

Jesus will mold those who have been tested and purified

written by Bishop Anthony B. Taylor |

Bishop Anthony B. Taylor delivered this homily Dec. 4 in Rogers for the 40th anniversary of Msgr. David LeSieur's priestly ordination.

I spent the summer just before entering the seminary working in the press room of my hometown newspaper, the Ponca City News, which at the time still used linotype machines.

My job was to gather up all the used lead each day, melt it down in a huge cauldron, burn off the matting that had adhered to the metal, skim off the residual dross and then make lead bars by pouring out the freshly tested and purified lead alloy into forms.

But Jesus did far more than just resign himself to the inevitable, he embraced his cross with love and we are to embrace our crosses with love too.

These lead bars were called “pigs” even though the metal was now clean, purified by fire. I, by contrast, was the one who was now filthy as a pig! When I got home, the first thing I would do was take a shower.

Water can clean the outer surface of things, but fire can go below the surface to purify the whole substance of metal, both inside and out. Clean is not the same thing as pure. You can take a shower and still be filthy on the inside.

In today's Gospel John the Baptist baptizes — cleanses — with water. People voluntarily confessed their sins and then John symbolically cleansed them of their sins in the water of the Jordan River. But in doing this, he cautioned them that they must truly have firm purpose of amendment. This outer cleansing must be accompanied by inner purification if it's to mean anything. After John will come Jesus whose baptism will purify — not just cleanse, but purify — with fire and this purification will be involuntary.

Today's Gospel says that Jesus will test our mettle, purify the elements of our being, burn off the vices that still adhere to us, skim off the residual dross and then mold us who have been tested and purified into the form he intends us to become.

The result is that those who still have enough mettle in them to be reworked with will be refashioned into saints through Jesus' thoroughly purifying baptism of fire. Once we test out fully purified, we take our place in God's kingdom of heaven, sharing fully in the fruits of Jesus' victory.

Those, however, whose lives are mostly dross will simply be skimmed off and thrown away to spend an eternity forever separated from God, forever deprived of entry into God's kingdom. As Jesus says in today's Gospel, “The chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.”

Today we celebrate Msgr. LeSieur's 40th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood and it is ironic that we should have this Gospel reading on his anniversary because unlike John the Baptist who was by all accounts a fierce, ill-dressed loner with a harsh message, Msgr. LeSieur

is one of the gentlest, kindest, most competent and highly respected priests we have serving in Arkansas.

Where John the Baptist was a divisive uncompromising, prophetic figure, Msgr. LeSieur has strived throughout his priesthood to be a good shepherd for the flock entrusted to his care, building bridges of understanding and compassion. In order to serve you faithfully, he sometimes has had to take on the prophetic role — speaking a strong word, though in his case always done with kindness — but more demanding are all the other things that consume a pastor's time and energy.

Hearing your confessions by means of which, in line with today's Gospel, you are purified of your sins. Visiting the sick, administering the parish and the school, preparing couples for marriage, preparing homilies, responding to late night emergency calls, celebrating baptisms and weddings and funerals, dealing with personnel issues, representing the Church in civic and ecumenical affairs in the larger community, teaching you about the faith in RCIA and adult education classes, mentoring younger priests and missionary priests assigned to your parish, and that is just in your parish.

He is also the dean of your deanery, minister to priests, serves on the Clergy Welfare Board, the Clergy Personnel Board, the Presbyteral Council, the College of Consultors and probably some other things I have forgotten.

In other words, he's "all in" and has served the Lord faithfully for 40 years. Actually we could say 52 years if we count his time in seminary. He entered the minor seminary as a ninth grader and has never looked back.

So on this second Sunday of Advent we thank God for Msgr. LeSieur and we pray for him. And in line with today's Gospel, we recall how one of his important roles as your pastor is to accompany you through all the challenging and ultimately purifying experiences that you have to face as the Lord tests you and molds you into the saints he intends you to become.

None of us would freely choose the adversities that come our way and even Jesus dreaded taking up his cross. But Jesus did far more than just resign himself to the inevitable, he embraced his cross with love and we are to embrace our crosses with love too. If that cross is what our Father wants for us, then we should pray to learn to love it.

That's what Msgr. LeSieur does with some of the challenges he faces in serving you. By embracing his cross with love, Jesus also embraces us with love, we who have been redeemed by that thoroughly purifying baptism of fire that Jesus endured and then kindled for us on Calvary.