

Msgr. John Hemann funeral (October 15, 2021—Sacred Heart, Osage)

First, I want to extend my sympathy and prayers to Fr. John's family: his brothers Fr. Mel, James and Matthew, his sisters Kathleen, Sr. Camilla, and Lucille and to all their families, all the nephews and nieces and their families, to his brother priests and to all who knew him. We were all certainly saddened to learn of his sudden illness and hospitalization, and then of his death last Saturday. But we are grateful for the faith that reminds us that death is not the end of our story. So as we offer this funeral Mass for the blessed repose of Fr. John's soul, we also promise you, his family, our continued prayers for God's peace and consolation for all of you.

I'm deeply honored to be here today. I've known Fr. John well for about 30 years; he was pastor of my home parish of St. Wenceslaus (Duncan) in the 1990's. More than that, however, we were in the same priest support during that time. With the recent death of Msgr. Joe Slepicka, also part of that group, we have now lost two out of our five members within the last month. It will certainly be different for Fr.'s Craig Steimel, Ray Atwood and me from now on; the amount and volume of conversation will be notably different... Our gatherings were always lively, and Fr. John (you won't be surprised to learn) was never at a loss for words, and he wasn't shy about expressing his opinions, positive or negative. It often seemed that he didn't so much attend our group meetings; rather, he presided at our group meetings—telling us in detail about his most recent priest pilots gathering, the recent baptism he celebrated of a child whose parents' wedding he had years ago, and many other such events. He really did have a phenomenal memory for names and places and the connections he made throughout his priesthood, and we heard a lot about them... We will certainly miss him!

A common topic of conversation in church circles these days is what has been called the 'vocations crisis'—the decreasing number of priests and religious, at least in our part of the world. We also know, of course, that we all have a vocation—a calling from God to a certain way of life, the way that God has in mind for each person to grow in holiness and generous service to God and neighbor and eventually to reach eternal life in heaven. That is the general vocation that we all share by virtue of being baptized in Jesus Christ, and it is within that context that we are called to discern and follow the specific and personal call that God has extended to each of us. That is where we begin to talk about specific vocations such as marriage or religious life, the dedicated single life...or the ordained priesthood, the vocation to which Fr. John was called when he was ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Binz in 1960.

Vatican II had much to say about the idea of vocation, and in particular about the ministerial priesthood. Priests are called in a special way to share in the ministry of Jesus who is priest, prophet, and king:

--priest: helping the faithful grow in holiness, virtue and love, especially through the sacraments of Eucharist and penance/reconciliation;

--prophet (or teacher): the priest as one who helps the faithful to come to know Jesus and what he teaches about himself and his desire for our eternal life and joy through the power of his death and resurrection;

--king (or shepherd): the priest as one who, in imitation of Christ the Good Shepherd, works to protect, guard, and strengthen his flock.

Fr. John certainly lived out his 61+ years of priesthood with great fidelity, generosity, and energy. Besides his many assignments as associate pastor, team ministry in Waterloo and then as pastor throughout the archdiocese, he also served as chaplain with the Iowa Army National Guard—retiring with the rank of brigadier general. I think Fr. John took special pride in being the first ‘six-pack’ pastor of the Archdiocese of Dubuque—not talking about a particular beverage here; rather, he was the first to be pastor of six parishes at one time. And he managed Ionia, North Washington, Nashua, Alta Vista, Lourdes and Elma just fine! Fr. John retired in 2005, but I’m going to put quote marks around that word ‘retired’. He was very generous in providing substitute help for us ‘pre-retirement’ priests, helping with penance services, providing pastoral and sacramental service to the patients and staff at Mercy in Mason City. And when the archbishop would call and say “Fr. John, Fr. X needs to be away for a few weeks on medical leave—would you be able to cover his parishes in the meantime?”...Fr. John always said ‘yes’. That happened seven different times if I remember correctly, and in our priest group we heard about every single one of them!

Back for a moment to that broader notion of ‘vocation’—God’s call to each of us to grow in holiness and love: we need to keep that in mind because it helps us remember what and who we are made for—eternal life in the kingdom of God. We are all called to sanctity and holiness, and to recommit ourselves to Christ if and when we go astray. Fr. John was called to holiness, as are the rest of us—you who are his family, relatives, friends, his brother priests, all religious, and Archbishop Jackels as well (of course, that goes without saying...). We are all called to be holy, to follow, love and serve God and neighbor as ourselves, and finally to be with God forever in heaven. That is our hope and prayer for Fr. John; it’s also our hope for ourselves. Let’s remember that death will come for each one of us as well; thus, how important it is to pursue that holiness and in being directed to God and his will for us.

I said that Fr. John lived his particular vocation to the priesthood faithfully in so many ways; he also lived his vocation as Christian with that same fidelity. His love for Christ was deep and genuine, and he lived it with real joy. I couldn’t help noticing that all three readings today refer to joy in one way or another, especially Jesus’ words to the apostles at the Last Supper: “I tell you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” Pope St. Paul VI said that joy is not only a surface level of happiness and contentment; let’s face it—we don’t always feel ‘happy’ or ‘content’! But real joy goes deeper, he said—it’s what we experience when in the possession of a known and a loved good. Ultimate joy, of course, is knowing and loving God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as the ultimate, unsurpassable good.

Fr. John was a joy-filled man and priest. He had one of the heartiest and most infectious laughs I’ve ever heard that went well with his great sense of humor. My sister Mary Ann lived at Opportunity Village in Clear Lake (she had cerebral palsy). The Village staff would take her and other Catholic residents of the Village to Mass at St. Patrick’s in town, where Fr. John—of course—often helped out with weekend Masses. I remember her saying once: “I like Fr. John—he’s funny!” Yes, he most certainly was! Fr. John found great joy in serving the people of God in his many different assignments. He also found great joy in being with his brother priests. He was a founding member of the National Association of Priest Pilots, and he loved going to those annual meetings that would be held all over the U.S. And he was also always arranging the next priest gathering for a meal together either at his condo or at a local dining establishment.

You all know that there is so much more that could be said about Fr. John, and no doubt that sharing of memories will go on for a long time. I would simply conclude by thanking God for the fact that Fr. John Hemann—Msgr. Hemann—lived a truly admirable and faithful response to the vocation, that call to holiness, that God extended to him: first as a disciple of Jesus Christ, then as a priest. So we commend his soul now to the Divine Mercy. May the Lord cleanse him from any stain of sin or weakness that may yet remain. Do pray for the blessed repose of his soul and for all the faithful departed—Sacred Scripture tells us that is a good and holy thing to do. Fr. John has finished the work of his vocation on this earth; may he rest in the presence of Jesus his Savior in the eternal peace and the perfection of joy that is the kingdom of heaven.