

At New York Conference priests told: *NO 'CHEAP' GRACE*

by

Msgr. Cuthbert Alexander

How wholehearted is our response to God? How willing are we to pay the cost of discipleship? These were among the first questions which this year's International Fraternity Conference put to the priests gathered at the Cardinal Spellman Retreat House, Riverdale, New York.

The conference, on the theme, "If anyone would come after me" ...Discipleship (Luke 9: 23) began on the evening of Sunday, August 3, with its usual buoyancy, priestly wit—sparkling, at times—and humor, always good-natured. The registration sheet showed one of the largest number of participants in recent times. Some 40 priests registered, including four from Ghana, and four from Trinidad. In all, twelve Fraternities were represented.

As usual, the five-member board of the Fraternity gave the talks at the week-long conference, with each speaker building on what had been said previously, giving yet another dimension to our understanding of discipleship.

The Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5, 6, 7 and 10, provided the background for the first talk by out-going chairman Fr John Allard. His theme: "What is a disciple?" Jesus demanded a complete and radical allegiance of his disciples. They had to leave home and had no place to lay their head. The disciples of Jesus—all who were called to follow Him—



Br James Johnson C.P., center, joins Fraternity brothers around the lunch table.

were not simply called to absorb the words of the Master. They were called to be witnesses to the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

For priests, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is not enough, the observance of the external law cannot be enough. And so the question arises, "where is our heart in all this?"

"How wholehearted is our response to Jesus?"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, says in his book, 'The Cost of Discipleship', that when God calls someone, "he bids him come and die". After we have said our "yes" to God, after we have made our initial commitment and experienced God's love for us, there is more. Discipleship, living under the lordship of Christ comes at a cost. And as we commit our lives more and more to Christ, there is always a deeper cost. There is "no cheap grace."

As priests of Christ, Fr Tim Graff said, we already paid a price. We have made sacrifices. We have paid the price of celibacy, chastity, simplicity, obedience. Jesus says to us: if you want to be my disciple then you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me (cf. Mark 8:34). It may be difficult but "if God is worth anything, He is worth everything."

To be Fraternity, to belong to a group that seeks to live out the Fraternity disciplines, is a decision and a cost we have paid. Each

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Dear Friends of the Priesthood

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Newsletter material from all Fraternity members is gratefully accepted!

Behold, how good it is, and how pleasant, where brothers dwell as one." (Ps. 133.1)

The ancient psalmist captures for me the experience of the Fraternity's Annual Meeting this past August in New York City.

Brothers from Ghana, Trinidad, and all over the United States came together, as we do annually, to be challenged, to elect officers, to pray and to minister to one another, to recreate, to reconnect—to grow in the Lord and his priesthood.

Our theme was "If anyone would follow me..." Discipleship. Together we explored what discipleship means, what it costs, what it means to submit our lives to God's plan, how we can encourage each other in these difficult times, and, finally, how the Eucharist is our ultimate "abiding in" the Lord.

Needless to say the theme was quite relevant and challenging. Christ demands a lot of his disciples, he demands everything. Are we willing to pay the price, which is costly, so as to truly fulfill his plan for us and our priesthood? We were asked "Where is your heart" in all this?"

It always amazes me how year after year we come together as though there was no separation in time, even though I have not seen some brothers for three or four years. The Lord truly blesses us with his grace! An historic event happened to me personally this year: I actually drove in downtown Manhattan. I had been there a few times before, but I had never driven in the city.

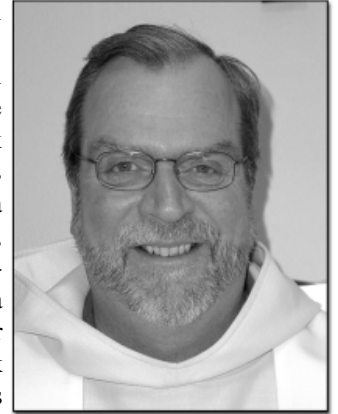
YIKES! What an experience! I really sensed the presence of my Guardian Angel. All in all, the experience of brotherhood was God-given and awesome.

One of the highpoints of the week is the awarding of the Brotherhood Award which is given yearly to a brother who exhibits and lives the goals of the Fraternity of Priests. This year the award went to Fr Ed Gresiedieck from the St. Louis Fraternity. Father Ed is recently retired but will be working at the Archdiocesan Seminary as a part-time spiritual director (those lucky seminarians!). The surprise on his face when given the reward was heart-warming, truly showing his personal humility.

