

Ordination to the Priesthood Homily

Eastertide 2008

by The Rev'd Fr. John H. Heschl, rector
St. Paul's Church by-the-Lake, Chicago, IL

Grant O Lord that thy word only may be spoken and thy word only received,
✠In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I. Next to the words of Jesus, (what the Gospels tell us He said) next in importance would be what He does- and what He does is usually done with His hands. He raises them in prayer, He writes with them in the mud, He touches people to heal them and used them to break, bless and give the bread & wine of the Eucharist. He further takes people by the hand and raises them to walk or even come back to life. Hands are how we “do” the things we say. Hands get things done.

After 30 years with this collar around my neck, I still, each and every time I vest to say Mass, LOOK at my hands in amazement and wonder at what they are about to do...The Holy Eucharist.

_____, LOOK at your hands today, right now. For after today they will never quite look the same to you- they will, I hope, amaze you at what God will use them to do. Hands get things done. For by those hands the Words will become an action: God's Action. He will use them to Absolve His people being contrite and repentant of their sins. And by them He will Bless & Consecrate people, places, things and Sacraments, all for His Glory and the welfare of His One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

II. But WHY do I focus on the hands? For many clear & traditional Anglican reasons. Think with me for a moment how essential hands are in our Catholic Tradition of Christianity. It is by the Bishop's hands that you

will be made a priest today. The old Prayerbook said it so specifically- “Receive the Holy Ghost...by the imposition of our hands”. And so it was also when the Bishop made you a Deacon and when once upon a time you were Confirmed by a Bishop. Even before all that it was a Priest’s hands by which you received the Sacrament of New Life in Holy Baptism.

Hands, next to the Words are essential to the ACTION of the Sacraments. So by your hands, consecrated today by the Bishop, you will Consecrate the Sacraments of the New Covenant, especially the Body and Blood of Jesus. These hands I am asking you to LOOK at now, will make bread live & become: “these creatures of bread and wine”- which is a theologically poetic way of telling us it is the Body & Blood, Soul & Divinity of Our Lord.

III. And it was by the hands of the Apostles that our Bishop here present was made a Successor to the Apostles. Today your hands will be anointed by him, just as Samuel anointed David in the Old Testament for a holy work- the work of bringing about God’s Kingdom. That is the same work you will do for the Church now. That is what Sacraments do, that is why we need your hands now.

With such an anointing you will take the role of Christ at the Altar to celebrate the Eucharist for God’s people. You will do what the Prayerbook orders to be done. Take, Bless, Break and Give the Body and Blood of Jesus for the life of the World. The reason our Catholic Tradition of Christianity uses the word ‘priest’ (instead of just minister) is to show that

by this Ordination you are consecrated to be ‘persona Christi’, the person of Christ among God’s people. Jesus was our High Priest, there need be no more, except that He Himself ordained *ἐπίσκοπος / πρεσβύτερος* to be Stewards of the Sacred Mysteries, the Sacraments of the New Covenant. For that, the Lord had to give His Body (the Church) ongoing hands, hands to represent Himself. And so your priesthood is to RE-PRESENT Jesus at every Mass- “His passion, His death, His mighty resurrection and glorious ascension” as our Prayerbook says, until His coming again.

Can you do this? Heavens NO! At least not on your own. So that is why I say LOOK at your hands now. They are still yours, but not for long, shortly they will become God’s. Now that should make you tremble a bit! If I didn’t tell you this while you were my seminarian, I remind you again: I tremble each and every time I say the preparation for Holy Mass. It is too awesome and overwhelming a thing not to tremble. How unworthy I am to be ‘alter christus’, the other Christ. How presumptuous indeed! But that is what Holy Mother Church, by the laying on of hands, ordains you to do.

IV. God has chosen, you cannot hide from it. Neither could the Old Testament prophets, nor could the Apostles in the New Testament ignore it. So my last point about hands is very practical. It is by hands, not words alone, that you will get things done. And there is so much work of the Gospel still to be done. In my opinion we have far too many Bishops and Priests using their mouths more than their anointed hands!

I mean to say, you’ve got’ a work hard to be a good Parish Priest these

days. You'll have to hold a lot of hands, comfort many people in many circumstances with a healing touch, the touch of Jesus.

That's the real ministry of Jesus' priest- not all this bickering and fighting we see among the hierarchy. Let 'em fight, you put your hands to the plow, and you know how, you've seen me, and other good priests do it. Now your hands will do it. And remember in reaching out your hands to do the ABC's of Priesthood (Absolve, Bless & Consecrate), that it is Jesus who first stretched out His Hands to us, it is Jesus who stretched them out on the hard wood of the cross. And Why? So that, as the collect from Stations of the Cross says: "All might come within the reach of His saving embrace". That is why your hands will do it now for the Lord. That is why He consecrates them today.

Finally I end by leaving you with those wonderful words of St. Teresa of Avila who said: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours.....yours are the hands with which He is to bless men now."

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.