

“Following Where Jesus Went First, So That His Joy in Us May Be Complete”

Homily for Mass of Priestly Ordinations

June 10, 2017, St. Mary’s Cathedral

Readings: Jer 1:4-9; Heb 5:1-10; Jn 15:9-17

Introduction

For every prophet we read about in Scripture, indeed, for anyone whom God selects to play a special role in His plan of salvation, there is a call. The Bible describes the call of these special servants of God, and each one is unique. It is sometimes interesting to compare and contrast the stories of these calls. For example, in our first reading we heard about the call of the prophet Jeremiah: we sense some protesting here. He protests that he is too young, and therefore unable to speak. That is, he would have no respect because of his youth, and therefore would not be heeded by the authorities.

Contrast this with the call of Isaiah, who, when the Lord asks, “Whom shall I send?”, responds immediately and with great alacrity, “Here I am. Send me.” Moses’ reaction on being called, on the other hand, is more like Jeremiah’s: he, too, at first looked for excuses to get out of it, protesting that he was not good at speaking – he must have considered himself to be inarticulate, or to have had some kind of a speech impediment. But God’s ways are not our ways, and often the qualities we would look for in such a servant of God’s plan do not correspond to God’s inscrutable wisdom.

Following the Voice

As with prophets of old, so with those called to the Priesthood: each one has his own unique story of how that call happened. It is as if God has a tailor-made plan for each one of those He calls. But no matter who is called, no matter how the call arrives, and no matter the initial reaction of the one called, it always begins with an inner, mysterious and indescribable voice, a sort of beckoning voice, even nagging, that won’t

let the one called alone until he responds, by following that voice. Those who do definitely have a sense of what we just heard Jesus talk about in the Gospel of St. John, namely, that they are not the ones doing the choosing, but rather are being chosen. And for them, that voice won't go away until they respond by following it. That is, they must obey.

Now, this obedience is not just an abstract idea, or something that one follows in some sort of a whimsical way, subject to the individual's desires as they come and go. Rather, once the one called takes concrete action in responding to that call, obedience is brought down into the concrete in myriad ways. This is what priestly formation is all about. We hear about formation in our first reading, again in the account of the call of Jeremiah to be God's prophet. Consider what the Lord says to him: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." The word "formed" here has the sense of clay being formed into pottery: the potter shapes the clay, continually refining it, until it takes the desired form, and then he bakes it in the heat of the oven. This is how it turns into a piece of pottery. The clay, in and of itself, serves no practical purpose. The raw material for the pottery is there, but it only becomes useful after it is shaped and baked into a vessel, which has the practical purpose of containing things. And so it is with priestly formation: yes, there are lots of rules and regulations, there is a rule of life, there are evaluations and grades, there are expectations, and so forth. This is all for the sake of shaping the raw material that is the man's call to the Priesthood so that it can achieve its greatest potential and so become a vessel for God.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who have had a role in Alvin and Michael's priestly formation, beginning with their professors and formatters at St. Patrick's Seminary, as well as their vocation directors and pastor-mentors, but also those who have helped form them all throughout their lives, for the

formation of a future priest begins long before he steps foot in a seminary: his teachers, coaches and other mentors, his pastors, but especially his family, and most all his parents. Thank you, parents, for getting your sons off to a good start in life, forming them with a heart open to receiving God's call to be a vessel for Him. But, a vessel of what? What is this vessel made for containing? It is designed to contain that which must always characterize the life of the priest: pastoral charity.

Christ Precedes Us

Our seminarians receive their priestly formation in accordance with the vision of St. John Paul II's Instruction on priestly formation that they come to know quite well during their years in the seminary, *Pastores dabo vobis*. The Instruction quotes St. John Paul's definition of pastoral charity, where he says, "Pastoral charity is the virtue by which we imitate Christ in his self-giving, which manifests Christ's love for his flock. Pastoral charity determines our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people. It makes special demands on us" (PDV 23, quoting from St. John Paul II's homily at Eucharistic adoration in Seoul in 1989). And to go deeper into the question of content, he further specifies, "The essential content of this pastoral charity is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church, following the example of Christ."

