

FATHER JIM LEE



A homily tribute by
FR. SEAN WILSON

REFLECTION ON FR. JIM LEE

This homily was delivered by Fr. Sean Wilson at the AP Pastor Leadership Retreat on September 25, 2025.

I started coaching with Amazing Parish in early...2019, so this is the third retreat that I've gotten to be on, so you kind of get to know guys over the years and and as I was kind of pulling in and things were getting started, it dawned on me there was one person who I knew I would not get to see - and that's the man for whom we celebrate mass today - Father Jim Lee.

Father Jim was at the first two pastor retreats, but on December 22nd of this past year, he passed away. Anyway, I think I'm like an AP veteran, an old timer. I don't know if I'm old enough to be called an old timer, but I feel like it's important to tell the stories. It's important to tell the stories of the movement, to tell the stories of people who have been involved.

It's like when you go to a parish and you sit down with the people who have been in the parish for 50 years, and they tell you the stories about the people and about the different priests. Because the stories that get told help to form an identity.

The stories that get told help to form us and who we are. The stories that we tell, the ones we choose to omit, all of it helps to form our identity.

I mean, it's why the stories of the Scriptures, those are the stories that help form who we are as the people of God, and the stories of the saints help to form us as to the goal, to the holiness that all of us strive to imitate.



Father Jim was born in Chicago, and as a young man, entered the Maryknoll Missionaries, was ordained in 1975, and did all sorts of missionary work. He spent a number of years in Tanzania, but eventually spent some time in Seattle while he was on a sabbatical, and while he was there, just kind of fell in love with parish ministry and eventually incarnated into the Archdiocese of Seattle.

For over 25 years. Father Jim served as the pastor of St. Michael in Olympia. I can only imagine the difficulty of wrestling with a new vocation, of being a missionary, giving your vows to this religious community, and then having this wrestling. But there was always this sense, a very supernatural sense, that he always had. It was this sense of a purpose about him, that even though his life was kind of fading away, that there was always a purpose; that he was made for some definite purpose.

And this gospel of these disciples being sent out to proclaim the Kingdom of God, to heal the sick, to drive out demons. And I think yesterday, we were reminded of that portion of our call - this call that we have to defeat the power of darkness, or at least to work alongside the Light Bringer, to work alongside Jesus Christ, who is the one who is going to cast out darkness.

And I think this sense of Father Jim's call, this sense of being sent out, probably reached an important point in his life in 2018, [when] Father Jim was diagnosed with ALS.

I'm sure we've all probably been around parishioners, people who have been diagnosed with ALS, just this degeneration. It's just, it's brutal, because each day is a new loss. Each day is a new wrapping your head around new suffering and new things that you weren't able to do with new challenges.



And so Father Jim went to his Archbishop after he was diagnosed, and basically asked if he could stay there at Saint Michael's for as long as possible. Just wanted to stay and live out his days. Wanted to die with his boots on the ground.

So in 2023, at the Amazing Parish Summit, Jake, who's his coach, sat down and did an interview with Father Jim. And you can still see this interview online on Amazing Parish's Vimeo page, it is a remarkable thing. It's an absolutely dynamite revelation of a man living a life of holiness.

And one of the questions that he's asked is, how do you keep going when you've been given every opportunity [to stop]? Right? He could have hung it up when he was diagnosed with ALS. Could have not made the leap into parish life, because every one of us knows how messy and how dirty that is, and how just broken parish life can be. And he gave this response,

“I'm not dead, I'm not done.

I'm not dead, I'm not done.”

And the other aspect that just shows up in this interview is his childlike love for God. Jake asked him a question, and he didn't answer the question. He just turns to all the people in the crowd and says, “Thanks for bringing your children,” because there's crying babies you can hear in the background... he said these babies, they're so dependent. And as he talks about the way ALS has degenerated his body, I mean, the people on his team had to help him at the AP retreat... Rex and Chris were right there, hand and foot, cutting up his food for him, making sure he got dressed, and revealed his complete dependency on the Lord.

