

Tom Rechen's Remarks on the Occasion of Father Matera's Retirement – June 27, 2021

Good afternoon.

Father Matera does not like to be the center of attention and I suspect he will be a little uncomfortable today as we reflect on what he has meant to this Parish. Father, I apologize in advance. I ask your forgiveness. But today is appropriately unavoidable.

We gather, of course, to say thank you, and to celebrate a well-deserved retirement. It is an occasion of great joy while at the same time representing an occasion marked with some sadness. Sadness because we are losing a Pastor who has made a mark upon this Parish and who has meant so much to all of us who are gathered here today.

Of course, on an occasion such as this it is customary to look back and to reflect on the accomplishments of a career – in this case the accomplishments of a vocation – a ministry.

Fifty-three years ago – 1968 if my math is correct – Father Frank Matera was ordained as a Roman Catholic Priest. Ten of those years were spent at St. John's Seminary in Boston; twenty-five of them at Catholic University of America where he was the Kelly-Ryan Professor of Biblical Studies and, for a time, the President of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. Father Matera distinguished himself by his scholarship. Never seeking recognition, his style, grace and effectiveness as a teacher and professor of theology earned him plenty of it. Indeed, as Sue Guazelli and I learned when we spoke to our incoming Pastor several weeks ago, many of Father Matera's published works are part of the required course of study for seminarians. Yet, Father Matera has always maintained a humble, personable, approachable connection with people; a scholar with a deep understanding of faith and a genuine desire to share it with others. Always teaching, always making disciples of Christ, both by his preaching and, perhaps, more importantly by his personal example.

As a former student of Father Matera's observed, "He embraced St. Paul's model of pastoral service, never allowing his scholarship to eclipse his priesthood."

We have witnessed this, haven't we?

It would have been easy and certainly comfortable for Father Matera to have stayed at Catholic U and to have retired from his tenured position. But nine years ago, at a point when most would have been thinking of retirement, he left academia and stepped well outside of his comfort zone to become our Pastor. Had he known just how far he was going beyond the comfort of academic life on a college campus he might have turned back. But he didn't know. And he couldn't know. Because no one can ever know just what God has in store for them. And Father Matera certainly knew that much. He put his trust and faith in God. And we are all the better for it.

But in some ways Father Matera never fully left the academic life. For several years after coming to St. Mary's he continued to travel between Simsbury and Washington in order to direct, advise on and hear the dissertation defenses of his students. He continued to write and to publish. In fact, of the 22 books Father Matera has authored or co-authored, seven of them were written and published while a Pastor here at St. Mary's. Meanwhile, he was teaching all of us, from the pulpit on Sundays, through his personal example, through his bible study discussions during the fall and winter, and, of course, by handing out homework assignments. One could conclude that Father Matera never really left academic life at all.

Four words come to mind when I look back on these past nine years: Evangelization; Collaboration; Innovation; and Inspiration.

Evangelization. Father Matera sought to grow this Parish, but not just to grow it – more importantly to strengthen the faith of those who are already parishioners, already believers, and

who have been for many years. He designed many programs outside of Sunday mass to make that happen. But perhaps his most effective method was so simple as to be overlooked as an act of evangelization – greeting parishioners before and after Mass, getting to know them by their first names, but more than that, connecting with them, getting them involved in the parish, and making them stakeholders beyond mere attendance at Mass once a week. Recently I heard Father Matera tell a group of parishioners that the way to grow this Parish. When a new family arrives walks through the vestibule, get to know them, get them involved in a ministry, however small. Make them a stakeholder. Father Matera, always the teacher, was teaching us the Matera Method of evangelization.

Father Matera also took a particular interest in our young parishioners – bringing our CCD masses back to the Church from Squadron Line, supporting and encouraging Steubenville East where our teenagers attend a weekend spiritual retreat, and by attending morning prayer with the children of the St. Mary's School nearly every morning – something Mrs. Williamson tells me the children very much look forward to and involves Father Matera greeting and welcoming each student each morning, and the students bidding Father Matera to have a nice day. I have not witnessed this myself, but I am told that it is an equally important part of the day for Father Matera as for the children.

But there is more on the subject of Evangelization. Father Matera encouraged a small group of five or six men who were informally gathering on Friday mornings to take a bolder step and to establish a Men's ministry here at St. Marys'. For those of you who may not know, this group now gathers every Saturday – by Zoom or in person – to read and reflect on the next day's Gospel passage, to pray together, and to share their faith with each other. That small group has now grown to over 30 men and Father Matera recently challenged them to take an even bolder

step and to grow attendance to over 100. It's going to happen, and it will be part of Father Matera's legacy. One of the organizers told me that this group would not exist but for Father Matera.

Of course, no discussion of Evangelization could forget our Parish Retreats. This Parish has hosted several spiritually moving retreats, including outside speakers and celebrants. Faith on Fire was just one of those retreats, and those words became real here at St. Mary's over the past nine years.

Collaboration. Father Matera's Pastoral style has been very much one of collaboration. He has not made decisions lightly and he has rarely made them alone. He sought and carefully considered the viewpoints of many with respect to every important decision he had to make. In fact, his style of collaboration was consistent with his understanding that this Parish is not his. He has carefully avoided referring to "my Parish," understanding that the Parish belongs to all of us and that the only constant is Jesus Christ. I have witnessed Father's collaborative style at our Parish Council meetings, where he always took careful notes of the ideas he heard expressed during our brainstorming sessions, and often found a way to implement what he heard. Indeed, it was Father Matera who reinstated an active Parish Council and he used it as his sounding board. Further, Father found a way to involve many of the Parishioners in making the various decisions that had to be made. He recognized the expertise and talent that resides in our parishioners and he harnessed it to help him and to help us.

