

“Prayer as the Heart of the Priest’s Friendship with Christ”
Homily for Mass of Priestly Ordinations
May 18, 2019; St. Mary’s Cathedral
Readings: Acts 10:37-43; Pt 4:7b-11; Jn 15:9-17

Introduction

Many years ago, when I was a young priest, I remember a conversation I had with an older priest whom I looked up to and admired. He was commenting on the attitude of some priests after the Second Vatican Council who, he said, felt relieved at the Council’s emphasis on the universal call to holiness. According to him, such priests interpreted this as meaning that they no longer had to strive to do better than everyone else at being an example of holiness in life – they were, you might say, off the hook!

I don’t know how common that attitude was, but the lifestyle of priests did change as priests became more involved in the lives of their people and affairs of the world. This did give the impression, not entirely unmerited, that priests were beginning to live a more worldly way of life. They are, after all, “human just like everyone else.” As experience shows, though, things didn’t work out as planned: the travails the Church is experiencing in our own age demonstrates that, just like in every other age of the Church, people expect more from their priests, a higher level of integrity, of virtue, of holiness.

The Commandment of Love

Such an attitude also directly contradicts what our Lord said to his apostles the night before he died. We hear in the Gospel reading for this Mass of Ordination about the high calling that he gives them. It is not a compliment, not a pat on the back, but a calling: “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.”

A slave works out of fear and ignorance; by definition, a slave is not free. As our Lord says, “a slave does not know what his master is doing.” The slave is left out, distant from the master. A friend, on the other hand, works out of love, out of devotion, out of a sense of communion in doing what pleases the one he loves. Only in this way can what Jesus also tells them here make sense in light of what they were to suffer for him a little later in their lives: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.”

Yes, we are well aware of all they suffered for him. The scene we just heard about from the Acts of the Apostles took place after Peter had been detained in prison and heavily guarded. Yes, on this occasion he was miraculously released by an angel of the Lord, but we know how he ended his life: nailed to a cross, just like the friend he loved and who laid down his life for him. In the end, Peter fulfilled his Lord and friend’s ultimate commandment: “love one another as I love you.” Just about all of those first followers suffered a similar fate. Yet, they were joyful. As we hear elsewhere in the Acts of the Apostles (and just two weeks in the first reading for Mass of Friday of the Second Week of Easter), after being flogged, the apostles “left the presence of the Sanhedrin, *rejoicing* that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name” (Acts 5:41).

In the Life of the Priest

They laid down their lives not only for Jesus, but also for those whom Jesus called them to serve. In our second reading we heard from St. Peter’s letter addressed to the Christians

dispersed far away from the Church's original home in Jerusalem. There he gives lots of practical advice on what it means to put this ultimate commandment into practice, with particular application to the life of the priest.

He says that, above all, our love for each other should be "intense." The original Greek word here carries the sense of "constant" and "unfailing"; the priest is to carry out his responsibilities as a "steward of God's varied gifts." The steward is the one who cares for the master's home; the steward is a householder, ensuring that the master's home is a well-run, prosperous, happy place. It is this kind of love that "covers a multitude of sins."

This has a very specific application in the lives of priests. By now the whole world knows that priests have their shortcomings, their weaknesses, their quirks. But I find that our people are patient with their priests. It is my consistent experience and observation that, even aware of the faults and foibles of their priest, people find themselves loving and admiring their priest when they know he is there for them, when they know that his life is characterized by a self-giving love expressed in pastoral presence and attentiveness that is intense: it never fails, because it is all directed toward the members of the household of God, not himself and his own ambitions or pursuits or comforts. This is the love that covers a multitude of sins.

Proper Perspective

It is also the way that the priest heeds Peter's first exhortation in this passage, to be "serious and sober-minded." One Bible commentator explains that this means, literally, "preserve your sanity." That may seem like a tall order, especially in this day and age! But as the commentator goes on to explain, sanity in this Christian sense is characterized by the wisdom to see things in their proper proportion, and measure all in the light of eternity: not being swept away by the latest fad nor closed to new movements of the Spirit; given neither to fanaticism nor to indifference; able to read the signs of the times and stand apart from and above them in order to discern the will of God in the midst of it all.

A bishop of the seventh century by the name of Eligius put it this way in his last admonition to his people before he died: "If you would pay me back my love for you, keep the commandments of Almighty God. Always sigh for Jesus Christ. Fix His precepts firmly in your minds. Love His name even as I have done. Keep always in mind the uncertain end of this fleeting life. Never be without fear of God's tremendous judgments."

With the wisdom of this kind of Christian sanity, not only is the priest enabled to lead his people in the ways of holiness, but he is also able to acquire the humility he needs to learn from them, to recognize in them the way they live out the Lord's ultimate commandment in their own vocations, and to allow himself to be inspired, and formed, by them.

Prayer

St. Peter makes another very important point here: all of this is for rendering prayer possible, fruitful and effective. Certainly without prayer, none of this is possible. Certainly without prayer, the priest will fail in the call to be a friend, and not slave, of his Lord, for without it he will not know what his master is about. One might even go so far as to say that, certainly without prayer, the priest will lose his sanity!

Just last Sunday Pope Francis reminded those he was about to ordain priests in his homily at their Mass of Ordination of the importance of prayer, and how it is at the center of everything the priest is and does as the householder of God, and the only way he can know what Jesus

meant when he said, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” As the Holy Father put it:

Never give a homily, never preach, without much prayer, with the Bible in hand. Don't forget this. Let your teaching therefore be nourishment for the People of God: when it comes from the heart and is born of prayer, it will bear much fruit. May the fragrance of your life be joy and support for the faithful of Christ: men of prayer, men of sacrifice, so that by word and example you may build up the household of God, which is the Church.

Conclusion

Kyle, Ernie and Michael: in a few moments you will make your ordination promises, among which will be “to implore God’s mercy upon the people entrusted to your care by observing the command to pray without ceasing.” “Pray without ceasing”: make this always the center of your life, that it may animate all you do and are as Christ’s priest for his people.

There is one truly important thing in the life of the priest. I leave you with this reminder, the reminder which Pope Francis gave in that same homily to those he ordained priests last Sunday: “carry out with joy and charity, with sincerity, the priestly work of Christ, solely intent on pleasing God and not yourself. Priestly joy is found only by going down this path: seeking to please God.”