

“First Things First” (Homily)

Deacon John Fulton, St. Kevin Roman Catholic Church, Warwick, Rhode Island
October 29, 2017 – Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Lectionary 148: MT 22:34-40)

As I meditated on today’s Gospel, I couldn’t help but notice the *order* in which the Lord answered the scholar’s question:

“You shall love the Lord, your God.”

[...then...]

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Lord *first*, neighbor *second*. It reminded me of the order of the commandments. First, three for the Lord, then one for father and mother, then six for neighbor. And the order of the petitions in the Lord’s prayer. “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.” ... *before* our daily bread and other earthly petitions.

I thought to myself, “*First things first!*” And I thought of my own life. And I thanked God that *somehow*, throughout the course of my life, *someone*—some angel of God—has always been there to remind me of this.

When I was three, for example, I helped my *very* Italian grandmother make *very* rich butter cookies. Lord, but my mouth waters as I tell you this! And, as it turns out, the cookies were done just before dinner. I remember them. Golden. Just a touch of brown. Little rosettes that fit *just* right in the hands of a little boy! And good thing, too, for I was hungry—no, *starved*—for butter cookies, *those* butter cookies. It was then—when I was reaching for the cookies—that I first remember hearing these words: “First things first, John! *First things first!*” *First*, we must eat supper; *then* we can eat the cookies!

My, those cookies were good!

When I was 12, I got a hankering to be a lifeguard. I must have weighed all of a hundred pounds, soaking wet—including my big beach towel! Nevertheless, I presented myself to Mr. Ray Donnell of the American Red Cross, and offered my services. Now Mr. Donnell’s eyesight was as good as anyone’s, which is to say, he sized me up pretty quickly, but he was a Godly man, and wise, and so instead of deflating me, he said, “First things first, John! *First things first!*” *First*, let’s make you a good, strong swimmer; *then*, let’s train you as a lifeguard!

Three years later, I won an award for my life-saving skills.

When I was 16, I arrived at Faith’s house in a ’58 Ford. We were going to choir practice. I had never taken a girl out before. I honked the horn. The door of the neat Cape Cod opened. Faith came out. She walked towards the car. I was surprised to see her in shirtsleeves, as it was late October, and rather chilly. And so, when she opened the door of the car, I said, “Get in, it’s cold!” Well, as you may have suspected, Faith said: “First things first, John! *First things first!*” *First*, you come in the house and meet my father; *then*, I can ride with you to choir practice.

That was my first serious training as a gentleman, and it has served me well ever since.

When I was 18, my life came crashing down. No matter the reason. Life could get pretty dark in the late ‘60s, especially at college, far from home and friends. I got pretty depressed, wasn’t doing well, lost my way. But, thank God, I had a compassionate uncle who lived nearby,

just a local bus-ride away. I called him, and when he heard my tone of voice, he just said, “Why don’t you come over for the weekend. We’ll talk.” So I did.

Now, my uncle was a clergyman, and as we talked, he introduced God and the Lord Jesus and church quite naturally into the conversation. I guess I hadn’t been paying much attention to them: Hadn’t been praying much to the Father. Hadn’t been appreciating the Lord’s sacrifice. Hadn’t been going to church regularly. At some point in the conversation, I just ran out of steam. I sat for a moment, with my Uncle silent, and then asked, “What should I do?” “Drop out of school? Get a job?” In a gentle voice my Uncle said, “Whoa!” “First things first, John! *First things first!*” *First*, come to church with me tomorrow. We’ll get there early. It’s very peaceful in the church at that hour. You can pray a little, think a little, before the service. We’ll resume our conversation afterwards. So I did, and as I sat there that morning and prayed and thought, a peace came over me that I had not felt for a long time—the peace of God. My troubles weren’t over by a long shot, but somehow they seemed so much smaller than they had the day before.

Later that day, my uncle explained, “Sometimes we get the cart before the horse, John, and that cart is pretty *dumb*. It doesn’t know the way. Sometimes we don’t move at all, and sometimes, when we do, we get lost. Remember: *First things first. Pray every morning, as you start the day. Go to church every Sunday, as you start the week.*”

Good advice. “*First things first.*” Put God *first* in your life. *He* knows the way.

Gospel: Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees,
they gathered together, and one of them,
a scholar of the law tested him by asking,
“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”
He said to him,
“You shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your mind.
This is the greatest and the first commandment.
The second is like it:
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”