At the end of one of the retreats, we're all kind of sitting around at the end before we go home. And kind of everybody has an opportunity to say, you know, some of the impacts, some of the takeaways that have been there for them. And I don't know if it was the first one or the second one, but both of them, we were all just waiting to hear what Father Jim would say. You know that's who we wanted to hear from. No offense to anybody else at those retreats.

But what Father Jim said of one of them was, he said he was just so grateful to be near Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He said, at his parish, the Blessed Sacrament and his rectory and office are in different buildings, and he always feels like he has to burden people to ask them, "could you take me to the Blessed Sacrament? Could you wheel me down there to the Blessed Sacrament?" And he said, "I didn't have to do that here. I just got to be near Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. I just got to be close to him, which is really all I ever want to do." And you get this sense that he wanted to abide with Jesus.



He was so grateful for a retreat where he could be near his friend, where he could be near his Lord.

He could be near the single treasure, the pearl of great Christ in his life, Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

And think of how often we all take this for granted that we've lived on the same property, most of us, as the Lord of the universe. And seeing in this man this hunger to be close to Him, to abide near Him.

And you know, we've been talking about this abiding in Jesus, in John chapter 15 all week, about what it means to remain in the vine and to abide in Him, as Jesus talks about there at the Last Supper. But we probably all know this, that there's another spot in John's Gospel where the word "abide" shows up, in only one other place where it shows up.

It's where Jesus says, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in Me and I in him" In John chapter 15, Jesus talks about the importance of abiding, but He doesn't say how. He doesn't say, how do we abide in Him? Like, what's the practical? How do you abide in Him? Luckily, in John chapter 6, He does.

It's in the Eucharist that we abide in Him. It's in His very flesh and blood that we may remain attached to the vine.

I feel like it's maybe providential, probably, that the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas is here with us today, because the only priest I really know in the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas... is the priest who gave us our canonical retreat when we were preparing for diaconate ordination.

And he said a lot of wonderful things, but one of the things I remember him saying was, he talked about the importance of daily Mass for the priest. He talked about how central it is for our spiritual life. He said, for the laity, if they can come to daily Mass, it's great. It's icing on the cake. It's not essential for their sanctity. So for you, daily Mass is essential for sanctity. Then he encouraged us to do whatever you need to do to make daily Mass a place of prayer, a place of in abiding with the Lord.

Take the practical steps to do what you need to do to pray daily Mass well. Maybe that means we need to celebrate Mass at the same time every day. I showed up at the parish, in a week: one day it was at 6:30 am, one day it was at 7 pm, one day it was at noon. It was just all over the place, and it was hard to pray because you never got the rhythm.

Maybe that's what we need to do. Maybe if you have multiple sites, multiple churches that you're going to, and you got to remember which place you're at and how they celebrate Mass, and what's different in this place, maybe for daily Mass, just to say this is how we're going to do it here, and the daily Mass people are going to be good. They really don't care. We can just celebrate the Mass.

Maybe also that means we need to uncomplicate it, and things can just kind of creep into how we celebrate Mass; that things can get so complicated, you know, more than just offering the sacrifice of praise, but for us to be able to pray this, this Mass, well, day in and day out, because daily Mass is so important for us.

Sunday Mass, you know, you got baptisms during Mass, you gotta do an OCIA, right? You got all sorts of different things to remember, and that's just the way it is. But daily Mass becomes this place for us to abide in, this place to be nourished by Him, the time of adoration that we get to say that we get to abide with our Lord, to remain on this vine. And it becomes the nourishment for us, just as the manna was the nourishment for the Israelites in the desert - and sometimes in our parish life, we feel like we're in the desert. We feel like we're just wandering aimlessly. Maybe it feels like it's going to have to be 40 years of wandering; but our Lord feeds us with His very Body and Blood. He gives us His strength to carry on so that we can say like, like our friend, like our brother, like our mentor Father Jim Lee,

“I'm not dead, I'm not done.”

