



Address to the FDLC – 11 October 2019

Chicago, Grand Sheraton Hotel

I can only imagine that most of you in this room are wondering, “Who is this guy?” When Rita Thiron told me that I had been chosen to be the recipient of this prestigious award, I really wondered, “Did she get the wrong phone number? Was this a mistake?” In all honesty, I can only say that I deeply honored, very humbled, and still surprised that I am standing here before you. Let me tell you one reason why, related to the man whose name distinguishes this award. On one occasion, a confrere of mine from Conception Abbey told me of an experience he had with Monsignor Frederick McManus in Rome. They had been attending a high-level meeting at the Vatican relating to the Liturgy for the United States. The meeting had its very difficult moments, even wondering if its problems could be solved in a way that was respectful of everyone present. Knowing something of all the people involved, it was quite clear that Monsignor McManus, without being told to do something, stepped into an embarrassing and quarrelsome situation and became the ambassador of reconciliation needed at that moment, allowing a project for the English-speaking liturgy to move forward, having a positive and formative impact on many people. To receive this award in his name is a great honor, for if there is one message that runs through the words and deeds of Jesus throughout the Gospel, it is reconciliation, which I truly believe is God’s great dream for our world today.

Despite the fact that this is the first FDLC meeting in which I have participated, my life has been involved with the liturgy since grade school, and I am a son of the Archdiocese of Chicago. I began playing the organ for the children’s

Mass at St. Mary's grade school in Riverside in the early 1960s, graduated to being assistant organist at Holy Name Cathedral in the late 1960s, and then entered the monastery at Conception Abbey in the summer of 1970. In all those years, whether playing the organ, leading song chanting the Responsorial Psalm, directing a choir, or composing music, liturgy has been at the center of my life. As Benedictines, our life is the liturgy; it is the heartbeat of the Benedictine's life in which the whole day – from early morning to late evening – is consecrated to God in liturgical worship, not only for ourselves, but for the whole world. This is a very similar reason that all of you are gathered here, because you enliven the faith of others by offering something that is beautiful, inspiring, and truly noble. The gift of yourself expressed in the music that you compose from mind and heart, that you pray fervently, that you render with love and devotion, and that you generously and lovingly offer to others is a most precious gift. It is precious because it is a gift of yourself, of your very being. It is precious because you help us to hear the voice of God given in the Psalms and other biblical texts, in ways that lift the spirit and touch the human heart. That is no small gift.

Recently, a friend in Kansas City told me that when her husband prepares to cantor at the Eucharist, he takes time to reflect on the Psalm he will chant, to read something about the Psalm, and to pray the Psalm. He has given his heart to what he is doing in the liturgy, and I imagine that is true of all of you, of all of us. How beautiful and how blessed is the gift you give, week after week, for those who come to worship. You help people to hear the cry of the poor, the pain of the needy, the brokenness of human lives, the hopes of the sorrowing, and the joy of the grateful. Those are expressions we all need to hear, because they touch our hearts and minds, and remind us that God stands in the middle of our lives – whether in good times or bad, moments of lament or glimpses of glory – God speaks to us, and you are the instruments of the divine Voice that recollect the depth of compassion, mercy, peace, hope, strength, courage, and joy that is found in relationship with God. Thank you; thank you; and thank you again for the gift you offer the people of God.

In 1998, Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb and Cardinal Francis George asked if I would undertake the work of revising the *1963 Grail Psalms*. From my own study of Scripture, I knew that the text had many examples of paraphrase; and yet, this translation was a tremendous gift to the Church by the Ladies of the Grail in England. How I had the audacity of accepting that invitation, when I know there are scholars much wiser and more learned than myself, I still do not know. At that point in 1998, I was a newly-minted abbot (1996), but from the time I was a novice in 1970, I had taken on a project of memorizing the whole Psalter so that it would become something that was a living part of me. That again was an audacious challenge; for a young monk, it was a constructive and creative endeavor to do. And now, looking back, I can say with conviction, it was one of the most formative experiences of my life; the Psalter became a “book of life through prayer” that forever would be my daily companion, a most intimate friend. Archbishop Lipscomb and Cardinal George told me that my work on the revision of the Book of Isaiah of *The New American Bible*, my background as a trained musician, and my life as a Benedictine monk made me the right person at the right time to tackle this major undertaking. When I explained that I would have to do this part-time because my main responsibility was to be a spiritual father to a wonderful community of Benedictines at Conception Abbey, they said, “no deadlines; just do good and accurate work.” And that is how the project began.

The revision of the Grail Psalms went through a series of redactions, and sometimes I had to swallow hard when those who were examining my work did not accept my changes, interventions, and new ways of expression which I felt were good for right translation and for the praying Church. But it taught me that this endeavor was really not “for” me or “about” me, but for the Church, and its redactors had to be the last judge of my offering. It was also an occasion to see the great work of Church publishers, especially GIA Publications, with whom I worked closely. And it was there that I began to hear God’s words, which I had the distinct privilege to translate, and then musicians like you had the gifts and talents to set to beautiful melodies, lush harmonies, and creative rhythms. If there are any groups to

thank it is both you of the FDLC and my monastic community of Conception Abbey who allowed me to take up this work of revising the fine *1963 Grail Psalms*.

There are probably many of you here for whom the name of an early monastic author is not that well known, John Cassian. For Benedictines, Cistercians and Trappists, he is a spiritual father and formative teacher. I would like to share with you what he has to say about those people who come to love the Psalms, pray them day after day like you, and hear them as they gather for prayer. I can say from experience that his words of 1,600 years ago are a haunting message of truth, an inspiring expression of reality, and a genuine hope for those who come to pray, love, and reflect on the Psalms. In his Tenth Conference, he writes: “The zeal of the human soul makes us like a spiritual deer who feeds on the high mountains of the Psalms. Nourished by this food, which we continually eat, we penetrate so deeply into the thinking of the Psalms that we sing them not as though composed by the Psalmist, but as if we had written them, as if these were our own private prayer uttered amid the deepest compunction of the heart. We come to think of them as having been specifically composed for us and we recognize that what they express was made real not simply once upon a time in the person of the Psalmist, but that now, every day they are being fulfilled in each of us. Thus do the Scriptures lie ever opened to us. They are revealed heart and sinew. The sacred words stir memories in us. Instructed by our own experiences, we are not really learning through hearsay, but have a feeling for these sentiments as things that we have already seen and experienced. We bring them to birth in the depths of our hearts as if they were feelings naturally there and part of our very being. We enter into their meaning not because of what we read, but because of what we have experienced earlier. And so our soul will arrive at that purity of heart in our search for the living God.”

May these words of John Cassian live in us, and may we continue to find in God’s Word the inspiration to set to music the beauty of these texts, so that they may continue to serve us and the people of God. Again, I thank you for your liturgical ministry which continues to evangelize the Church in the love, mercy and compassion of God. I thank you for enlivening in all God’s people a living trust in the

teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which shows us the way to eternal life, God's great dream for our world. Thank you again for this great honor and award. Peace.