

A Rosa Moment

The Catholic Review

My earliest days of priesthood found me assigned (very happily) to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. For almost five years, I served as civilian chaplain to the cadets, military families and support troops there.

Most Holy Trinity Chapel and the adjoining rectory are beautifully located on a bluff overlooking a turn in the lordly Hudson River. A high point of the academic year would finally arrive during June Week when cadets would be graduated and commissioned as officers. Former classes would return for reunions and many of the newly commissioned would choose to be married at the Academy. For five or six days our chapel would have wedding ceremonies (not Masses) throughout the day every half hour. As you would expect for West Point, the brief rite began on time and would be conducted with due dignity and reverence.

Enter Rosa, the cleaning lady who would come three or four hours a day to complement the efforts of sainted Delia, our cook and live-in housekeeper. During June week, however, Rosa did little if anything. She would sit, dust-mop like a crozier, looking out the upstairs window as the brides came and went, and simply cry the whole time. At the end of her tour she would head home red-eyed and exhausted from the day's emotion, only to return the next day for more of the same.

I relate this story for reasons of self-confession. Every now and then, I have a "Rosa moment." Thankfully, it's only a moment and I usually catch myself in such time that only the most observant could notice. It occurs, invariably, as it did last Saturday, during an Ordination ceremony.

It was a privilege to ordain four deacons at the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on Saturday. There were three transitional deacons who will be ordained priests next year (none, by the way, natives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore), and the fourth a permanent deacon. How blest our Archdiocese is by the permanent deacons who serve us. At a couple of points in the ceremony, I was

struck by the profound meaning of the words I was reading and the gestures and symbols I was employing and my voiced wavered, cracking a bit at times, only to recover quickly.

Since the time of the Apostles, bishops have performed this sacred rite, effectively calling upon the Holy Spirit to transform these men's souls (I called it "characterizing" them) to serve the Church as Christ did (Read Acts 6:1-7a). In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1570):

The Sacrament of Holy Orders marks (deacons) with an imprint ("character") which cannot be removed and which configures them to Christ, who made himself the "deacon" or servant of all.

Somehow, I suppose it is good and necessary that one like myself will never fully grasp, this side of eternity, the stunning, overwhelming spiritual power which the Lord handed over to his Apostles and their successors. If I were thoroughly to appreciate, to "feel" that mystery when ordaining, when consecrating bread and wine or when absolving sins "in the person of Christ." I suspect that such "Rosa moments" would extend into minutes and hours, with virtual verbal paralysis likely resulting.

But the pause such moments create can be a powerful reminder of God's love, the way he provides for his Church and for each of us. How regrettable, to take for granted the power and love of God made known to us in the sacraments of the Church, whether it is the grand event of an ordination or the daily repeated words of consecration: "This is my Body. This is my Blood."