

Holy Orders: A Sacrament at the Service of Communion

The memory of Saturday, June 26, 2004 will be with me forever as a special day. It was the day of my priestly ordination at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen. I remember promising respect and obedience to Cardinal Keeler and his successors as Archbishop of Baltimore. I remember my hands being anointed with sacred oil. I remember being vested in the chasuble and stole by my brother Jon. I remember the priests of Baltimore sharing in the celebration that day. And I remember concelebrating the Eucharist for the first time.

As Cardinal Keeler concluded his homily, he gave us an instruction on the meaning of what was happening in this sacrament:

“Remember, when you gather others into the people of God through Baptism, and when you forgive sins in the name of Christ and the Church in the sacrament of Penance; when you comfort the sick with holy oil and celebrate the sacred rites, when you offer prayers of praise and thanks to God throughout the hours of the day, not only for the people of God but for the world – remember then that you are taken from among men and appointed on their behalf for those things that pertain to God. Therefore, carry out the ministry of Christ the Priest with constant joy and genuine love, attending not to your own concerns but to those of Jesus Christ.”

This reminds us that the priesthood truly is a sacrament at the service of communion (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1534). The “constant joy” and “genuine love” of my life as a priest comes in realizing each day that the mystery and mission of the priesthood is the mystery and mission of Christ –lived out in the surprises of each new day.

Almost two years ago, I was asked to consider becoming part of a ministerial team to provide pastoral care to the six parishes and one mission in Western Allegany and Northern Garrett Counties. Six parishes? One mission? Two counties? “Are you serious?” was my first thought.

Yet, the moment I was asked, I knew that my answer would be: “Sure!” Now I serve as part of a ministerial team of priests, a deacon and lay people working under the leadership of our new Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien. How could I so easily, so quickly say “Yes” to such a challenging consideration? I guess because I was prepared for it by a special nature of the sacrament of holy orders itself:

Through the sacrament of holy orders, priests share in the universal dimensions of the mission that Christ entrusted to the apostles. The spiritual gift they have received in ordination prepares them, not for a limited and restricted mission, “but for the fullest, in fact the universal mission of salvation ‘to the end of the earth,’” “prepared in spirit to preach the Gospel everywhere” (The Catechism, 1565).

The universal mission of salvation mentioned in the above statement is so obviously present in my assignment in Mountain Maryland. In this scenic part of our state, the mission of Christ the priest is presented to me each day in new, challenging and exciting ways. Never did I imagine on the day of my ordination that I would some day celebrate the Eucharist on seven altars in two different languages in one assignment!

Never did I dream then that the “needs of Christ” now would be to find new ways of reaching out to a growing community of immigrant Catholics in Western Maryland. Here in the peaks and valleys of many mountains, I’m learning each day a little bit more about the sacrament of holy orders.

Priesthood is not about my concerns – priesthood is about Christ and His concerns. And Christ is concerned about the world. And that is precisely where we are. And that is where he finds us!

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This is the fifth in a series of articles about the six-week spring session of Why Catholic?