

Priestly Ordination of Deacon Cornelius Philip

Sunday, January 22, 2006

Most Reverend Gabriel Malzaire

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this evening we are gathered here to witness the sacramental act which represents the highest point of Jesus earthly ministry—the raising of a young man to the presbyteral order—the making of a Priest on the pattern of Jesus Christ himself. It is indeed the means instituted by Christ, through which the Church would live in perpetuity.

What really are we about to witness? The Holy Scriptures tell us: “On the night before he died Jesus, surrounded by his disciples, took bread in his sacred hands, said the blessing, gave thanks to God, and gave the bread to his disciples saying: “Take this all of you and eat it. This is my body, which will be given up for you. Whenever you do this, do it in memorial of me”

In the same way he took the cup filled with wine. He gave thanks and giving the cup to his disciples he said: “Take this all of you and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and **everlasting** covenant. It will be shed for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memorial of me. With these prayers and gestures Jesus instituted the priesthood of the new covenant—he instituted a new presbyteral order.

This makes it clear that the priesthood is essentially Eucharistic. One exists for the other. Without the priesthood there is no Eucharist; without the Eucharist there is not priesthood. And without either of them there is no Church, in the pattern of the one founded by Christ. The priest of the new covenant exists for the sake of the Eucharist, which is Jesus himself.

As these pertain to the human dimension, it is important to realise that the priesthood is essentially God’s doing. It is an honour that we share in, which is undeserved and unmerited. No human being of himself is worthy of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Ours is a sharing in **his** ministry. It is absolutely God’s gift. As human beings, our duty is only to respond to God’s call. God always takes the initiative. It is God who implants in us even the desire to serve him in such a ministry. Therefore it is safe to say that the priesthood is related to Christ before it is related to the human community.

We notice how the Gospels account Jesus’ mode of choosing his disciples. He did not consult anybody. He did not go to a parent to ask permission for her son to be his follower. Neither did he go to Peter’s wife to ask her whether she would allow Peter to follow him. The scripture tells us that when Jesus went about choosing those he wanted to be his immediate followers, he rather spoke to the heavenly Father.

The Gospel of Luke 6:12-16 tells us that Jesus spent the night in prayer to God, and then he chose the twelve. He never asked for approval. In today’s Gospel text he asked no permission from Zebedee. He simply says to James and John: “Follow me,” and they left their Father and followed Jesus. So the priesthood comes primarily from Christ, not from

the people. “You did not choose me, no I chose you. And I commissioned you go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John. 15:16) Then the Vatican Council went on to say that “the priest is related to Christ before he is related to the people of God;” First to Christ, then to the people.

The letter to the Hebrews 5:1-3, on the other hand, indicates that the high priest comes from the people to offer sacrifice on his own behalf and on behalf of the people. This text, however, stresses the communal dimension of the priesthood for it is most obvious that every human being comes from a family.

My reason for stressing the primacy of Christ in the priesthood is to bring home the point that in its origin the priesthood has nothing to do with us. We are only vessels to be used by God to bring about his work of salvation to the humanity. Our response therefore is an act of faith. It is taking a leap into things divine. It means that when God calls, even if our response is in the affirmative, we do not know exactly where God will take us. We only have the testimonies of those who are ahead of us. All God asks of us is our “yes.” And he promises to build on that “yes.” Our faith tells us that whatever God says he will do, he does.

In our response to God, our commitment grows from a childish “yes” to a mature “yes.” Then we become reasonably convinced that this is what God really wants from us. The function of the Christian community in this regard, therefore, is to help nurture that “yes.”

We are often asked to pray for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. And what do we really mean by that? Are we trying to push the hands of God to respond to our needs? No! Not at all! God cannot be coerced. He already knows our needs even before we ask. Therefore, our prayer is a kind of affirmation; it represents our recognition of the needs of the Christian community, which we present to God in love and freedom, and a desire to do something about it; that is, to participate in God’s saving will. Our prayer creates a sense of Christian well-being, which make our hearts more pliable to God’s will. Our prayer creates the environment in which a young man or young women can respond positively to God’s initiative and to feel that it is not a foolish decision. Our prayer is a cry in the wilderness like that of John the Baptist, calling us to prepare the way in our lives to give selfless service to the Lord.

Deacon Cornelius is able to reconfirm his “yes” to the Lord by asking to be ordained to the Presbyterate in the pattern of Jesus Christ, because along the path of his life there have been many John the Baptist figures, who have helped to prepare the way with him—those who have helped create the spiritual environment that were conducive for his saying the initial “yes” and sustaining it: his parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, the youth groups to which he belonged, including those who have challenged his faith in one way on another, the parish priests who influenced his life, the FMI Fathers, those who were responsible for his spiritual and intellectual formation at the novitiate and at the seminary. All these helped to bring Deacon Cornelius to this moment. And we are

all here to witness and celebrate it with him. They made the sacrifice and we are here to enjoy the sacrament.

Responding to one's vocation, Brothers and sisters, is an act of faith. It is well to know that God trusts and believes in us more than we trust and believe in ourselves. If we give God a chance in our lives there will be many surprises for us. If we give God our word God will take us seriously and he will lead us to places that we did not plan to go—to places where we never intended. The only appropriate disposition to such action of God in our lives is humility. It is the disposition that allows God to do what God wills in our lives. To Peter, who was destined to be the head of the apostles, Jesus said: "When you were young, you put on your own belt and walked where you liked. When you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go" (John 21:18). Now, this is not meant to frighten us. Only to indicate that allowing ourselves to be pliable in God's hands is essential to the priestly ministry.

