

On the Occasion of His 25th Anniversary as Priest

Rev. Charles Van Vliet, Pastor

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First of all, I'd like to thank all the people that have been offering their prayers and sacrifices and congratulating me on my 25 years. I look back 25 years ago to a few words that were spoken to me, to a priest at his ordination. The bishop, addressing the ordinandi, says: "Dearly beloved children, who are about to be consecrated to the office of priesthood, strive to receive worthily and discharge these functions of the priestly office; for it is the duty of a priest to offer sacrifice, to bless, to govern, to preach, to baptize." He then delineates the offices a bit.

This is what a priest is to do to fulfill his duties, his instructions, so to speak, given to him by the bishop on the day of his ordination. And he warns us, too, that we have to approach this office with great fear. It is just like anything where we are doing something of great seriousness. We need to really take it seriously and prepare ourselves for it. That is the purpose of the priestly formation, which precedes the priestly ordination. That priestly formation, usually seven years at the seminary, at least in the Fraternity, and the minor orders and the subdiaconate and diaconate were all preparation steps towards this day, when on June 15, 1996, I was ordained a priest.

And so, we approach this office with great fear and trepidation and with seriousness. It is something we prepare for; it is something that we need to keep in mind, this office that we are called to by Almighty God.

My calling was one which may be a little bit hilarious, funny, in some ways. I had gone to the Sunday evening Mass and was out in front of the church with a group of other men and my pastor at the time stuck his head sideways out the door and says, "Fr. Van Vliet, Fr. So-and-so and the other guys that were there and I thought, "What's he saying?" [Laughter] Then he laughed and said, "Well, you never know. It may stick." And it did. I never stopped thinking about it after that. I thought about it before, but you know, it mostly was there and gone.

What he said, through that dropping the seed, planted the seed of priesthood in my mind, something which I did approach with trepidation. I wavered back and forth many times with fear that I couldn't handle the studies, that it would be too much, I wouldn't be able to do this. Finally, a spiritual director told me to go back to college for a few years. If you can manage at college, you will be just fine. And so, I did that, went back to college and did fine and from there the vocation was very clear.

The other part of the vocation that was very important was prayers of family, friends and religious who knew me, who prayed for me during this time, especially the Carmelite nuns. At that time, when I was in college and they were praying for my vocation, they were in San Francisco. A group of them went to Las Vegas and continued to pray for me and that is where they were when I was ordained a priest.

And so, it's kind of funny, in a way, after my ordination, I went to Las Vegas. [Laughter] I never went in a casino. That is where these Carmelite nuns were located and it was wonderful. It was the first time they had a Solemn High Tridentine Mass there. The server - they found one server to help me with the Sung Mass - had never seen a Latin Mass before, but we made it through, the nuns sang gloriously and I still remember that. It was the Feast of the Precious Blood when I celebrated Mass there. I have very wonderful memories of the Masses that I celebrated after ordination.

Back to the ordination, the bishop, is telling us – warning us – that we have to be pure and wise, seeking God's grace. He refers to Moses, who chose 70 men from all the Israel as his helpers and He said, "who thou knowest to be ancients of the people" and so he chose wise people. The rite of ordination points out the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit are to be upon them as well as the Ten Commandments. Seven times ten is seventy and there is a beautiful relation there. The ordination then ties back to the New Testament when our Lord sends out the 72. Why does He send out 72 instead of the 70? We still have the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Ten Commandments. On top of that, now we have the twofold commandment of Love of God and Love of Neighbor. That's what brings us to 72.

And so, we have the fulfilling of the Old Testament but the completing it with the love of God and that is something which the priest has to bring into his work as a priest, in fulfilling his function as a priest when dealing with souls.

Again, the bishop goes back to warning or teaching: "Let your doctrine be spiritual medicine for the people of God. Let the odor of your life be the delight of the church of Christ so that, by your preaching and example, you may build up the house that is the family of God so that neither we may be condemned by the Lord for promoting you to so high an office nor you for receiving it, but that both may rather be deemed worthy of a reward which He may Himself grant us through His grace."

And so, the Traditional rite of ordination, something which is very somber, very much gives us a warning, so to speak, but also encourages us with the grace that we must remain humble, we have to keep praying to God, asking for the help we need in order to fulfill our office as priest. It goes like that for any vocation in life, for married people. You want to approach marriage with great prayer and not to rush into it like so many people do. We want to take our time, discern our vocation, pray about it and remain prayerful all the way through. Priestly formation in the seminary has it built in. In the world, we have to adapt those things to make sure we keep the prayers and sacrifices there in preparing ourselves for the next stage in life.

At the end of the rite of ordination, after the priest is already ordained – we have some photos afterwards of my ordination. 25 years ago, we did not have digital cameras, if you can remember back that far, [laughter], so I asked the Saenz to scan the photos and put a little video together, which will be showing in the large room later – anyway, at one point in the images, you will see the chasuble is folded up at the back and penned. After ordination, the chasuble remains folded up. After communion, the priest recites the Apostles' Creed and then kneels down in front of the

bishop. The bishop says "Receive the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven and those whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." This is after communion, after the intinction, which symbolizes our Lord's Resurrection, where we put the particle of Host back into the chalice. Now we are after the Resurrection of our Lord and in Chapter 20, St. John, where Christ breathed on the Apostles and gave them the power to forgive sins.

