Twenty-four years old, a newly ordained deacon on fire with Spirit and youth, I was standing in the kitchen of the rectory in conversation with the pastor of the parish in which I was serving. Attempting to describe a parishioner with whom I had been engaged, I fumbled in my attempt to identify the person. Finally I said, “He’s middle-aged, around 40 I would say.”

The pastor, Paul Sullivan, in his quiet, low-key manner muttered, “One’s description of age obviously comes from one’s own vantage point.” Looking sort of perplexed, I guess I “got it” after a few moments. Well, 40, back then, did seem about midpoint. Today, from my perspective 40 is barely at the entrance of adulthood!

Everything is perspective, wouldn’t you agree?

Two evenings ago I was at Eucharist at St. John’s Cathedral here in Milwaukee—a quiet, sparsely filled daily Liturgy. I was going through the motions—in the best sense—but still kind of there and not there. All of a sudden I found myself looking up above me at the huge, cavernous space of ceiling. I found a lightness in my being, an expansiveness, almost a sense of discovery, like “I have never seen this before.” I felt the lightness, expansiveness, almost discovery of God, from a different angle, a different perspective. Until then, my eyes were focused on the altar, the ambo, the presider’s chair, the crucifix. Now I was seeing things anew.

Almost 10 years ago, the NACC, as a body, recognized the difficulty that persons in our care were having in finding a priest to administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The leadership, listening to the concerns of the body, set their eyes on a course of action to bring this difficulty to a responsible forum with a possible solution. The NACC began the writing of a “white paper” to explore the historical, doctrinal, theological, and pastoral issues around the Sacrament with the goal of asking the bishops of the United States to petition Rome to grant the faculty of administering the Sacrament to deacons and USCC/NACC certified chaplains.

We engaged noted theologians to write up summaries of the issue from their discipline. In 1994, in collaboration with the Catholic Health Association, we formulated a nine-question survey which was then distributed to approximately 6000 professional chaplains (NACC and the College of Chaplains) seeking their experience.
regarding the availability of priests to administer the Sacrament. With a 47 percent return, we had over 2000 extensive, written comments and an important statistical finding, namely that 30 percent of the respondents said they experienced “regular difficulties” in obtaining a priest to administer the Sacrament.

Five drafts of the white paper were written in regular consultation with our 14 bishops who included our Episcopal Liaison and Regional Episcopal Advisors. In 1997, we were in our final stages of preparation to enter our request into the body of bishops when the Instruction from Rome was released with a clear statement that the only minister of the Sacrament was the ordained priest. The advice of our bishops was to put the paper on hold for a year.

About six months ago, in response to an article that I wrote for Vision about the danger of losing this rich Sacrament due to the shortage of ordained priests, a bishop wrote to me with a suggestion. Recognizing that the “white paper” seemed to reach a dead end, he suggested that we take another perspective in dealing with this issue. His suggestion was to engage a serious theological discussion with reputable scholars in a public forum.

To this end, your leadership has agreed that NACC host a symposium in the spring of 2001 entitled, The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick: Theological and Pastoral Implications in the New Millennium. This symposium would take the place of the annual conference. The preliminary plan is that there would be four or five major presentations by leading theologians which would subsequently be published. All workshops and small group gatherings would be focused on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, ritual and prayer, and the practical concerns on how we keep the sacramental life of our Church available to our people.

Further, it is our intention to make this an international gathering, both in the selection of theologians and in the invitation for participants. In surfacing this proposal to colleagues in Accra, Ghana, this past summer, there was immediate interest and even assurance from some of our colleagues that they would attend such an important convocation in the United States.

So the NACC has changed its perspective – we are looking at this issue from a different angle.

But just as importantly, I believe, we need to change not only the perspective of strategy, but also the perspective of our own attitude.

And by “our,” I mean, “Church.” Church that is on fire with Spirit
and youth in her priests, laywomen, bishops, laymen, brothers, deacons, catechists and any other descriptor of specific role and responsibility. Baptism is the great equalizer. Baptism is the common ground, so to speak. Neither pope nor prostitute, priest nor tax collector, woman nor man comes to Christ any differently than through the waters of baptism.

The common ground we share sets our eyes on a common summit. In all of our differences, the ritual of baptismal waters leads us to waters of everlasting life. No one, I think, would disagree on the beginning and end of our Christian story.

The in-between, however, is another often poorly written story. Fighting with our primal sin of pride we wage wars, sometimes crusades, other times, official silences. Whether from “on top” or “from below,” the mistrust, name-calling, irreverence is a far cry from the admonition of Jesus to take up one’s cross each day and die to our own selves.

So as we approach this symposium, wouldn’t it be refreshing to go from a new perspective? Can our attitude be that of Christ’s who emptied himself, accepting even death, death on a cross? In our case, could this be an emptying of the labels, conservative and liberal? Could we not go into this theological inquiry with an open heart and open mind, whether bishop or chaplain?

I’m tired of the labels because I don’t really fit in one. I’m equally tired of my labeling others, especially because they differ from me and my thinking. I suspect that they don’t fit in my label either. Perhaps the emptying that needs to happen is the emptying of the right answers that each of us thinks we have. John Connelly, a seminary professor of mine, used to say that “every label is a liebel.”

I think it would be vitally important to have many bishops come and participate in this symposium. For that reason, it is our preliminary plan to send out an invitation to all the bishops to mark their calendars as soon as we have a city and some dates. To accommodate international travelers, we are looking to a date later in the spring and for a location in a first-tier city that is easily accessible to international flights.

The questions that come are many. What is the history of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick? Was the layperson in the early Church who brought home the blessed oil for the sick administering the Sacrament, or rather, was the ritual a blessing of a different order? What was the context for the Tridentine definition of the Sacraments and how might later discovery of texts or practices
now impact the formulations of that Council? Should the Church develop alternative rituals and rites of blessing for ministering to the sick? Is the Sacrament in danger of falling out of practice because of the unavailability of priests?

In approaching this subject, the NACC could be cast in the “liberal” light. A label. In thinking of our bishops, many members could cast them in the “conservative” light. Another label. How about lifting our eyes from what is familiar and as a result, habitual, and looking at each other from a different perspective?

The bishop has a significant role and responsibility in guarding the deposit of faith. And who could argue that this function has in fact been life-giving to the bearing of the message of Jesus Christ?

The chaplain likewise has a role and responsibility in her or his call to care for the sick, the dying, their families, and the staff who surround them. And who could argue that this function has in fact been life-giving to the bearing of the message of Jesus Christ?

All of us know that when two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, there is potential for the fire of Spirit and youth. We are a Spirited Church because we are the Church of Pentecost and all its promises. We are a youthful Church because we are energetic, vital, and open to the new.

Wouldn’t it be something that if in the first year of the third millennium of Christianity we could gather as Church and from a new perspective – not so much strategy, but attitude – look for fire in our discussion of how we can best care for the sick with the rich legacy that Jesus left us his followers? ✽