

Mass with Retired Priests

We are in the midst of the Year for Priests and with reference to today's second reading, we embrace the Word of God this afternoon to honor the priesthood of Jesus Christ, to give thanks for the priesthood of Jesus Christ, to pray for the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

The letter to the Hebrews paints Christ's priesthood in surprisingly human tones. Though He never sinned, he did take on our frail human flesh. From the beginning of his ministry and his 40 days in the desert, to the very end, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was exposed to the gravest of temptations. His victory over each temptation deepened and strengthened His human nature's complete commitment to the will of His father.

So very aware of his own human needs and weaknesses while among us, Jesus deals with us compassionately and tenderly, ever understanding, always forgiving. "No one on earth, before or since, has ever been through such spiritual desolation and human anguish," which allows Him to offer hope and strength and perseverance to us in moments of our spiritual and physical crisis, and our existential loneliness.

This was the role from all eternity planned for our High Priest by the Father. Fully God and fully man, Jesus is to be our representative before God, to bridge that relationship shattered by Adam's sin. How often during his earthly life he gave evidence of that mission: to heal, to restore, to forgive in, with and through the power of God. To the storm on the sea, "Be still," to the crippled, "Take up your mat and walk," to the adulterer, "Your sins are forgiven, go and sin no more." In Jesus, God is truly with us. In Jesus, we are one with God.

Now, the Letter to the Hebrews announces, this High Priest, having offered the gift of Himself on Calvary in sacrifice for our sins, has passed beyond this world, has entered the heavenly sanctuary and taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty where he intercedes for us, pleads for us, still healing, restoring and forgiving. From that heavenly sanctuary, He still offers gifts and sacrifices for sins and he does it all, through His Church, His Body on earth one with her High Priest in heaven.

The one sacrifice of Christ on Calvary “is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there.” After sharing the first Eucharist with his Apostles at the Last Supper, he immediately empowered his Church, through those first priestly Apostles: Keep doing this in remembrance of me.

The Preface of the Mass for Priesthood tells it beautifully. From among the royal priesthood of the People he has made his own, Christ, Himself,

“with a brother’s love, chooses men to share his sacred ministry by the laying on of hands. He appoints them to renew in his name the sacrifice of our redemption as they set before your family his paschal meal. He calls them to lead your holy people in love, nourish them by your word, and strengthen them through the sacraments. Father, they are to give their lives in your service and for the salvation of your people...”

And here before you, good People of God, are these, your priests, chosen by God and taken from among men, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

If the Blessed Mother herself were to appear in our midst today, she could not do what the simplest priest does every day and what she did physically in Bethlehem: give us the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. Nor could all the angels and archangels in heaven acting in full unison, forgive even one venial sin. Only the priest, acting in the person of Christ, can do these things and so much more, not of his own merits or power, but because he is chosen, called and empowered by God himself to continue to saving work of the Risen Jesus.

Central to the ordination rite of Priesthood is the imposition of hands as Christ takes full possession of us: You belong to me. And you are under the protection of my hands, kept safely in the palm of my hands. Now give me your hands not to take things for yourself, but for passing on my divine touch.

Having claimed them as His own, our High Priest returns them to us, places them in our midst, daily to carry out his saving mission. And what would we be without our priests? Most especially, what would we be without our retired priests, so many here present, whom we honor today?

Did I say “retired priests?” Strike that; for there is no such thing. Hemingway said that retirement is the ugliest word in the language. Sooner or later, every priest will die, but none will ever retire—A priest forever in the order of Melchisedech. Let’s instead say, Fathers, that you have simply stepped aside for less experienced and less able men. Let’s view you to be men in a renewed priestly vocation, not retired but re-tooled for a full pastoral and evangelical ministry.

And so you are, day in and out, to the utmost of your strength and abilities still serving the People of God of Baltimore wherever and whenever needed. You are convincing witnesses of the Good Shepherd’s steadfast love for his flock. We could not do without you, and not just pragmatically. For every time you approach an altar to proclaim the death of the Lord, wherever you are and how ever many are or are not present, the divine action of Christ and His Church brings new and redeeming life to God’s universe.

Senior brothers in the presbyterate, as proven, well-tested priestly instruments of God: your ministry is invaluable, integral to all the pastoral strivings of this Archdiocese.

In one of his messages, Pope John Paul II, himself about 79 at the time, cited the aging notables in the Scriptures: Abraham, Moses, Tobit and Eleazar, to mention a few in the Old Testament. Simeon and Anna, as they welcomed the infant Jesus to the Temple, Zechariah, John the Baptist’s elderly father, and of course, the foster father of Jesus, Joseph. And the elderly Pope’s conclusion?

“How reassuring are all these examples! They remind us that at every stage of life, the Lord can ask each of us to contribute what talents we have. The service of the Gospel has nothing to do with age.”

(Would our senior priests please rise.)

In conclusion, my friends here in this Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, might we not want to salute these wise and seasoned priestly ministers of ours, who have borne the heat of the day, these privileged and skilled interpreters of the signs of the times and guardians of our Church’s grand tradition and collective memory?

Pray for a springtime of priestly vocations inspired by these senior brothers, as we honor, thank and praise our High Priest for his reflective and smiling presence in each of their lives. Let us show our love and appreciation for them, for all they represent and for all who have gone before them.

My revered brothers in Christ, the Church of Jesus Christ in Baltimore salutes you.