment mattered, and that even those with the fullness of the priesthood could learn in an ongoing way from it. Different gifts, building the one Body, this is the kind of ecclesiology, the kind of love that by reflex and without thinking, had zero tolerance for sexual abuse in the Church long before the phrase even was invented. It is because Bishop D’Arcy had been formed so thoroughly and loved so deeply the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* that he could actually *see* the Church and defend the Church, and not confuse that with defending an inbred clerical structure. There was no one who could speak more

glowingly about the priesthood than Bishop D’Arcy – he was second to none in appreciating and fostering its dignity – but he did it not by pitting it against the lay estate in the Church, but by pointing out, time and again, that the dignity of the ordained priesthood, which he loved so dearly, and its ontological difference from the common priesthood, was due to its special configuration to the unique priesthood of Christ as an office of service to the baptismal priesthood, which he cast as something of inestimable worth, and taught others do to so. He told me one day that he would never send his seminarians to a particular seminary we had mentioned, because they would come back wearing French cuffs with gold cuff links and thinking that constituted their identity as priests.

Everyone who customarily attended the baccalaureate Mass will not fail to remember, perhaps again because they may have winced at the twentieth repetition of the same exercise that nevertheless each student class would hear for the first time – will, as I was saying, remember that Bishop D’Arcy – and I can almost remember the script now – would say, in his remarks after Communion, that at the time of his own graduation from a certain distinguished high school in Boston there were awards given out for excellence of accomplishment in the various disciplines, and that he, the young Bishop D’Arcy, did not receive even one, not even for excellence in RELIGION! And that he knew from the listing of their names in the program, that many of the students had been singled out for their accomplishments, but that he would now like all of those students to stand for a round of applause who, like him, had received no particular honor except the only one that really counted, the Notre Dame degree. Year after year, the huge congregation responded with surprisingly thunderous applause. Bishop D’Arcy’s instinct for an ecclesiology of mutual gift was aided and abetted by the fact that at heart he was a democrat – democrat with a small “d,” though also with a large “D,” whose sympathy with the unhonored common person was everywhere apparent. One of the enduring sadnesses of his life was the abandonment, by his beloved Democratic party, which he thought of as the party of the little people, of the littlest, the least honored and most helpless of all, the unborn. Bishop D’Arcy looked like someone who could have just stepped outside of an Irish pub in Boston after a satisfactory fight, and yet the essence of the image was a populist one.

Bishop D’Arcy communicated his love for people with ease, but that is not the only reason for the applause at the baccalaureate Mass. I think it was also because he really loved education, and that love was visible in this, another of his homiletic koans. He was reminding people that education was an intrinsic good, and that, though it is properly honored in those who have excelled, in the end it is to be pursued for its own sake and not *for* the prestige that comes from awards or honors. Bishop D’Arcy *enjoyed* the University. He attended every conference I ever ran, not as a speaker or presider but as a member of the audience, having fun learning, thinking, encouraging others to do so, chiding and teaching too with his comments. Bishop D’Arcy responded to every student invitation to speak on campus, and often was the last one to

leave the event because students wanted to talk to him. I remember one time when really *everyone* had finally left – everyone, it seemed, except one last stray student, who, it turned out, wanted Bishop to hear her confession. He had just heaved a sigh of relief that he was finished! But he took her off across the room and heard the confession. Bishop D’Arcy had a tremendous gift for not reifying things, communities or communions, into something that transcended the sum of the persons involved, be it the Church or the University. He attended every commencement, not because he had an official role other than to sit on the stage but because he enjoyed seeing the joy of the students and the pride of the parents and because he wanted to add the bishop’s implicit approval to the business of teaching and learning.

I guess I should say, he attended *almost* every commencement. Friends, “precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones,” as the Psalmist says. I take this to mean the death of the saints, especially a death so lovingly accepted as Bishop D’Arcy’s was, if honored properly, must be a memory of healing and of hope. Can we let this preciousness come into our memory and configure it? Perhaps it can aid in the healing of memory. Maybe some memories will come to prominence that had lain dormant before. So, at the risk of raising an awkward subject at this most difficult time, permit me to recount one memory from an even more difficult time. Bishop D’Arcy did attend the baccalaureate Mass of the Commencement Exercises of 2009. He did ask all the non-honored students to stand up, and then he gave his third favorite homiletic koan about faith and reason as two wings for the soul, and the Catholic university as fostering both wings of the soul. He concluded, with more wincing from regular attendees, who knew it was coming, by saying, there you have it, two good homilies for the price of one. That year, though, unlike any previous year, he received a standing ovation. It slowly spread across the stadium. President Jenkins, the principal celebrant of the Mass, could have stopped the ovation at any time by standing up to begin the concluding rite. Bishop D’Arcy had scrupulously avoided mentioning the controversy attendant upon that year’s commencement, but Fr. Jenkins could have interpreted the applause if not as a vote against him, certainly a vote for Bishop D’Arcy. But he nevertheless allowed the applause to spread and strengthen, and for almost an eternity, it seemed to me, sitting on the edge of my faculty marshall seat with the students. There was a deep courtesy exchanged there. The bond was not broken. Somewhere very deep, arising from the heart of the Church, *ex corde ecclesiae*, the bonds of the Church became visible. The strong cords of charity, which make the Church, held.

Friends, this is the Church that I love so much. This is the Church that Bishop D’Arcy lived, loved and taught, and the Church that he actually taught me to *see* in a way I could not see before. That is the supreme gift of the teaching office of the bishop, to give the Church to itself, to teach the Church, in the persons of all who are members of the one Body, to love themselves as members of the Church and to find the gifts of the Spirit working within, below the surface,

where it may sometimes seem absent. I will never again say that I want to start my own Church --certainly not to a bishop! – but also certainly not to a friend, and not to anyone, in fact, if for no other reason than to do that would be to disfigure the memory one of those holy ones, whose death in the eyes of the Lord is indeed precious, someone whom I loved, and love, both as friend and as bishop.

OK. Is it a sacrilege to say it? But I will – “There you have it. Two good homilies for the price of one.”

Thank You.