

HOMILY FOR THE MASS OF CHRISM: ST BARNABAS CATHEDRAL 2017

“But you, you will be named ‘priests of the Lord’ They will call you ‘ministers of our God’”

The feeling of constantly having to prove oneself is certainly the experience of priests. The priest is very much in the public gaze. He is watched for what he says and for what he does not say. His every action and public thought is held up for analysis. What is expected of him, and indeed what he expects of himself, is often impossible to achieve. He does at times get tired and impatient. He can often feel very inadequate in the face of human suffering, sin and death; unworthy of his great calling, and inclined to doubt at times the value of his ministry. Faced with this, the temptation can be to redouble his efforts, in the hope that if he works even harder in his priestly ministry, he will be valued more and so will feel better about himself.

My brothers, we must honestly acknowledge that this can be a very real temptation for us as priests. But today, before God, as we prepare to renew our priestly promises, this is most certainly not what we will be doing. For we all know the truth - that the harder a priest works, relying only on his own human resources - the more he will find himself physically, emotionally and spiritually drained. His priestly vocation will then cease to be a blessing and a privilege, and it will become instead only a duty and a burden.

Today, instead, we remind ourselves, in the renewing of our priestly promises this Holy Week, that our priesthood is a sharing in the priesthood of Jesus Christ who, during his life on earth, knew what it was to be the object of his Father's love, and what it was to abide in that love. Jesus arrived at priesthood only through radically making himself available to do the will of his Father. He learned obedience through suffering, and that learning of obedience is seen especially when his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane became the struggle to bring his will into line with the will of the Father: 'Father, if you are willing remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done' (Lk 22:42) Obedience is seen here as an active listening to the Father, a wrestling with what is heard, and a willingness to be lead by it. Jesus' desire to live for the Father found its ultimate expression in his self-surrender and in his prayer of abandonment on the cross: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Lk 23:46). The core of Jesus' life, his true priestly identity, is summed up in the words: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to complete his work' (Jn 4:34). We see in his life and ministry that Jesus lives for the Father, and nothing deflects him from living that identity. Jesus was not afraid of losing anything by giving up his life to the Father, because he knew that the Father loved him and had nothing but his best interests at heart.

My brother priests, this too is our calling, our identity, to share in the priesthood of Christ. Because a sense of priestly identity that is simply based on our particular roles or functions, is vulnerable to crisis when a change of role is required in our priesthood. So too, a sense of priestly identity that is tied up too much with our awareness of being gifted in certain ways and having the opportunity to use those gifts and talents, is also vulnerable when such opportunities are removed from us or are not available. But a priestly identity that is solidly founded on the priesthood of Christ, on living in obedience to the Father's will, because of our belief that the Father loves us and has only our best interests at heart, will be less prone to crisis or worry about sense of identity, because a change of role or a change of location of ministry will not alter the basic direction of a life that seeks to make itself totally available for God to work in and through.

My brothers, in Christ Jesus we are God's beloved sons. We are loved, as we are, with all our faults and weaknesses Our true identity comes not from what others may say or think about us; our true identity comes not from the negatives voices within us; our true identity comes only from our heavenly Father who reminds us, in Jesus Christ, that we are loved by him, that we are his sons, whom he has called to the priesthood, and in whom he is very much at work. The negative voices which make us, at times, feel discouraged and anxious about ourselves, and our priestly ministry, are not then from God, and they must be resolutely resisted.

So regular time spent in the presence of the Lord, who restores, renews, and convinces us of his love, is vital to our priestly ministry. Without that time spent in prayer, we can lose sight of God and become mere activists building our house on sand. And yet how difficult we can find it to drag ourselves into the Lord's presence in prayer. We would often much rather be busy out in the vineyard of the Lord, ministering to others, working for the Lord, rather than on our knees before him in prayer. To remain in God's presence, in our times of prayer and meditation upon the scriptures, without being tempted to do something else, can sometimes take all our determination and strength of will, and yet, let's not forget, especially today, that this is our primary and supreme ministry as God's priests, from which everything else should flow. Simply put, all our ministry to God's people finds its basis and starting point in our ministry to the Lord in prayer; and the wonderful truth is that the more we minister to the Lord, the more effective will be our ministry to others.

For, as priests, we need to be supremely conscious that we have no other priesthood but Christ's, no power and authority, except the power and authority to serve that he has conferred on us, in spite of our own frailty and sinfulness. Our calling is quite simply to imitate him, to be his humble and open instruments so that we can make him present in the lives of those we serve. So when the people in our parishes and chaplaincies come to us to ask for support, for a blessing, for advice or forgiveness, it is because they are confident that they will find the Lord himself, whom we serve, in our actions and our words. And when, at the end of each day, we kneel down in grateful prayer, our greatest joy comes from knowing that the Lord has acted through our hands and spoken through our words.

My dear deacons, those living a consecrated life, lay men and women, boys and girls, as priests we are also very much sustained, inspired, and renewed by you; by the love, faith and mercy we see and experience in the lives of those we work alongside, and those we serve; by the faith of those to whom we are sent to anoint with the holy oils we bless today: the oil of catechumens, the Oil of the Sick, and the Holy Chrism. We are often profoundly moved and positively affected by the depth of the faith, contrition and humility we recognise whenever a penitent pours out their soul to us in confession. Our priesthood is enriched by the spirituality and pastoral zeal of our deacons, those who live the consecrated life, and of our parishioners, and we continue to be formed and inspired in our priesthood by the witness of their holiness and generosity. Thank you for this inspiring witness, and please encourage and demand of me and all your priests, that we be men of prayer, and men of deep faith and joy. Encourage and demand of us that we devote ourselves generously each week to prayerful reflection upon the scriptures that we may give sufficient time to the preparation of our homilies and talks. Encourage and demand of us that we take our day off, take our holidays, and look after our health and well being. Because many of us need encouragement to do these things!

My brother priests, the truth is that we are not the best judges of the impact of our own priestly ministry, so it is usually best never to look for results in what we do, but instead to offer it generously in the service of the Lord, and entrust it simply to the One who will enable it to bear fruit, wherever, whenever, and however He determines. Today, I thank God for the life and ministry of you and all the priests of this diocese, and I pray that by continuing to be faithful to the calling you have received, and by always being ready to express and show clearly the joy that comes from your ministry to the Lord, many more young men may hear from God, and respond generously to, a call to priesthood in our diocese. Let us now prepare ourselves to renew the promises of our priesthood, first made at our ordination, and let us do so relying utterly on God's grace, love and mercy towards us, and on the generous prayerful support and inspiring examples of faith of all God's people.

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