

At the Retirement Eucharist of the Rev. Cn. Laura Howell
The First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 7, 2018
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I am very grateful that Mother Laura has invited me to come back to Trinity and to preach, and on this day in particular. But I must admit that I had a moment's hesitation - or perhaps it was anxiety - when she sent me the music for today showing the sequence hymn to be "We three kings..." and mentioning that she had thought about singing her favorite high school version of it; *"We Three Kings of Orient are. Tried to smoke a rubber cigar. It was loaded and exploded. POW! We two kings of Orient are..."*

I have learned over these years that simply because Mother Laura mentions the possibility of doing something can indeed provoke anxiety in one's heart that she may do it. Because she so often does do it.

Hence Bishop's Paul's designation of her as the Diocesan Foole, in the tradition of the one who whether in the king's court and the bishop's cathedral had the *wisdom* to see the truth, the *courage* to speak the truth, the *gall* to do it "in the face", and the *standing, the Gravitas* to live to do it again another day. Clearly, Bishop Paul saw Mother Laura as one who is *"wise enough to play the foole"*, to quote William Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*.

And so here we are on this day when we remember the Baptism of Jesus and his designation as God's Beloved Son... here we are to bring to mind and to give thanks for this beloved daughter of God who has so enriched the lives of so many of us. Who has kept before us the truth and the demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Who in her person brings the honest and true Jesus who stands with us in all the circumstances of our lives, at times loving us gently, at times admonishing us strongly, at times guiding us wisely, at times playing with us uproariously.

She will visit in the hospital room, the waiting room, the recovery room. She will advocate (**strongly**) at the nurse's station or in the doctor's face in the hallway. She is as fearless as she is gentle, loving, persistent, and prayerful – and willing to bend the knee of her heart before God at the slightest invitation or need.

She can be John the Baptist calling out worldly powers, always pointing to Jesus as the Messiah of God in our midst. She, like John, is willing to dress for the task at hand; be it with a special hat, or a mask, or a fake mustache, or a halo on a

headband swinging over her head, daily in a black shirt with a white collar, and other times, putting on the Eucharistic vestments of priest.

She is always pointing to the available presence of the Holy One in our midst. Mother Laura does that simply by being Mother Laura, in whom there is no guile – and no BS! She can point with a word, or a secret smile, or (you should pardon the expression) a devilish twinkle in her eye, or with a pointing finger, or an insistent voice on the phone that can verge on outrageous demand, or on rare occasions with a hand pounding on a table.

But always, always, always with a hope, a plea, and a prayer that each of us will know that we are the Beloved child of God, pointing to what this relationship can, could and should make possible for us and the world around us.

I want to say a word about you all, about Trinity Parish, even before the arrival of Mother Laura. Trinity was the first true parish home for our family when we came here as a family in 1984 as I began as archdeacon. Here I was parishioner, not priest. We sat in the pew together. Puddy and I had known some of your rectors going back to Dinty Moore, and Sandy Zabriskie, and then John Coble. We came here for who you were and what you did. We came because you were living out ministries to Jesus's favorite people. You welcomed everybody and anybody, including us and our very different family. Your soup kitchen, even pre- Deacon Liz, was famous for both food and true hospitality – no do-gooders here. Our family spent Thanksgiving Day here for several years. Your commitment to social justice and the well-being of all people was legendary – and more importantly, effective. And in line with our own prejudices for the poor.

I bring this up because I want you to know that I have been watching you and loving you for decades. I have worked with you through some tough times over the years and been part of some wonderful times, too, and I have helped you find 3 fine rectors; John, Nick, and now Laura.

I borrow a little Mother Laura Hutzpah here, to tell you how I see you today as we mark the end of her time as your rector, priest, pastor, but not end of her time as your friend. Her tenure here has been marked by both light and depth. I think she has raised up your spirit, reminding you to find joy in your life and in your faith. Christian community can be so many things, but so often it can be ponderous, dutiful, and even boring. But she has added the gift of laughter, joy, and fun. Even in the midst of sinkholes and building and other disasters, Sunday Race Days, the passing on of loved ones and so much more.

We don't often remember that Jesus lived in community, too, and he loved to be with his friends, having some food, drinking a little wine, enjoying the conversation and hospitality of friends.

I do think that Mother Laura has led you, lifted you, lightened your load and your spirit and gifted you in remembering to Rejoice, Rejoice in the Lord- always and anyway. Laughing, dancing, singing and rejoicing are all signs of the presence of God's Holy Spirit! What a great gift.

Many, many years ago we had a diocesan conference in the spring of each year titled, the Spirituality and Mission Conference. That I believe is Mother Laura's second great gift to you – the marrying of your historic mission to those who are poor, lost, lonely or feel alienated – marrying that mission with the spirituality that can empower it. As she has grown and deepened her own spiritual maturity over these years – and she has – Right, Mother Oblate? And so, she has also helped this community live more and more deeply into the presence of God's Holy Spirit. The presence of the Spirit of God seems to permeate your life and work, and your daily parish calendar is filled with offerings for people to come aside and make room for the Holy in their busy lives.

It has taken me decades to learn some of what Mother Laura has given you these last years. The power of our mission is clearly grounded in time spent with the God who loves us and sent us Jesus, empowering our community, our personal lives and our ability to minister. I see that you know and live into the truth that *"It ain't all on you or on this parish community."* The presence and power of God almighty is with you in it.

Theologian N. T. Wright writes about today's gospel passage of the Baptism of Jesus: *"Look at this story, look at this life, and learn to see and hear in it the heavenly vision, the heavenly voice. Learn to hear these words addressed to yourself. Let them change you, mold you, make you wondrously new, the person God wants you to be. Discover in this story the normally hidden heavenly vision of God's world."*

Life is so fraught and filled with stresses and strains, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Some lives are in transition, some are in limbo. Some relationships are in turmoil. Some futures are unclear. But all of us are, each of us is, now and forever, the Beloved of God – in whose love and by whose power - shown to us in Jesus –

life can be lived, purpose can be discovered, hope can be found, and love and joy can be known.

There in a nutshell is my understanding of the ministry and person of Mother Laura. And with you I thank God for her – and for Dave her partner in life with his quiet strength – and I thank God that they are going to be around our diocese for a good long time, with Mother Laura just in a new guise, or disguise, and in a new gig – or two.