This was no more on display than it was during the various stages of the Campus Connection Project. The Project had its genesis in Father Matera's first parish retreat in the basement of the church where parishioners were encouraged to discuss what the Parish lacked, what it needed, what they wanted it to be when it grew up, and to write their ideas on sticky

notes and put them on the wall. What emerged was a vision to reunite the Church, the School and the Parish Offices to create a singular culture from one that was then divided. From there, Father Matera formed planning, fundraising and construction committees to oversee and guide us through the complexities of this undertaking. And the Campus Connection Project was borne. Father Matera, with little or no experience in construction, contracting or finance, brought together a team representing the very best in their fields, leaving us a connection of church and school that is beautiful, functional, completed with nary a hiccup, is debt free, and serves the vision and the mission. Now, to be fair, Father Matera could not have made the decisions that had to be made on that project by himself. Indeed, I know that he had more than a few sleepless nights at critical junctures during the fundraising and then the planning and construction. As I said earlier, had he known how far outside of his comfort zone he was stepping when he left Catholic U, he might have turned back. The project and its financial and other risks weighed heavily on him at times. But his faith, management style, and general demeanor, allowed him to give it all to God, to trust in the Holy Spirit, and to trust in the wisdom and judgment of others. This attitude trickled down to and infected all who worked on this project. The result speaks for itself in no small measure due to the collaborative leadership style of our Pastor.

Innovation. We don't often think of our parish priests as innovators. Well, I have already mentioned the decisions to return the CCD masses to the Church from Squadron Line and the inspiration for the Men's Ministry. And I have already mentioned the decision to merge our church, school and administrative function in order to successfully achieve a singular culture. But there is more to be said here.

When Father Matera brought the CCD masses back to the church, he recognized that parents, many of them young parents with competing demands on their time, would spend an

hour waiting, after Mass, for their children to complete their CCD instruction. This hour would be a wasted opportunity if they were not drawn closer to the church in some way. Thus was born the Sunday morning Adult Education series of programs. An hour of coffee and social interaction followed by sometimes practical instruction (for example a class on estate planning) and sometimes adult religious instruction (for example a class on the different parts of the mass).

Speaking of innovation, how about Coach Bobby Joe and the Golden Hurricanes. Those of you who regularly attended the 9:30 CCD masses got to know Coach Bobby Joe, whose football coaching philosophy was related to our children, week in and week out, together with a connection to our faith and our weekly scripture readings. Father Matera's Bobby Joe homilies were designed for and directed at the children, but they touched the adults as well. And just when some of us began to question whether Coach Bobby Joe was real, Father Matera presented him in the flesh at 9:30 Mass one Sunday – coach's whistle and all – to reassure any doubting Thomas'. The Coach Bobby Joe parables are now forever a part of St. Mary's Parish lore.

Witness statements. Moving statements of faith offered from the pulpit by individual parishioners – at retreats and at masses. These were also an innovation of Father Matera.

And homework assignments. I told you that Father Matera never really left academia and this may be the best example. Thoughtful assignments at the end of many homilies prefaced with “Here is something you can do during the coming week...” When you heard those words you knew that your Pastor was giving you a focal point for your prayerful meditation that would relate what you heard in the scripture reading that Sunday to your prayer life during the week. Another Matera innovation.

Finally, Inspiration

Father Matera lives his priesthood. He models it by his behavior. He has talked to us about his early morning prayer routine. It is who he is. It is so genuine. And it inspires each of us to be better versions of ourselves. One parishioner shared the view that “Father’s love of scripture is tangible, as is his desire to teach it.” No doubt this is what a former student saw when she said: “He is able to understand and communicate – to share – what is most essential, most useful and most valuable to those who want to learn. In this way, he taught hundreds of students -- shaped the way they read the Gospels, shaped their attitude toward the Pauline letters. He did it year after year -- patiently, calmly, clearly.” Father Matera’s homilies, his bible study lectures, his writings, all reflect this. And we have experienced this as he has taught us.

Another parishioner gave the following witness: “My faith has grown tremendously since I have known him.” So simple in its expression. But so compelling, and so true for so many of us.

God smiled on this Parish when a man who might have closed out a tremendously successful vocation in comfort writing books and giving lectures took another more difficult and less comfortable path. Following the lessons of St. Paul about which he taught, Father Matera left the life of an academic to serve, to carry Christ’s message, to build faith, and to make disciples in the community. That he came to our community was our great blessing.

Father Matera, I speak for all of St Mary’s Parish when I quote the following from the most recent homework assignment you gave us - Ch. 1, V. 3 of St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians: “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you.”

Father, we wish you all of the very best in retirement. And we have a homework assignment for you – that you will be a frequent visitor, lecturer, and celebrant at Mass, not as our Pastor, but as our friend and teacher. Congratulations!

[Applause.]

Now Father, I know that you did not want any gifts on this occasion. You have been very clear about that. And I have to tell you that we tried really hard to Honor your wishes. So we need you to work collaboratively with us here, and to trust and rely upon the wisdom and judgment of others.

First, as you know, to show our appreciation the Parish has commissioned the Father Matera Faith Formation Fund -- This Fund is in recognition and appreciation of your Christ-centered service and dedication as our pastor and faith leader from 2012-2021. This Fund, established in your name, will be used by St. Mary's to promote Faith Formation and Evangelization.

Second, we would like to present you with a framed remembrance -- a photograph of the Immaculate Conception window over the entrance to the Church that you have looked upon every time that you have celebrated Mass with the people of St. Mary's.