

Good evening, St. Christopher's! I'm familiar with your patron saint, because when I was growing up, some of my cousins had a St. Christopher prayer card hanging from the rearview mirror of their car. Whenever the family left on a road trip, the kids would get buckled in, and then their dad would read the prayer aloud, asking for St. Christopher's protection on the journey. Every time, he would add his own ending: "No crashes, no traffic, no cops. Amen."

This, of course, is because St. Christopher is the patron of travelers. His patronage feels especially fitting at a time like this in the life of your parish, when you've been on such a long journey, discerning who your next rector will be. Now you have found a leader and fellow traveler. I like to think that St. Christopher has been keeping an eye on you the whole time.

Where is the search committee? Will you stand? Well done, good and faithful servants. Most people will never know how many hours of effort have led to this day, how many prayers, how much worry and fear and excitement and hope. You have been faithful to this church and called the new rector you were meant to have. Congratulations, and know that God has seen your efforts and called them good.

Where are the wardens? Wardens, are you tired? Look at your wardens. They are tired. Their job, if I can paraphrase the book of Numbers, is to bear the burden of the people along with the rector so that he doesn't have to bear it all by himself.¹ But during this time when you've been

without a permanent rector, they've been supporting the interim and setting the vision for this parish. Church, go easy on these wardens for a few months. They need a chance to rest.

But I know this community has been blessed by excellent leaders, because I know it by reputation: St. Christopher's is famous for its ministries with children, its commitment to social justice, its presence in the neighborhood. These are just a few of your charisms as a parish. And now you have called another excellent leader, who shares your passion for these ministries and more, and who will help you encounter Jesus in new ways.

The great youth minister Mark Yaconelli writes that early in his vocation, he kept hearing the same phrase about his role with the young people he served: "You may be the only Jesus they'll ever know." But, he says, "This idea of 'being Jesus' ... can warp our relationships by putting too much emphasis on us. When we seek to *be* Jesus, we become the center of attention ... When I encounter a young person, I find it much more helpful to think that she (or he) may be the only Jesus *I'll* ever know."²

That's why I trust George as a priest, and, most importantly, as *your* priest. Not because he will try to be Jesus. But because I trust him to look into each of your faces and see Jesus there. His job as your rector is not to make you holy; his job is to see that within you which is already holy, and notice the gifts you have been given for the healing of the world.

¹ Numbers 11:16-17: "So the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel ... and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and

they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.'"

² Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2006), 127-128.

Paul writes to the Ephesians that “[Christ’s gifts] were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers ... for building up the body of Christ.”³ One of the things I value most about George is his profound attunement to the gifts of others. *You* are the apostles and prophets. *You* are the pastors and teachers. George’s job is to equip the saints. And you can bank on him for that. Trust that he will see all the best in you, that flame of goodness and talent burning within you, and help you make sure it has all the fuel it needs to burn bright.

The same with the church; his job is to notice everything about this community that is already beautiful and good, already lit up by God from within, and encourage it to grow. You are the light of the world; he will be the keeper of the flame.

George was your intern, and everyone loves an intern. Not everyone loves a rector. There will be times when this is hard on all sides. George, I know you are not somebody who likes to disappoint people or tell them no. But I fear you are going to have to get comfortable with both.

Church, I know that a rector search is an anxiety-provoking time, even in a healthy parish. It’s hard not to feel like everything is on the line right now, and like St. Christopher’s can’t afford for the new rector to make one single mistake.

But mistakes will be made. Even though George is an enormously gifted and capable priest, and more than up to the task. He will do many things right, because he is talented and hardworking. He will also make mistakes, because he is human. In those moments, he will

need you to grant him grace. He will need you to look into *his* face, and see Jesus there.

Despite his many gifts, George also has numerous deficiencies. He cannot be in two places at once, for example. He cannot manifest money or congregants by sheer force of will. And, disappointingly, he cannot read minds. If you are in the hospital and want him to visit you, tell him. If you realize that he has neglected an important parish tradition because he didn’t know about it, tell him. Most of all, if you have a problem with George—just tell him. He is an outstanding priest. But through his partnership with you, he will be an even better priest ten years from now. Just as I believe that through your partnership with him, you will be an even better church ten years from now—growing ever more fully into God’s vision for you, bringing in the good harvest that is the fruit of all your labors.⁴ And not just your church. Oak Park, and the world, will be made better because you are here.

In his ordination vows, George promised to “love and serve the people among whom [he works], caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.”⁵ All priests make these promises, but it’s not every day that you find one with both the humility to love, and the skills to serve.

I know how excited he is to be here. I can only imagine how excited you are to have him as your rector. In the days and months to come, please pray for him, as I know that he is praying for you.

³ Ephesians 4:11-12.

⁴ Luke 10:2: “He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”

⁵ “The Ordination of a Priest: The Examination,” Book of Common Prayer, 531.