## Holy Weakness Introduction

By the V. Rev. William Nordenbrock, C.PP.S.

Given a choice would you rather:

- Be weak or be strong?
- Be poor or be rich?
- Choose to be admired or be looked at with disdain? Would you choose the Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem or the events of Good Friday?

I've come to point in my own life where I think of the journey to faithfulness, at least for me, as a journey toward accepting, or at least becoming okay with, weakness. In some ways this might be a mid-life awareness.

I am beginning to realize that:

- I'm probably not going to change the world
- I'm probably not going to accomplish great things [my foolish use of 'probably', shows that I've not yet arrived at faithfulness]
- I'm not going to win the Nobel Peace prize; I'm not going to eradicate poverty; I'm not going to reconcile the Church and restore table harmony.

Whatever great and lofty goals and dreams I might have once had—and which I still somehow desire—are probably not going to happen.

When I was asked to be with you today, at the beginning of Holy Week, I was asked to come up with a theme. So I chose the theme *Embracing Our Holy Weakness*, not just to make a silly pun, but rather selfishly, I chose it because it is the reflection that I need to make. And it is a reflection that is a fairly constant companion for me as Moderator General. So, I'm not here as any kind of expert; I come to be with you in weakness.

I'm hoping that we can reflect together on the powerlessness that we all experience, our experiences of weakness. I seem to bump up against this all the time.

- I look at what is going on in our world with a sense of powerlessness in the face of unjust political realities; a seemingly endless war against terror organizations; and economic structures that impoverish much of the world.
- I look at what is going on in the Church with a sense of powerlessness in the face of the abuse of power that seems to place a higher value on control than compassion; the growing, and seemingly irreconcilable divide between liberals and conservatives, between innovators and traditionalist.
- I look at my own life as Moderator General and I realize that much of my service and ministry does not bear the fruit that I hope for; that I am just like a poor widow giving her two small coins that don't buy great success.

- And I look at my own life on a personal level I sometimes seem powerless to live as I desire; powerless to get out of the way/to put aside selfishness and fear that prevent me from being truly faithful.
- Does that sound familiar—maybe uncomfortably familiar?

I'm hoping that today will be a time when we can embrace the truth of our weakness, embrace the truth of our humanness—and find hope, not condemnation; joy, not despair.

I'm hoping that we can use this to kick-start our experience of Holy Week. I'm sure that we all are going to be spending a bit of extra time in Church this coming week. How can our prayer this week be a real catalyst for our spiritual growth, for a deepening of our relationship with God? I hope to share a bit about the lessons that I have been trying to learn: how we must embrace weakness as a pathway to union with God. How embracing weakness is to place ourselves in the hands of a God who seeks nothing more—or nothing less—than to welcome us as a part of God's design of creation and God's plan of salvation.

Like most of you, I am in the second half of life. I don't expect to live to be 121. Probably, I am more in the November of my life than August. And in the second half of life, often there is a shift in focus, a clarifying of what is most important to us. And for many, the shadow of mortality it is a gentle prod, a little poke in the soul that invites us to be more attentive to our prayer life, to our relationship with God.

While men and women are different and approach spirituality along different paths, there is common ground where we meet. That common ground is call the Incarnation. In Christ, we see a humanity that reflects the image of God in a way that is beyond male or female. We see in the person of Jesus a model of faithfulness, a way of being in union with God that is a promise that is given to each of us. And we desire that and seek to grow in our relationship with God in intensely personal and unique ways. But, risking the danger of using broad gender stereotypes, men and women take the journey differently (not the least of which may be that men don't like to ask for directions).

Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan spiritual writer and preacher, speaks of five truths that must be accepted for a man to embody a mature masculine spirituality. These are the truths that are accepted as men come into a deeper and more mature relationship with God. The five truths are:

- 1. Life is hard.
- 2. I am not important.
- 3. My life is not about me.
- 4. I am not in control.
- 5. I am going to die.

And it is all okay; because I am created in the image of a God who calls me "Beloved Son."

Teresa of Avila was a feminine mystic who encouraged a mantra style of prayer. She wrote:

Let nothing disturb thee.
Let nothing dismay thee.
All things pass.
God never changes.
Patience obtains all.
She who has God lacks nothing.
God alone is enough.

The prayer of Teresa is the prayer of a holy and mature soul. It is the prayer of a woman who has discovered the peace of a life that is confidently resting in the embrace of God.

We see in these two faithful people, a masculine approach and a feminine approach that is rooted in the same truth: the way of holiness is downward and not upward. It is a message that seeks to overcome the false importance that we give our egos as we accept that we are not God—and that's okay. It is the message that holiness is received and not achieved. And that we are most open to receiving that holiness when the walls protecting our egos have been cracked by the event of our lives and we are forced to confront our inherent poverty and weakness. When we are naked in our need, we are ready to encounter the raw experience of unconditional love that we name God. That is the truth that we will remember today. That is the truth that we will try to plant in our hearts, so that it can take root and grow.