

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – B
Fr. Chad S. Green
Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
5 August 2018

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15
Psalm 78
Ephesians 4:17, 20-24
(Matthew 4:4b) John 6:24-35

Exitus et Reditus

A common question that I get asked from time to time is, “How long does seminary take?” There’s no one answer to that question, as it takes different lengths of time for different seminarians. It depends on how old the man is when he enters seminary, and what his previous education is. Take Fr. Steve, for example. He went to seminary when he was in high school. Four years of high school seminary; four years of college seminary; and four years of major seminary. For him, seminary took 12 years.

When I went to seminary, I had already completed high school, and I had already completed college. But before I could enter major seminary, I had to complete two years of prerequisite education and formation, as well, and (like Seminarian Ben last year) a one-year internship at a parish. So, for me, seminary took 7 years.

In order to more fully answer the question of how long seminary took for me, however, I have to explain that I left seminary for a few years in the midst of my seminary formation, in order to discern more clearly my call to be a priest. Adding it all up, it took me ten years from when I first entered seminary in 2007, before I was ordained in 2017.

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In my time away from seminary, the Lord taught me an important lesson that helped me return to seminary and eventually be ordained a priest. But first, I’d like us to take a look at our First Reading from the Book of Exodus.

The Israelites were only one month into their journey out of slavery in Egypt toward freedom in the Promised Land. Just one month and they had already forgotten the Lord's Promise to them.¹ They had already forgotten how the Lord helped them escape Pharaoh and led them safely through the Red Sea.² Four-hundred years of slavery in Egypt, and only one month after starting the path toward freedom, they were ready to turn back.³

This wasn't the first time that the Israelites complained about the new freedom the Lord had won for them.⁴ And it wasn't the last time that they would want to go back to Egypt.⁵ This cycle of accepting the freedom of salvation and turning back to the slavery of sin is the story of Creation and Salvation. It's the story of the Israelites – and it's our own personal story, as well.

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Saint Thomas Aquinas explained this cycle with the Latin term *exitus et reditus*, which means, “exiting and returning.” *Exiting* or going away from God – and *returning* to God. This is the basic story of Creation and Salvation, and it's the basic story for each one of us. We were created by God, but by our sins we have gone away from Him. By His love and mercy, God doesn't leave us – He is always working to bring us back – to help us return safely to Him. God is always working to set us free from slavery and bring us to the freedom of salvation in the Promised Land of Heaven.

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Before I entered seminary, my spiritual director gave me a book to read called *He Ledeth Me*, the spiritual autobiography of Fr. Walter Cizek. Fr. Cizek was a Jesuit priest from Pennsylvania who was captured by the Russian army during World War II and falsely convicted of being a Vatican “spy”. He spent the next 23 years being tortured and mistreated in Soviet prisons and Siberian labor camps, until he was returned to the United States in 1963 in an

exchange of spies. “During those years of hardship and suffering,” Fr. Ciszek learned so much about faith and trust in God, that he thought his story “could be of help to others in their lives.”⁶ His story was a help to me in my life. He was part of my inspiration to take a chance and go to seminary.

Four years later, after I had decided to withdraw from seminary, I met with Archbishop Sartain to talk about it and explain my decision. Toward the end of our meeting, he said to me, “Chad, I remember that before you entered seminary, you read Fr Ciszek’s book, *He Leadeth Me*. I think that you should read it again.”

About six months later, I finally did read it again. When I came to a particular part toward the end of the book, Fr. Ciszek’s lesson struck me like it hadn’t the first time I read it. After many years of prison and labor camps, Fr. Ciszek had been released to live as a free citizen in a small Soviet town. But soon after a joyful celebration of the Easter Triduum with his parish, the KGB told him he would have to move to another city. He was heartbroken. For the first time in his life he had been able to minister fully as a priest in a parish, but now it was once again being taken away from him. *How could God allow this to happen?*

As he boarded the plane to another city, he realized his error. After all that God had shown him, taught him, and brought him through – over twenty years of prison and labor camps – why was he questioning God’s Providence now?

Fr. Ciszek’s lesson is that this happens to all of us. Like the Israelites, we, too, are called to trust completely in God’s Providence as He guides us to the Promised Land. As Fr. Ciszek learned, “It’s so simple and yet so difficult.”⁷

We enter into things with great enthusiasm and joy: seminary or priesthood; marriage or parenthood; a new job, a new ministry, a new commitment to our relationship with God.⁸ But

then, “as the years go by, difficulties increase and there is a constant need for more sacrifice and a renewal of...the initial promise.”⁹ A need for us to see God’s Providence helping us through the difficulties and sacrifices, and bringing us back to Him.

If we only see the difficulties and sacrifices as an empty burden, then what we had once committed to with zeal becomes meaningless. Like the Israelites questioning Moses, we start to question ourselves. *Why did I ever commit to this? Was it all a mistake? Maybe I should have chosen a different path?*¹⁰ And then we look for some way out.¹¹

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Reading this chapter for the second time – with new eyes – I realized Fr. Ciszek was talking about *me*. I entered seminary with enthusiasm and joy. When times got more difficult, when I started to feel lonely, I questioned why I had ever even gone to seminary in the first place. I thought it had been a mistake. And I looked for a way *out*.

I’ll always remember how I felt reading that book for the second time and having that revelation. I didn’t know how it would all work out, but I knew that – God-willing – I would eventually go back to seminary and one day be a priest.

Now, don’t get me wrong, it hasn’t been all smooth from that moment on. There have been and continue to be moments of *exitus* for me – of turning away from God. But for every *exitus* we make, God is ready to offer us a *reditus* – a way to return to Him.

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The most important way that God offers us a way to return to Him happens right here in the Mass – every Sunday and every day of the week. Jesus becomes Present to us in the Word and in the Eucharist.¹² In the Word, we are reminded of His plan to save us from sin and bring us to Salvation in Heaven. And in the Eucharist, His Body and Blood are Truly Present to

strengthen us on our journey toward the Promised Land.¹³ This is why we need to be here each Sunday – and even during the week, if possible – to help us remember.

Like the Ancient Israelites, sometimes we forget where God has brought us *from* – and where He is leading us *to*. It happens to all of us. Let the Eucharist, the True Bread from Heaven,¹⁴ be a frequent reminder and a strengthening for us on our way to the Promised Land.

¹ Exodus 13:3-5, 16:1

² Exodus 12:31-36, 14:23-31

³ Exodus 16:2-3

⁴ Exodus 14:10-12, 15:24

⁵ For example, Exodus 17:1-3

⁶ Fr. Walter Ciszek, “Prologue” in *He Leadeth Me*, 12

⁷ Ciszek, 174

⁸ Ephesians 4:22-24

⁹ Ciszek, 175

¹⁰ Ciszek, 176

¹¹ Ciszek, 175

¹² *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 1362-1365

¹⁴ John 6:31-35; also see Exodus 16:4, 15 and Psalm 78:23-25