

HOMILY
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ORDINATION
BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL
JUNE 7, 2003

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-3; I Peter 4:7b-11; Matthew 20:25b-28

My dear Ordinands – John, Paul, Pawel, Robert, James, and Anthony:

On this vigil of Pentecost, our Church of Detroit rejoices in the gift of your lives for the service of God and the Church. In the time-honored custom of our liturgical tradition, in a few moments you will be prostrating yourselves before the Lord, acknowledging your human weakness and dependence on God's mercy. We will join you in prayer, singing the Litany of the Saints, that the Holy Spirit might consecrate and configure you to Christ, the High Priest, so that you can act in His person as Head of His Body, the Church.

Rising from your posture of prostration – a sign of your complete self-giving – you will come forward for the powerful but silent gesture of the laying on of hands, the central act of ordination, a reminder that ordination brings a whole new identity, a new way of living. As a symbol of your special sharing in Christ's consecration and mission, you will then be robed in priestly garments and your hands anointed with Sacred Chrism.

Finally, as you receive from the people of God their gifts of bread and wine, you will hear these beautiful words: *“Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to be offered to Him. Know what you are doing and imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross.”* As a priest, your whole life can be summarized in this humble and simple gesture of accepting the joys and sorrows of the people you serve and uniting them to the perfect self-sacrifice of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. While presiding at the Eucharist is not your sole ministry, nonetheless, this sacrament manifests and energizes all priestly ministry. As our Holy Father recently reminded us in his encyclical on the Eucharist, the Church itself, and certainly ordained priesthood, draws its life from this great mystery of faith.

As this mystery of the Holy Eucharist proclaims Christ's self-sacrificing love, so too at every moment of your day, your own personal needs and desires must always take second place to the needs of your people. Through a spirit of contemplative prayer, you will hear the voice of the Lord speaking in and through the gifts and needs of the Church. As Jesus teaches us in today's very beautiful Gospel, your own greatness will emerge as the fruit of your humility and willingness to live and die for the Lord's glory and the strengthening of ecclesial communion and the common good.

You are being ordained to serve in the name of the Lord. May you always remember that He alone is your life source and that all ministry will be effective and fruitful only to the extent that you forget yourself and allow Christ to work through you. You are about to be consecrated to the Lord for the sake of His people, that they might better know and love the Lord Jesus. The

Council Fathers of Vatican II explain, *“By their vocation and ordination, priests of the New Testament are indeed set apart in a certain sense within the midst of God’s people. But this is so, not that they may be separated from the people but that they may be totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord has raised them up. They cannot be ministers of Christ unless they are witnesses and dispensers of a life other than this earthly one. But they cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of the people they serve.”* (PO 3)

Quite naturally and quite appropriately, you are undoubtedly looking forward to performing priestly functions such as celebrating the Eucharist and hearing confessions, anointing the sick, witnessing marriages, and baptizing. All of these are indeed beautiful and sacred rituals. But priestly ministry is much more than the fulfilling of ministries; it is a whole way of being and that is why we speak of the sacramental character imparted by Holy Orders.

The obedience you will be pledging this day is not simply committing yourself to a particular parish for a certain number of years. Rather, your obedience must embrace an attitude whereby you freely and completely immerse yourself in this presbyterate and this local Church of Detroit with all of its gifts and needs. To serve well after the example of the Lord Jesus, as we hear in today’s Gospel, you must seek always the unity of the presbyterate rather than your own personal recognition. To serve well, you will also need to know and understand your people, patiently accepting them as they are rather than trying to persuade them to think or act as you might prefer.

In fact, as any priest here might tell you, you yourself will be greatly changed in the very act of your ministerial service. The circumstances and challenges of preaching to others will force you yourself to hear God’s Word and His call to conversion in some new way in your own life. The ministry of absolving others will bring to mind your own need for pardon and healing. Proclaiming the presence of the Lord in every Eucharist will challenge you each day to renew your commitment of celibate chastity. As you say, *“This is my Body... this is my Blood”* you will be making the Lord’s words your own promise; you will be pledging the love of an undivided heart – for the Lord and His people.

As brought out by all three of the Scriptures today, ministry in the name of the Lord Jesus involves all three aspects of Christ's mission as Priest, Prophet, and Shepherd-King. A vital part of your Eucharistic ministry is the proclamation of the Gospel message itself which derives its power and force from the sacrifice of Christ. Through the preaching of the Gospel and the work of evangelization, you will be calling God’s people into unity and inviting others who have not yet heard God’s Word to be touched by its power. Your ministry of proclaiming the Word will also require a constant study of the faith so that you will be all the more prepared to catechize adults and children alike; this is certainly a special need in our Church today.

Following the pattern of Jesus, the Suffering Servant and Shepherd, your ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and calling all people to share in the sacrifice of Christ will also necessarily include a commitment to work for the manifestation of the justice of God’s Kingdom. According to the circumstances and needs of your community, you will need to be responsive to the times and ways you can proclaim the Gospel of Life and build up the common good of the Church and wider society as stewards of God’s many blessings.

Throughout the centuries, the Church has always taught that we are all called to holiness in and through the circumstances of our life and vocation. For a *diocesan* priest, a vital part of your own spiritual growth and deepening relationship with the Lord Jesus requires a spirit of cooperation, respect, and even genuine love for your brothers in the presbyterate, and also for me and my auxiliary bishops.

To serve as a good shepherd, we must be united with each other in a true bond of communion, a bond renewed and strengthened as we stand together at the Lord's altar and humbly give our lives for the well-being of the whole body of the Church. No one of us on our own can single-handedly accomplish Christ's mission in a satisfactory way, but *together*, we can manifest and fulfill the prayer of Christ that all might be one so that the world might believe in Jesus Christ.

This day, the Lord Jesus and the Church asks you the same question posed to the sons of Zebedee in today's Gospel: "*Can you drink this cup?*" As you consecrate and then drink of the Eucharist each day, may you renew your love for the Lord and His Church. Each day, may you express your thanks to the Lord by taking up the cup of salvation – with all its joys and sorrows. May the Holy Spirit come down upon you and our whole presbyterate and Archdiocese, blessing and consecrating all of us who serve together in His name. Amen. Alleluia.