

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 40th Anniversary of Priesthood

6th Sunday of Easter

Basilica of the Assumption

May 21, 2017

Tonight I'm honored to celebrate Holy Mass with my brother priests ordained forty years ago, in 1977. It so happens that I too was ordained forty years ago but not for the Archdiocese of Baltimore but for another Archdiocese, just to the south of here. But now that I've served as Archbishop of Baltimore for five years, I hope I qualify as a true classmate with the class of '77 gathered here tonight.

We're here to give thanks to the Lord for the blessings of these past forty years. I think I can safely speak for my classmates in saying that these forty years of priesthood have passed by very quickly. I think I can also safely say that a happy priesthood is like a happy marriage. There are ups and downs but mostly there is happiness in living this vocation. And the priests who join me on the altar tonight truly love and live their vocation. I wonder if you would offer them your warmest congratulations.

"What's it like being a priest?" we're sometimes asked. I've been asked that question enough to give it some serious thought and prayer. So I've gravitated toward two images to describe the priesthood, especially the ministry of a priest who serves as pastor of a parish. The pastor could be said to be like a coach; or he could be said to be like a conductor of a symphony orchestra. Let me explain.

First, let's think about how a parish priest is like a coach, let's say the coach of a basketball team. The first thing a coach needs to do is to put a team together. The pastor has to think carefully who's going to be on his immediate staff - those who serve in the front office, or if you prefer, the back office. But he's also got to think about the bigger team, the whole parish. If he's lucky, he'll have an assistant coach

in the person of a younger priest. In any case he'll have to have rely on deacons and wise and holy lay people to help. What he's looking for in the parish are people with special gifts from God, just like a coach who's putting together a basketball team. That coach needs tall people who can be the center, fast and agile people who can be point guards - you get the idea. So every parish needs people who can explain the faith to others, those who have a knack for working with young people, those who are good at working with the sick, homebound, and the poor, those who can help families stay together and live their vocation - as well as those who can help the parish stay afloat financially.

And while fielding a team, the coach has to enforce discipline - but in the case of a priest, not mere rules, but the commandments of God. The commandments might be thought of as a way of keeping good order both in Church and in society but actually they are much more than that. Keeping the commandments is the way we say "yes" to Jesus who happens to be the very benevolent owner of the team. The pastor-as-coach connects the team to the owner and the owner to the team. Jesus wants us as a team, not to make a profit, but for our profit, for our salvation.

And there's something else. The pastor-as-coach has to be concerned not merely with the team but also with the individual members of the team - who's injured, who's hurting, who's in danger of dropping off the team. He will want to know how each and every parishioner is doing - what troubles them, what burdens they are bearing, what they need to become not only team players but star players. It's a lot of work being a coach but it's wonderful coaching a team we know will ultimately win - not merely an earthly contest but rather the contest between good and evil, grace and sin, life and death - for Jesus has conquered sin and death!

Let's move to a second comparison, the pastor as conductor of a symphony orchestra. An orchestra, of course, is made up of individual musicians and it also has different components or sections. There are the strings, the brass, the woodwinds, percussion, and so forth, and sometimes the orchestra accompanies a chorus or vice-versa. From all these individual persons and instruments, a very special kind of community is formed - a community dedicated to creating harmony and beauty by playing pieces composed by inspired individuals - such as Mozart, Beethoven, or Shostakovich, to name a few.

In the case of a pastor-as-conductor, he too assembles an orchestra and chorus to sing the praises of God and to express the yearnings of the human spirit for his love. The members of this orchestra bring their individual identity, style, gifts, and talents and it is the pastor's job to respect the individuality of each, while marshalling them into a harmonious whole, namely, a community of faith, worship, and service. Like the conductor of an orchestra, the pastor will face challenges. Sometimes the woodwinds are too windy, the brass too brassy, and the percussion is just a beat or two off the mark – not to mention a few discordant notes from the chorus. Like every conductor, the pastor knows that practice makes perfect as he seeks to help each member of the parish grow not in musical skills but rather in virtue, specifically, the virtues of Christ . . . so that individually and corporately the parish can bear witness to the Lord before a much wider audience that Scripture calls “the world”.

It is important to remember that the musical piece being played in a parish is not of the pastor's own composition, however inspiring he may be. Rather, what is being played and sung is the New Song of the Resurrection composed by the Father, scored by the Son, and inspired by the Holy Spirit. In his preaching, in his celebration of the sacraments, in leading the parish to love and serve the poor, the pastor-as-conductor will seek to ensure not only that the notes on the page are played accurately, but also that the whole piece truly will be inspired – inspired by the Holy Spirit by whom the Paschal Mystery of the Risen Lord comes alive in our hearts and shapes the entirety of our existence. Others will sing the songs of the world. For his part, the pastor helps us to strike up the instruments and to raise our voices so as to sing, even on earth, the songs of the redeemed in heaven. And finally, just as many conductors lament the underfunding of the arts, so too pastors lament the underfunding of the pastoral arts of healing and redemption but somehow, both conductors and pastors manage to produce a thing of beauty.

So in this class of 1977 there are excellent coaches and conductors, and they have been engaged in their art for some forty years – even as there are priests who have been coaching and conducting for fifty, even sixty years, and thankfully, some who are younger. But every coach knows he won't be coaching forever and every conductor knows that he won't be on the podium forever. Someday someone will take the place of each one of us in this sanctuary and of the priests all across the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

For that reason, I hope you will pray for vocations to the priesthood and if you happen to be in the sound of my voice and have ever thought that God might be calling you to the priesthood, I would ask you to open your hearts widely and generously to the Lord so that you too might become a special instrument of his redeeming love.

For now, however, I'd better get out of the pulpit; the two-minute warning just sounded! God bless you and keep you always in his love.