

012410 SOMEONE HAS TO GO FIRST

(Do not be afraid to be bold. Do not be afraid to step up.
The Lord has given us his Spirit.)

Yesterday I went to Our Lady of Lourdes parish in the Overbrook section of Philadelphia. The occasion was to concelebrate the Funeral Mass for Mrs. Genevieve Owens the mother of Monsignor Owens the pastor of Saint Alphonsus and a good friend of mine. Mrs. Owens had lived in that parish for over 80 years. She had worked in the Rectory and celebrated all her sacraments and those of her children in that place of worship. It was very fitting that she be buried from there.

While I was vesting with the other priest concelebrants downstairs in the hall I saw Father Chris Rogers who is the Vocations Director for the Archdiocese and a former student of mine. He had called me last month and asked me to give a 15 or 20 minute talk at the seminary to a group of young men mostly of high school age from around the archdiocese on my own vocational call and some of the typical things I would encounter as a priest. There were about 120 young men at the Seminary that night and besides my presentation they also saw a video and spent some time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament with cardinal Rigali who also gave a brief talk of encouragement.

I gave an indication of who I talked to when I was considering going into the Seminary and how I told my mom and dad and what their reaction was and the reaction of my friends. At the end of my talk I had a single point to make. I told the young men that I was the first to enter the seminary from my home parish. It was a young parish but no one had ever gone into the seminary. I was the first. Someone has to be the first. Many will come after but someone has to go first. Do not be afraid to be bold. I have found in life that the voice of God almost never says to us: "Take your time. Think it over. Try other things and then see where you are." No. The voice of God says: "Come follow me. Now!"

With all that as a backdrop, Father Rogers came over to me to thank me again for my talk and to give me an update. The next day he had received a phone call from a senior at Archbishop Ryan who said that he had been considering the seminary for a while and that he had been dithering, thinking about attending culinary school or another college. What he really thought he should do was to go into the seminary. And when he heard me say that someone had to go first he thought that he was that someone. Perhaps if I had not spoken or said what I did there may have been a different outcome. Who knows? But do not be afraid to step out.

On Friday I went on the bus to the March for Life in Washington with parishioners from Saint Anthony's and Saint Alphonsus parishes. There were hundreds of thousands of people there, all in good spirits, no anger, no contentiousness. They were people of all ages from strollers to walkers and everything in between. There were thousands and thousands of young people. There were signs and banners, singing and chanting, cell phones were abuzz with

twittering and tweeting and all manner of communication so that no one would get lost. Behind our group were a group of young men with a pro life banner who had made up a few chants of their own. At one point they chanted: We love ba—bies! We love ba—bies! I winced a little at first but then I thought to myself. Listen to what they are chanting loud and clear. Young men rejoicing in babies not just what leads to babies. It became music to my ears, a source of hope for another generation. They were bold. Someone has to step up. They did. Someone has to go first. They did.

Ezra and Nehemiah have brought back a sizable portion of the people of Israel from captivity. They return to a country in ruins. It is all so overwhelming. How will they rebuild? Where do they begin? Ezra and Nehemiah gather the people together and tell them to come prepared to spend the day. Bring your children. We are going to read from our story. And we are not to grow sad but we are to find joy and reasons for joy. Someone had to lead them. Someone had to step up. Someone had to go first. Ezra and Nehemiah did.

And Jesus goes back to his home town after being away for awhile. Stories about him have circulated. He goes right into the synagogue and takes the scroll of Isaiah which speaks of what it will be like when the kingdom of God breaks into this world—the blind will see and the deaf will hear and the poor will have good news brought to them. Jesus steps up and says that this passage has been fulfilled. Already. In their midst. That very day. Right there in his words. He IS the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Someone has to stand up and be bold. Someone has to go first. And so he does.

Saint Paul uses our intimate understanding of our own bodies to make a point about our relationship with Christ and with one another in Christ. We are not all the same anymore than the eye is the ear or the foot is the hand. Each has a special purpose and place. Each has a special contribution to make to the body. And when all make their contribution the body functions at its best. You and I are not the same nor are we meant to be. But we each have a very important contribution to make, a very specific contribution to make which the others need. We are not to be afraid. It is for each of us to step up in our time. We must each be bold. Someone has to go first. Sometimes that someone has to be me.

Thankfully, Christ did. You can see him there on the crucifix. He stood up, boldly, and took the first step because he was so aware of how hard it is for us to be courageous. So he then sends his own Spirit to us so that we will have available to us the power we need to take the steps that we are to take. Let the Lord feed you here this day and strengthen you. Let him send you out to your homes and offices and places of work. Do not be afraid. Be bold. Stand up. It is your turn to go first.