

God is alive and God is here!

This is a night for celebration!

This is a night for rejoicing!

And this is a night for applause!

. . . if we are to observe the rubrics, those rules for worship found in italicized fine print.

In fact, the celebration of a new ministry, when the rector is presented to the congregation, is one of only two times that the Book of Common Prayer commends applause, the other being when a newly minted bishop is presented to the diocese.

So this night we celebrate, rejoice, applaud.

You rightly applaud and celebrate a successful conclusion to the untold hours you spent in conversation and in writing not only the story of where you have been and where you currently are but where you hope to go in and through the power of God's holy and life-giving Spirit.

You rightly applaud a concrete answer to your prayer that God will provide a priest and pastor, an effective leader through whose word and action, all of you together will be more fully enabled and equipped to offer your gifts to the Lord, strengthen this church, and extend the God's Kingdom in the world about you.

And tonight we of course applaud what God has done, what God is doing, and God will yet do through the one whom he calls, you affirm, and the bishop blesses to be your rector—Father Eric Christopher Mills.

I first met Eric when together we began priestly formation at Nashotah House and two things about him were immediately and indelibly stamped in my mind:

First, whatever the cost, whatever the distance, whatever the sacrifice, Eric will follow wherever God leads.

Secondly, how Eric loves his family—his wife Sue and daughters Katie and Rachel—is such an integral part of how he loves God.

To know Eric is to know that he loves God and he loves his family, and this is good news for anyone and everyone entrusted to his care.

Eric's pilgrimage to Nashotah and then his sacred journey to this night here to Saint Anne's, De Pere, has taken him across an ecclesiastical map and around the globe. Yet for every step of the way, the light upon his path has been God.

If you are now willing to walk with Eric and, just as importantly, if you are willing to let him walk alongside you as your priest and pastor, you can have confidence that whatever the circumstances are or however difficult the road is, Eric will undoubtedly be a vessel of God's real presence in your life.

You learn something about the character of person, don't you, when that person is under extraordinary pressure.

In three years of living in community with Eric, I saw no one who balanced any better the challenges and often competing stresses of academic productivity, vocational formation and testing, manual labor, and family responsibility.

At that time I didn't have children and now that I do, I am simply not sure how Eric did it. But he did, and there was none who doubted that as for him and he household, he would serve the Lord: God first, those entrusted to his care next, and academic achievement a distant third. And with those balanced priorities, Eric completed his studies with distinction.

Yet what I remember as much as anything is my feelings of jealousy when after Evensong, here would come Rachel and Katy running up to Eric with outstretched arms, yelling "Daddy!"

Little did I know then that some four or five years later, I would have a two-year-old daughter who upon seeing me at the altar in my long white dress would yell, "Mama!"

It is in knowing Eric, especially in these two areas—faith and family—I know that at the end of this Eucharist we can pray with confidence: *"that Eric may be to us an effective example in word and action, in love and patience, and in holiness of life."*

He has been that for me for years now, and I trust you will find him to be that for you in the years to come.

But, my sisters and brothers, if we attend closely to what we say and hear this night, we will be confronted with the fact that the stellar gifts of a leader and the manifold and inherent gifts of God's people gathered are not in and of themselves *enough*.

For that to which God calls us is, through own abilities alone, too big to accomplish, the burden too heavy to shoulder, and the road too narrow to travel. We need help . . . and lots of it!

Just take Psalm 133 which we have just sung together, of how good and pleasant it is when brethren live together in unity, a glimpse of the ineffable blessing that is a church gathered together in unity, abiding in the love, experiencing joy, for there the Lord has ordained the blessing—life for evermore.

Yet we know don't we—and such a “we” is a profoundly human “we” not a royal one— through our own heartbreaking experience, the inherent pain when a part of the body does not work together for the good of the whole, when deceitful scheming divides, when those divisions threaten to destroy, and when that fruit you and I are supposed to bear is less lasting and more rotten.

And we know as well that even as we ask for a leader to come among us, we can prefer a theory of leadership to the necessarily imperfection of its concrete reality in our midst!

While at Nashotah I served briefly as a seminarian at your incomparable cathedral, St. Paul's, Fond du Lac. On the first Sunday, the Dean gave me a tour in which he showed me the rogues gallery—those pictures of the former pastors we like to put on the wall. I had to suppress a smile when a young girl pointed to the Dean's immediate predecessor and declared quite audibly: “I wish he were still here.”

What is it about The Episcopal Church where we can often prefer to be guided by the idiosyncratic light of a dearly departed rector to that of the one who now lives among us?

Ah, and I suspect the same is true of bishops, especially with the likes of Blessed Charles Chapman Grafton. While the centennial anniversary of his death is to be observed next year, his shrine even now lies eternal in the Cathedral!

For not unlike a people freed from slavery in Egypt, if we wander just long enough in the wilderness, we can find ourselves harkening back to the glory days of yesteryear when we had ample food in our bellies, youth in our step, and power in our hand.

As rose-colored glasses obscure difficulties of an earlier day, our penchant for looking in the rearview mirror can make our driving to the Promised Land a little dangerous!

Perhaps that is one of the greatest challenges for any rector and indeed for every Christian: to develop such trust in God that we keep our eyes on the road ahead—you know, the road that actually leads us, a pilgrim people, out of bondage into freedom, out of death into life, that road, upon which we stand today, where God is alive and God is here in our NOW. . . .

For our task is only too big, our burden only too heavy, our road only too narrow . . . without the living God.

For even when the Lord lightened the burden of leadership by sharing that spirit that was in Moses with others, it was God who still fed his pilgrim people, it was God who still led them, and it was God who still saved them.

And all the gifts combined of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, rectors, are ineffective and nothing worth if they are not oriented to restoring all people to unity with this living God and with one another *now*, to building up the church in love *now*, that we may love one another as he has loved us *now*, that his joy may be in us and our joy may be complete *now*.

Please stand, Eric.

Father, in becoming rector of Saint Anne's you are given a sacred trust for which you must one day give an account.

God has gifted you with native ability as a person, excellent formation as a priest, exceptional depth as a pastor.

God has lavished upon these people of Saint Anne's, now committed to your care, gifts abundant and overflowing.

But never forget that church's task—that task to which you as rector are now accountable is a special way—is nothing less than reconciling the whole world to

God and all of us one to another. And such a task can only be accomplished with God!

So renew. Renew day by day your gratitude for the works of God in ages past, your awareness of God's presence here and now, your trust in that future which God has prepared for each of us better things than we could ask or imagine.

And rejoice. Rejoice in the Spirit which God pours so freely upon his people: drink that wine which is the gift of nature and the work of human hands and eat the bread of life broken not only upon this altar but in the hearts and homes of those you have been called to serve.

And risk. Risk opening these doors to all people. Risk sharing power. Risk total forgiveness. And for goodness sake, risk abject failure. For such risk is filled with resurrection power and new life.

And remember! Remember! Remember! Our help and our hope, our very life is found not in ourselves but in the living God, so that for all those with eyes to see, hearts to receive, arms to embrace, this night is indeed one for celebration, rejoicing, applause . . . because God is alive and God is here!