This teaching about self-gift was, of course, one of his foundational themes, and one which he repeated often. It is one that reflects the commandment our Lord gives to his apostles in the Gospel reading we just heard proclaimed: "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

Now, our Lord can give this commandment, because he was the first to fulfill it. In fact, all that he asks of us he has done first, he has paved the way for us. This is why

he says: “I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.” Now, we should not understand this to mean that we are no longer servants of his, and the fact that he calls us his friends certainly does not mean that we are his equals, but rather, that the relationship has taken on a new and deeper reality. This has happened because he has gone there first: he is our head, but he serves us. Is this not a constant part of his teaching, by word and example? What immediately comes to mind is him washing the feet of his apostles at the Last Supper, as well so many of his teachings, such as, “I am among you as one who serves” (Lk 22:27).

And he has gone before us in friendship, too. He made himself our friend after we denied his friendship by our sin, in order to win us back to himself. And he did so through his own obedience to the will of his Father, submitting himself to his suffering. This is what the Letter to the Hebrews tells us in our second reading: “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”

Obedience from Love

But, why? Why would he put himself through all of this? One word: love. Because he loves us.

Love is what gives obedience its rationale and proper context. This is also why the promise of obedience has such a central part in the rites of ordination. In these rites, those to be ordained make several promises: these promises take the form of resolutions, to which the candidates respond in the affirmative as each question is asked to them, one after the other.

But the promise of obedience is singled out: each ordinand approaches the bishop and places his hands inside the bishop’s hands as he makes that promise. And, this is the

only promise that is repeated at Priesthood: although the one being ordained first made this promise when he was ordained a deacon, he makes it again at his priestly ordination. This is because his relationship to his bishop and to Christ's people has now been changed: he is ordained to be for God's people "their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins," sharing in the very Priesthood of Christ himself.

The special demands of pastoral charity are really all kinds of different forms of obedience, but none of it makes any sense without love, or, as St. John Paul would put it, the complete gift of self. Obedience must proceed from love, otherwise it does not make sense, and can become oppressive. As St. Augustine teaches: "Love precedes the keeping of commandments. For whoever does not love does not have the ability to keep them."

Complete Joy

And why would Jesus ask this of his priests? Why would he place special demands on them? He tells his apostles why in the Gospel passage we just heard proclaimed: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete."

Continuing to respond to that voice, in obedience to all of the demands which that voice places on him – this is how the priest's friendship with Christ is deepened, and how the priest becomes an ever more accurate image of Christ for his people. And that is the source of the joy, for the only true and lasting joy comes from God. That is the irony in the life of the priest: he becomes capable of the true and lasting joy that only God can give when he gives completely of himself in pastoral charity to the people he is called to serve. In other words, the joy is found in pastoral weariness.

As self-gift was a constant teaching of Pope John Paul II, so joy is a constant teaching of Pope Francis. He spoke about the connection between the weariness of the priest and joy in addressing priests in his homily at the Chrism Mass in 2015. He interprets that scene of Jesus washing his disciples' feet as the Lord washing us: as the feet are a sign of the weariness of the body (since they absorb the weight of the body), so the Lord washes the weariness of our discipleship so that we can rightly feel joyful. And this, he says, is holy. As he puts it: "Our tiredness, dear priests, is like incense that silently rises up to heaven (cf. Ps 141:2; Rev 8:3-4). Our weariness goes straight to the heart of the Father." This is that sort of weariness that brings about peace of conscience, when one can say, with a clear and honest conscience, "I have given my all." That is where the joy is found, knowing that one has given one's all for God.

A young man's response to this call, to follow the voice to this deep joy that is the only joy that endures, pursuing this call by taking on the special demands of his pastoral charity, consuming himself in service to God's people: this truly an extraordinary thing. The path to joy lies in laying down one's life in gift to another – or for the priest, in gift to *the Other*. So many either don't see this deeper, spiritual reality, or get a glimpse of it and run away, seeking lasting good in what is fleeting, and sometimes even harmful.

Conclusion

Today is a day of joy, as we celebrate the ordination to the Priesthood for our Archdiocese of our brothers Michael and Alvin. But we rejoice to the extent that we have taken on the special demands of our calling – all of us, really, each one in accordance with his or her own vocation in life. This is what opens the heart to receiving the true and lasting joy that God wants us to have; it makes us capable of it. Only in tasting that, getting even just a little glimpse of it, does one understand.

I can do no better than to conclude with the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who explains this mystery in his characteristically lucid way in one of his epistles:

Verily that is the true and only joy which comes not from a creature, but from the Creator, and which no one shall take away from you when you possess it. Compared with this all other gladness is only sorrow; all other pleasantness is pain, all sweetness bitter, all beauty but as ugliness; everything whatsoever, finally, which could be delightful – burdensome [*epit* 114].