One of the important practical functions of the meeting is to elect members to the Board of Directors. This year two board members' terms were up (one term was mine), and Fr Cuthbert Alexander, representing the international fraternities, was stepping down because he is

going on sabbatical.

Fr Bill Cosgrove of the New York Fraternity was elected for a three-year term, and I was re-elected for a second term. Fr Dwight Merrick of Trinidad was elected to replace Fr Cutty.



I will no longer be serving as Chairman of the Board since our bylaws state that after one three year term, the chairman must step down for at least one year. The new Chairman is Fr Tim Graff of the New Jersey Fraternity. Fr Tim was our Treasurer. Guess who the new Treasurer is??? Moi! Fr Tim and I have switched positions. This means that starting with the October newsletter he will be writing this monthly note to you. It has been a joy sharing with you over these three years. On behalf of the Fraternity of Priests and on my own behalf I say "Thank you" to all of you. Over the years I have been encouraged by the number of notes, letters, and comments made relating to our sharings. In New York I met with a sweet little lady of eighty-nine who lives on City Island who stated that she waited anxiously for this monthly letter (God bless you, Emma!).

Please continue to pray for priests, especially your parish. This is one thing we can all do to assist the priesthood in these difficult times. If you know someone who would like to be and intercessor and/or a benefactor for the Fraternity please send in their name to Visitation House (there is always room for one more). This year's meeting has given us tons of hope. Let's pray together for abundant fruition. Until we meet again, maybe in a newsletter, Peace in Jesus.

In Christ,

Fr. John

P.S. I will be offering a Mass for all your personal intentions.

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Fraternity priest is called to live out part of his discipleship with his brothers. After a while we may well face temptation: we do not want to pay the price, we cut back on our involvement. What would keep us going, make us willing to pay the cost? We are willing because Christ has been generous and because “we have seen what others have not seen.” Jesus says to his disciples: “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Luke 10:23-24).

If we are to follow Christ, to abide in Him daily, we have to place ourselves in a position where we can listen to His voice. It is only when we can humble ourselves before God that we can hear His voice, that we can accomplish great things for God. Jesus promises: “he who humbles himself will be exalted” but “he who exalts himself will be humbled” (Matthew 23:12). “Humbly”, is the only way by which we can submit our lives to God. Surrender and submission is not easy but Fr Bob Giardina reminded us of the Lord’s words to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

A particular way, indeed, the ultimate way in which we can abide in the Lord is through the Eucharist. Jesus after the Eucharistic meal says in the Gospel



The Fraternity Brothers gather in the chapel at Cardinal Spellman Retreat House.

of John, “I am the true vine ... abide in me and I in you ...I am the vine” (John 15:1-8). Jesus says it is only through our union with Him that we can be fruitful. He is present in His word, really present in the sacrament of His Body and Blood and He is present in the body of believers. It is then in our Fraternity groups, there where we eat with, become one with, suffer with and are challenged that the Lord also says to us: “I am the vine.”

Disciples need encouragement. Many are still shaken by the sex abuse scandals. The topic still surfaced in informal groups during the conference. At last year’s conference in Tucson, Fr Ray Ratzenberger had spoken about the “purification” which the Church, of necessity, had to go through. This year he wanted the brothers to know that the trials themselves are a sign of hope. So, his message: “Be encouraged.” “Trials always precede a time of

glory,” said Fr Ray. “After the storm, the air is fresh and clean and there’s usually a double rainbow (*in Arizona anyway*) that follows. A bright day is coming.”

What do you do in the storm? Keep your eyes on Jesus, and “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). Fr Ray reminded the brothers that there is power in praise, in speaking and singing in tongues. He said, in these difficult times, the Lord was bringing about a reform of the priesthood: the “professionals” would give way to the “prophets”. Vatican II, the charismatic movement, the call for renewed evangelization, the purification, the “ultra-traditionalists” are all preludes and preparations for great things to come.

Please send us your prayer intentions: _____

THANK YOU FOR PRAYING FOR A PRIEST EACH DAY!

A PRAYER FOR PRIESTS

O Jesus, Eternal High Priest, live in (name of priest), act in him, speak in and through him. Think your thoughts in his mind, love through his heart. Give him your own disposition and feelings. Teach, lead and guide him always. Correct, enlighten and expand his thoughts and behavior. Possess his soul, take over his entire personality and life. Replace him with yourself. Incline him to constant adoration and thanksgiving; pray in and through him. Let him live in you and keep him in this intimate union always.

O Mary, Immaculate Conception, Mother of Jesus and Mother of priests, pray and intercede for (.....). Amen.

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