

Ordination to the Priesthood 2014

Deacons James Boric, Ross Conklin, Andrew DeFusco, Joseph Langan, Canisius Tah

My brother Bishops, priests, and deacons, dear Religious, family members and friends of our candidates for ordination, and especially you: James, Ned, Andrew, Joseph, and Canisius, so soon to be ordained to the Priesthood of Jesus Christ:

Introduction: The Vinegrower Is God Himself

“It was not you who chose me,” Christ says to you in today’s Gospel, “but I who chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my Name He may give you” (Jn. 15:16). On this day of your priestly ordination, reflect with me for a moment on what Christ, the One who has chosen you, is asking of you, for he is the One who now sends you out into the world as priests to bear fruit.

The fruit of the vine is the grape, and it is from grapes that wine is made. The vine is first planted by the vine grower. He carefully tends it, and fertilizes it. He clears away the weeds from it and sets it on supports so that it can grow strong. When the vine is overgrown, he prunes it back, so that it can bear more fruit. By and by, grapes begin to appear. And in order for these grapes to ripen and to come to maturity, the brightness and heat of the day together with the darkness and cool of the night — are both necessary. The vine needs times of rain, and also times of dryness. And then the vine grower chooses the grapes which will be harvested. After the grapes are chosen, and picked, then they are crushed. Next the juice from the grapes undergoes a long, slow process of fermentation. It is a carefully watched process that requires great patience and vigilance. Wine that is truly noble is distinguished by rich and subtle flavors. It is something truly special, a real treasure, in which many expert hands played a role – but which can be traced back to when the vine grower first planted the vine.

This, my brothers, is an image of what has brought you to this day. The vine grower is God Himself and the vine which He has planted is His Church. The grace of God, alive and active in the Church, tends to it, and makes it fruitful. Just as the vine grower sets up supports so that the vine can grow tall and strong, so too God has

given you family members and friends, and later priests, who have supported you, on whom you have leaned, and who have shown you the way to grow towards God. You have experienced the pruning hand of the vine grower too, when he has forgiven your sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In the course of your lives, you have known both the light of the day and the darkness of night; times of joy and celebration and times of uncertainty, trial, and suffering. And in all of this, dear sons, you have been chosen. In his great love, God has chosen you to serve Him and to serve the Church in His very person, as priests. And so in this process, perhaps it is not too strong to say that you have been crushed: you have learned what it means to die to yourselves so that you might live for God. The process of priestly formation has been long and slow, carefully watched with great patience and vigilance. And so you are ready for today, ready to be ordained. Each of you brings with you today the fruit of the work of grace in your soul – which has built upon your own gifts and talents. You know, of course, that the work of formation extends over a lifetime. But God has brought you to this day, and you can say, with Saint Paul in his letter to the Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

It Was Not You Who Chose Me . . . Fruit That Will Remain

Let us return to our Gospel text: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my Name He may give you” (Jn. 15:16).

On this day of your ordination, you are filled with zeal and hope, and certainly have thought of what you hope to accomplish as priests: homilies that will instruct and inspire; lapsed Catholics brought back to the Faith; people disconnected from God brought to faith and the Sacraments; young people brought close to Christ and the Church; confessions heard, Masses celebrated, the sick consoled, the dying prepared, vocations to the priesthood and religious life brought to fruition; responsibilities that you will shoulder in and for the Church. This list goes on . . .

These are the hopes and dreams you and every one of us priests should have. But the Lord has something in mind other than our personal accomplishments when he sends us forth to bear fruit that will last. The fruit that will last is not our resumes or

those things of which we are most proud, rightly or wrongly. What we seem to accomplish one day might be undone the next by someone else or by factors that are quite beyond our control.

So what is the “fruit that will remain?” St. Paul tells us, “... faith, hope, and love remain,” he says, “but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). So if you want your priestly ministry to be fruitful, you must remain in the Lord’s love by faith and hope, like a branch, a living branch, connected to the vine. If you would be an effective teacher of the Faith and a witness to the hope of the Resurrection, then you must allow the Lord to draw you into the inner-circle of his friendship and listen attentively as daily his heart speaks to your heart. As He says in today’s Gospel, “I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. Instead I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father” (Jn. 15:15).

In the same way, if you would celebrate the Mass and Sacraments not as a personal performance but rather to bring about the salvation of souls, then you must imitate in daily life the love you celebrate: the love of Christ who laid down his life for us and for our salvation.

And, in order to “bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,” (Is. 61:1) you must have in your heart the same joy that Jesus has: the joy of doing his Father’s will – what Pope Francis calls “the joy of the Gospel.” Indeed, as the Pope has written so memorably: “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew” (EG, 1). This is the reality you will be called first to live and then to proclaim as priests,

We Are Not Discouraged

Dear brothers, permit me a final observation. St. Paul writes very pointedly, in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (4:1) that “since we have this ministry through the mercy shown us, we are not discouraged.” As one who has labored for many years in the vineyard of the Lord, I can tell you that one of the weapons the enemy of your souls will try to use against you, as priests, is the weapon of discouragement. Yet I

have always found that we priests are most susceptible to discouragement if we take our eyes off of Jesus and focus instead on ourselves. Taking our eyes off of Jesus means mistaking the supernatural reality of priestly ministry for merely something natural and worldly. And then discouragement sets in. And discouragement leads to self-pity. And this leads to disaster.

To all of this, St. Paul says a resounding No! We as priests are called to encourage and strengthen our brother priests. From this day forward this will be your duty, your privilege, and your joy. We priests are called to be to each other and to the world, a living and effective sign of God's presence among us and of the power of His grace.

Think back to the image of the vine grower. He sets the young vine on supports so that it can grow strong. Just as he has provided you with examples and friends who have encouraged and strengthened you, so too you are now to be those examples, bringing encouragement and strength to those to whom you are sent. And in this way the Church is built up, grows strong, and fulfills her mission of giving glory to God and bringing about the salvation of souls.

Conclusion

And now, James, Ned, Andrew, Joseph, and Canisius, everything is ready. You are now to be ordained to the Sacred Priesthood of Jesus Christ. He is about to make you, in a particular way, his friends. So pray with me now, in these words of Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote, "Lord, help me to come to know you more and more. Help me to be ever more at one with your will. Help me to live my life not for myself, but in union with you to live it for others. Help me to become ever more your friend."

May God bless us and keep us always in His love!