The power was given to St. Peter first, beforehand, to him alone. "Thou art Peter and upon this Rock, I build my Church" and so on, but here in Chapter 20, it was given to all. So, this is the point where the priest is given the power to forgive sins and as soon as that power has been granted to him, the chasuble is unpinned and falls down fully. You will see in the photos that, at the end of the ceremony, the priest has his chasuble fully unfolded.

Having received the power to forgive sins, the priest makes a promise to the bishop very solemnly. It is a promise to the ordinary at that time of reverence and obedience. We are making a promise to the bishop who is ordaining us, of course, but he is taking the promise on behalf of the Superior General of the Fraternity. We promise obedience to him. It is not the vow of obedience, but it is still a very solemn moment in the ceremony wherein the young priest promises this obedience.

The day after ordination, I had my First Mass. I had the privilege of having my priest Fr. Ashley, the pastor who stuck his head out the door and planted that seed for the vocation, be my priest assistant at the ordination and again at my First Mass the next day. I had him preach at that Mass. We talked earlier this year and he was hoping to come down on this day. I would have been delighted to see him again and he would have been preaching here today instead of me. He preached for 45 minutes at my First Mass. [Laughter]. He was a wonderful preacher and that is why, when people listened to him, followed him through, they opened their hearts to him.

One of the things he told me at that time and also to the people in the sermon was to call upon the grace of the sacrament. The grace of the sacrament is there to help us accomplish our duties and responsibilities in the priesthood. And so, the character that is given in our souls, the graces of the sacrament of holy orders, is there to help the young priest to accomplish what he has to do and even later, when he is an older priest, to do the work he needs to do. I often tell couples to touch their rings, to remind themselves of the sacrament of matrimony and to call upon those graces to help them in their daily struggles.

He said another thing which is very beautiful and I thought of it many times. He said there will be a time when you are not going to be able to get enough sleep and your body will be tired, but the Holy Ghost can give the grace to help you through that. And that [his voice catches] has helped me so many times. That is a very beautiful thing.

So, 15 years later, I was asked to come to Houston to look at establishing a parish here. No one knew it at the time, but the first Mass we had at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was June 15, 2011, my 15th Anniversary. Ten years later, I am still here. [Laughter]

I would like to thank Fr. Lockey. His generosity to myself as well as to the parish is something which was unprecedented in the Fraternity. I was in contact with Mrs. Charba at that time, the Charbas and others. I called her up from Pennsylvania where I was at the time. We were looking for a place to celebrate Mass and also have a reception afterwards. I had come down to celebrate Mass several times, always at Annunciation Church, whose pastor was Msgr. Golasinski. [At that time, Annunciation had no meeting space.] We were getting closer to my actually moving down here and starting a parish and we wanted to be able to have a Mass and reception together. She said Fr. Lockey has always been friendly with the homeschoolers and maybe he will let you use his church. I said, "Will you give me the number and I will give him a call" and so, out of the blue, I called Fr. Lockey at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton parish. He asked me a few questions and said "sure". I told him the dates I was looking at and he said, "yeah, that's fine. You can have the Wednesday evening Mass", which happened to be the 15th of June. And so it was, in that phone meeting, I was a little bold.

The next day, I started thinking about it and looked at the map where Elizabeth Ann Seton was and it was a long way from Annunciation, so I called him back and asked, "You wouldn't happen to have a guest room I could use, would you?" [Laughter]. He said "sure." I ended up staying there for that trip. We had a wonderful time together. The day before I left, he had, I guess, already spoken with Cardinal DiNardo about this, he proposed that Regina Caeli Parish – we did not have that name at that time – stay at Elizabeth Ann Seton parish. We would stay there for free; he would put me up in the guest room for as long as I needed in order to get the parish off the ground. That generosity was something really very beautiful and I love Fr. Lockey dearly for his sacrifice and, of course, Fr. Reynolds continued the same promise. Five years I was there. They let us stay there, use their facilities, never charged us anything, even helped us in many ways, in donations and so on. We have very much to thank him for and I thank him for the help he gave me at the time, when I was trying to figure out where to say the Mass, where we were going to start our parish. It was just an inspiration of the Holy Spirit to ask him if I could stay at his rectory. The Holy Spirit is there at work.

Ten years later, at the 25th Anniversary, and now we are on our own property and so we have much to be thankful. I thank you all for your prayers, your sacrifices during my time here. It is going to hopefully be many more years. The Superior General will be here on Saturday and Sunday and he will talk himself. There are no plans right now of my moving. I cannot promise I will be here the next 25 years, but hopefully, for a good part of it. Thank you for your prayers and, of course, there will be a reception afterwards.

Mass of the Queenship of Mary, with the additional orations of the Priest himself and the *Te Deum* chanted by all.

Transcribed for the Parish