Five years ago I had Deacon Cornelius in class at the seminary. If you were to ask him whether he knew how the preparation for priestly life was going to evolve for him, or whether he would live to see a day like today, I am certain he would categorically say, no. And truly, there was no need for him to know. God was imperceptibly building on his initial commitment to the formation process. And that was enough. All he needed to do was to let God lead the way. And here he is today; ready to take another great leap of faith. But this time you are here to support him in that jump.

One essential aspect of the priestly ministry is its sacrificial nature. The Eucharist, which is the highest point in the exercise of the priestly office, is indeed a representation of the sacrifice of Calvary. The Eucharist remains for us the model and school for Christian living. The Eucharist teaches us how to wash each other's feet. It teaches us the value of selfless service. The salvation of the world depends on it. This is what Jesus calls his priests to embrace.

The scriptural selections of today's liturgy lend themselves to a fuller understanding of another dimension of the priesthood, i.e. the teaching office. Just as Jonah went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of the Lord, though he was reluctant at first, so the priest is called to respond in obedience to God's call if he is to effectively communicate the message of Christ. Otherwise it becomes his message. And that is dangerous.

The initial reluctance of Jonah can represent the many doubts, the fears, and the many questions that confront the young man or the young woman who is thinking of the priesthood or consecrated life today. What we see, however, is that, despite his dilly-dallying with God, Jonah eventually responded positively. Evidently he could not be contained or quenched the fire burning in his heart. I have no doubt that the same is happening in the hearts of many young men and women in our Church communities here in the Diocese.

The priest is called to preach the word of God in season and out of season. And of course, the more he ruminates on that Word the more it becomes part of him, and the more he will be on fire when he comes to the pulpit. St Charles Borromeo, who was a bishop of Milan in the 1580s, said to his priests: “Is your duty preaching and teaching? Concentrate carefully on what is essential to fulfill that office fittingly. Make sure in the first place that your life and conduct are sermons in themselves. Do not give people cause to purse their lips and shake their heads during your sermons, since they have heard you before, preaching one thing, then seen you doing the exact opposite.” Brothers and sisters, being a preacher of the word is a dangerous thing. We are indeed playing with fire.

Paul in the second lesson reminds us that the time is growing short. It is a message that we always need to keep before the eyes of the world. It is not meant simply to frighten people into believing in God, but rather to help us appreciate the temporary nature of this earthly existence. It is a mission to convince the world that a life devoid of God is empty. This we are called to do without fear or favour.

But in order to convince others of the Good News, our own lives must give witness to that reality. Friedrich Nietzsche, a prominent agnostic German philosopher of the late 19th century, once reproached the Christians of his time for the lukewarmness with which they gave witness to the Christian message. He told them: “How can you get me to believe in a redeemer if you do not act like a person redeemed?” For once Nietzsche was right when he spoke on religious matters.

Brothers and sisters, the world will be inspired by us if we are inspired ourselves. There is nothing more dangerous than a soldier who has lost his fire—one who has lost the zest for battle. He will surely be defeated by the enemy. And the enemies, as you know are numerous. Therefore it is the first duty of the priest of God to find inspiration through his daily meditation on the word of God and from his intimacy with Jesus in the Eucharist. No one will catch our fire if we are not ourselves being consumed by that fire. When people see us being consumed, and yet with joy in our hearts, they will wonder about us and may desire to share that joy. It is not simply by what we say, but more so by how we live that people will understand that “this world as we know it is passing away.” The essence is Christ.

In the gospel, Jesus exercises his prophetic ministry. He calls his disciples to himself so that he would make them fishers of human beings. By the act of ordination, the Bishop, in the name of Christ is essentially saying to Deacon Cornelius: “Follow me and I will make you fishers of human beings.” Today we exercise this invitation sacramentally. In his life as a priest Fr. Cornelius will exercise this ministerially. In fact, every Christian, by the witness of his/her life, is essentially inviting other people to be like him/her—a bearer of Christ, a propagator of the Christian faith. As priest Fr. Cornelius will have numerous opportunities to draw people to Christ through his ministry. At every celebration of the Eucharist he will invite the faithful to join him in offering the sacred species and consequently, offering themselves for their own salvation and for the reparation of the sins of the world. It will be nothing less than the invitation to eternity.

As I come to my conclusion, I wish to leave you, Deacon Cornelius, some useful tips as you enter this new level of ministerial life:

1. Grow in love with Jesus in the Eucharist. He will sustain you on the long journey. Make it a practice to celebrate Mass daily. The spirituality that it engenders will keep you focused on the more important things. It will fuel the fire of your love for the people whom you serve.
2. Try not to grow tired of doing your duty. Serve God's people with humility and selflessness. Let no work be too menial for you to do. Never lose sight of your humble beginnings. It will keep you real. And keeping it real is important.
3. Let no one be too big to frighten you into easy compromise. And let no one be too small to be worthy of your service and your company. Strive to remain authentic in whatever you do and in whatever capacity you are called to serve. Your truthfulness will win you your life.
4. Have a genuine love for people and a passion for souls. Work untiringly for the Lord. If you win a soul for the Lord you will not lose your own, says St. James. And the people of God will love you.
5. At the end of it all, among the things that will be said in your regard, let it be said that you are a man of prayer. May the Lord bring to completion the good work he has begun in you. Amen.