

Ordination to the Priesthood Homily

Ordinary Time 2008

St. John 10:11-18

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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.

“The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” vs. 11.

I. To distinguish our doctrine of the Sacred Order of Priests from the protestant view of the “priesthood of all believers”, we Anglo-Catholics have used several explanations. From the Eastern Church we speak of the Priest as the ‘Icon’ of the Incarnate Jesus. Or we have borrowed from another Communion the concept of ‘Persona Christi’. And occasionally we use our own Anglican friend C.S.Lewis. He described the Priest at an east facing Altar being ‘Alter Christus’ when he turns toward the people to say “The Lord be with you”. There he represents Christ to His people. I am old enough to remember when a lay reader in Morning Prayer had to substituted the words “O Lord hear our prayer” for “The Lord be with you” (which only priests could say).

Today I want to take our idea of the Sacerdotal Priesthood one step even more radical. Let us think of what it means to say Holy Orders is a Sacrament. For like Holy Baptism, Holy Orders has a distinct & indelible character. The protestant notion that has become very popular among Episcopalians, says that Ordination is just a “re-focusing of your Baptism”. This implies no new grace is bestowed beyond the grace of Holy Baptism.

It thus denies Holy Orders as a distinct sacrament with a particular grace.

It further contradicts prayerbook rubrics that only a priest or bishop may Absolve, Bless & Consecrate (the ABC's of the Priesthood).

II. The priest, in a more radical view of Christian Sacraments, is more than an appointed representative of /or for the Community of Faith. Jonathan, I suggest to you, that we see the priesthood in the deeper and fuller terms of the great mystery of the Eucharist. As in the Mass we participate in something far deeper than just this world (we believe it is God's World, His eternal kingdom). So too in the Sacrament of Holy Orders the Priest is of God's eternal kingdom, ‘Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’ (Hebrews 5:6). For in this Sacred Order Jesus is both Priest & Victim, the one who offers and is offered. This character we receive is indelible; it cannot be taken away, not even by presiding bishops! Like the sacrament of Holy Matrimony- the outward & visible sign is not as simple as a ring on a finger, but how a man & a woman treat each other. So in the Priesthood it is not the collar around your neck that is the outward & visible sign of this sacrament, rather how you will live-out the Priesthood. Jesus lives it out as the Good Shepherd laying down his life in sacrifice for His flock, which is the One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic Church. Also like marriage, you will need the sacrificial love of Jesus that we see on the Cross, to let God work through you.

III. Think of St. Paul's teaching on the Sacrifice of the Mass: "Is the bread we break not a participation in the Body of Christ, is the cup we bless not a participation in the Body of Christ?" (I Corinthians 10:16) He is speaking of the Blessed Sacrament in terms of having an outward appearance (Aquinas called this the 'accidents') & an elemental being ('substance') that which it has in common with all other things that it looks like. The Thomist understanding tells us that while the accidents remain the same, the substance changes, i.e. It has nothing left in common with any of the other things of this world that look like bread or wine. It is now the Body & Blood, Soul & Divinity of Jesus.

So it is with Jesus' Priesthood as a sacrament. Jonathan, your body (what we might call the accidents!) will still look like you, you'll still laugh like you do, sin like you do. You'll even continue to smell like you've always smelled (poor Elizabeth!). But your being, dear Jonathan, the elemental state & substance of your baptized humanity will be changed- completely transformed into the living Priesthood of Jesus. HAVE I SCARED YOU YET? I hope so!

So Jonathan take a good look at your hands right now, they are **one** part of your being, and how you use them will be that outward & visible sign of Christ's Priesthood. This is the last time they will be exclusively yours- for your whole being becomes God's today. Now they are God's hands for us His Bride, the One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic Church.

IV. Well, is this Radical enough or what? Not quite the 'Modern TEC' definition of ministry as re-focusing our Baptismal Covenant, is it? Nor is this some sweet little "nice priest-person" that Commission on Ministries like to approve. You know the types, I heard it often during my 6 years on Chicago's COM-"He's such a nice person, he should be a priest". Please, somebody get a spoon and gag me! You see that view of priesthood is a load of sentimental rubbish that has led us to a very sick concept of the priesthood. A concept devoid of the gift, meaning & mystery of being created male & female for God's purposes. What we see, in reading the news of our National Church, is a concept of priest that is lured by power, not sacrifice. It is not based on good shepherding. It is not the Catholic Priesthood of Jesus or His Apostles that they believe in, but a creation of their own comfort: 'that we are the nicest church around'. Where's that spoon? Watch out for anything based on power that sells itself as ministry & being 'nice'...it will burn you. Rather look for and trust in that humble spirit of sacrifice that we see in Jesus on the Cross at every Mass. That will keep you a faithful priest with hands & even more, your whole body a sacrament of Jesus the high priest. Finally, what does all this high-fluting talk mean practically for you? Exactly the same as it means for me, for your bishop, and for every priest here present. It means we have a gift, an INDELIBLE CHARACTER of Jesus the high priest, and that what we do must reflect HIS ACTIONS, especially His sacrificial action. You will do that by joining with us in the ABC's of the Priesthood. You will absolve sin, bless people & objects, and consecrate the Sacraments of the new covenant, especially the Body & Blood of Jesus.

But you will not just absolve the sins of the faithful, rather by the character of Jesus' death & resurrection you will make forgiveness flow into the penitent's hearts. And you will not just bless, as if dedicating, people and objects. Rather you will impart the living grace of Jesus from the font of every blessing: from His Sacred Heart. And you will not just mechanically consecrate Sacraments as memorial symbols- but instead direct a living participation into the very Soul & Divinity of Jesus. This you can only do if your very being is sacramentally transformed today through the laying on of Apostolic hands. Then you become a living sacrament of Jesus' priesthood: caring & shepherding the lives of all His flock, all who are baptized into His death & resurrection. Jonathan, can you do this? Hell no, at least not alone,

for the accidents remain the same, you are still like all of us. You will still feel hurt, jealousy, pain, and you will still sin. That is exactly why you need the grace, care & fellowship of God the Father through your Bishop and fellow college of priests. Is that not the reason the old prayerbook addressed the bishop as “Father in God”?

Well, none of this is easy, nice or sweet. It is a labor; it is hard work and sacrifice if done right. Such is being a good shepherd. But in it is also the JOY, the PEACE and the deeper PRESENCE of Jesus. At times you will look at your hands, and they will amaze you, what God allows you to do by His grace. Especially in the years to come when people you never suspected you had an effect on, come back and tell you how much you helped them, and even changed their lives. But remember, it is not you; it was and will be Jesus the Good Shepherd, the priest who is the priest of your transubstantiated being. Today you become an outward & visible sign of the inward & spiritual grace of Christ’s Priesthood, ordained by Christ whereby we receive a sure & certain means of that grace. For this-

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