

## 26<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (October 1, 2023)

Have you ever felt completely empty, totally drained—like you have not ounce of energy left within you? Think about parents of young children who every day give themselves to all the tasks involved in caring for their children, while at the same time keeping up with their other responsibilities at work or home. At this harvest time of year, think of the farmers who put in extra long days getting the crops in. In this football season the coaches and players go through all the drills and practices, and after the ‘big game’ they are exhausted—they ‘left it all on the field’.

I think we have all experienced that emptiness in one way or another; and the more the years fly by, the more we experience that emptiness. In our second reading today St. Paul speaks a different kind of emptiness, that experienced by Jesus. Though Jesus ‘was in the form of God’ (as Paul put it), he didn’t chase after ‘equality with God’ for its own sake. Instead, “he emptied himself...coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance.” St. Paul is talking here about the profound mystery of the Incarnation: that doctrine of our faith that proclaims that Jesus, God the Son and co-eternal with the Father, really and truly took on our human nature in its fullness and in its weakness in all things except sin. Jesus did not lose his divine nature when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb. But, in taking on our human nature, he indeed ‘emptied himself’ of all that would prevent him from experiencing our own pain, weakness, frustration and fear. He took on and endured our frail humanity precisely in order to lift us out of that frailty and bring us back to full and eternal communion with his and our Father in heaven.

Jesus often challenges us on our need to follow him and his example by taking up our own crosses, to face with faith, courage, and resolve the pains and struggles of this life. In other words, he calls us to empty ourselves of all that gets in the way of belonging completely to him. The saints give us wonderful examples of that kind of self-emptying, especially those who gave the total and complete gift of themselves by martyrdom. And on September 10 (three weeks ago), the Church gave us yet another example of heroic faith and love by beatifying an entire family who was brutally murdered during World War II in Nazi-controlled Poland.

It is an amazing story. Joseph and Victoria Ulma lived in Markowa, a small town in southeast Poland. They were married in 1935, and by 1944 they had six children and were expecting child number seven. They were devoted to each other and to their family, and lived their Catholic faith with real integrity. In their town there lived a number of Jewish families—they and their Catholic neighbors got along very well with each other. But real danger came in the fall of 1941. Nazi Germany had conquered and occupied Poland in 1939 which began World War II, and their demonic plan to destroy the Jewish population in Europe began in earnest two years later. In November of 1941 the death penalty was decreed for any Polish citizens who provided aid or shelter to Jews. In 1942 many of Markowa’s Jews were either deported to the death camps or were executed on the spot.

Despite the death penalty ordered for those who protected Jews, Joseph and Victoria Ulma took eight local Jews into their home to protect them from the Nazis. They were discovered, however, by the Nazis in 1944. In late March, Nazi officers came to the Ulma farm and immediately killed the eight Jews who had been protected. They then killed Joseph and Victoria...in the presence of their six children. Eyewitnesses reported that Victoria had gone into labor and began to give birth to her seventh child right before she died. The Nazis then proceeded to kill all of the Ulma children who ranged in age from 2 to 8, along with child #7 who hadn’t even had a chance to receive a name before dying.

It is really difficult to read of such outrageous evil and even to tell you this story even now. But it is real, it truly happened. Throughout the course of human history, we have shown ourselves capable of monstrous evil...but also of the most amazing grace, courage, and love. Joseph and Victoria Ulma and their family were on the side of God and goodness in showing compassion and love for their Jewish neighbors who were under direct attack. In the Ulma family Bible, the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel was underlined in red—they were inspired to live out the lesson of that parable by helping those in need, even though they knew they were endangering themselves by doing so. The Ulma family gives us a truly great and powerful example of total dedication to Jesus Christ and living out the call to holiness and love that is given to all of us. They were willing to be emptied of everything—even their very lives—to be faithful to their call to love, serve, and protect their neighbors who faced bitter and deadly persecution.

I am certainly not saying that we all have to face blood martyrdom as did the Ulma family. But there certainly are ways that we can empty ourselves of those things or attitudes that are obstacles to living more fully the call to follow Christ and love and serve our neighbor as ourselves. For example, what greed or envy or lust or resentments do we hang onto? With what bitterness or anger or refusal to forgive are we filled? Oftentimes the self-emptying we need is something we can choose to do and that we know, in our heart of hearts, is precisely what Jesus calls us to do. We can decide and choose to forgive someone we hold a grudge against, even if we don't feel like it. We can decide and choose to offer ourselves and our resources, even if only a friendly ear and presence to someone who is hurting, even if we'd rather pursue our own interests and desires.

Blessed Joseph and Victoria Ulma and their family emptied themselves totally; they gave their lives for Jesus and their Church in general and for their Jewish friends and neighbors in particular. May we follow their example in our own particular circumstances of life; may we be emptied of what is not of Jesus so that we can be filled instead with and by him. Then our emptiness will become our fullness because Jesus will be our fullness, he who is Lord to the eternal glory of God the Father.