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The gift of priesthood

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The day of ordination to the priesthood is always a joyful day in the life of the Church. The faithful gather to witness a beautiful and solemn event, a powerful moment of grace when Christ shares his own priesthood with unworthy men. I have to admit that I am looking forward to this year's ordination on June 27 with particular anticipation. This will be the first ordination of priests that I will celebrate as a bishop, so I share the excitement of our two ordinands, Deacon Kyle Metzger and Deacon William Slattery.

The ordination of priests is an occasion of true renewal, a day of revitalization of hope, of faith, and of trust in the future of God's holy Church. Seeing these men lay down their lives renews our belief that the Church is alive and vibrant, and that it will endure as Jesus promised until the end of time. We rejoice in knowing that the Gospel will be preached, the sacrifice of the Mass will be offered, the sacraments administered, and God's people will be spiritually shepherded.

Paraphrasing words of the late Cardinal John J. O'Connor, it is important to realize that what happens at an ordination is not a mere ritual in which these men will be vested with new vestments. They will *become* something they were not before. They will become priests of God for all eternity. They will be changed in a mysterious way that none of us can completely understand. They will remain men, with all their weaknesses in all their humanity, but they will become "other Christs" in their service to God's people. This identification with Christ is most evident in their celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass, which every candidate for the priesthood eagerly anticipates. And just as powerfully, they act in the person of Christ when they forgive sins through the sacrament of reconciliation.

This notion of the priest acting in the person of Christ is at the heart of our belief in priesthood within the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: "In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts *in persona Christi capitis* (in the person of Christ the Head)" (n. 1548). When the priest consecrates bread and wine at the altar, it is Christ who consecrates. When the priest forgives sin in reconciliation, it is Christ who forgives. When the priest proclaims the Gospel, it is Christ who teaches.

We should never fail to stand in awe before the gift of the priesthood to the Church, but we must also be humble before this gift. Divine revelation says, "And one does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was" (Heb 5:4). No one is worthy to share in the priesthood of Jesus, but he chooses human instruments to do so nonetheless. Jesus is the "one mediator between God and men" (I Tim 2:5), but he desires to exercise this mediation through the human agents he calls to be priests, whom the ancients called "other Christs." St. John Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests, once said, "A priest himself will not understand the greatness of his office until he is in heaven. If he understood it on earth, he would die, if not out of fear, then out of love."

This is also the time of year when most of our priests celebrate the anniversaries of their ordination. I can only express my deepest gratitude to all of our priests for their many years of

priestly life and service to our diocese, and I would ask all the faithful to join me in expressing thanks to them. I also ask for prayers for our priests. They give of themselves every day to meet the spiritual needs of our people, and they make many unseen sacrifices for the good of the faithful. More than anyone else, our priests know their own frailties and shortcomings. They know they are ordinary men called to do extraordinary, even miraculous things. And, they know their need for prayers, so I implore all the faithful to remember them often in their prayers to Almighty God.

Our diocese will be richly blessed in these two new priests of Jesus Christ, who very soon will serve in our parishes. But, the obvious challenge is also to encourage others to heed this same call. When I visit our parishes, almost without exception, I urge our people to pray for vocations to the priesthood, and I urge our young men to consider that Christ might be calling them just as he called Peter, James and John to follow him and become fishers of men. In fact, all the members of the Church should take to heart the directive of the Second Vatican Council: “The task of fostering vocations devolves upon the whole Christian community, which should do so in the first place by living in a fully Christian way” (*Optatum Totius*, 2). The call to the priesthood can originate in families, in schools, in youth groups and most definitely before the altar at Mass. As we all join in celebration at the upcoming priestly ordinations and anniversaries, let us resolve to pray that the Lord will move others to step forward, and that he will form them as shepherds after his own heart. May Christ the High Priest bless our new priests, and all the priests of the Diocese of Fargo.