

Sermon on the occasion of the ordination of Deacon René Knaap

- Hamilton May 1st 2010 -

I have forgiven in the presence of Christ – 2 Corinthians 2:10

Sharers in the ministry of Jesus Christ:

The Church has always understood that through the power of divine grace, Christ remains present to his Church through the actions and the person of those called to minister within the people of God. We know, for example, that leaders in the faith communities were sometimes called shepherds calling to mind Jesus who is the True Shepherd of his sheep. In some way their ministry was seen as a continuation of this sacred ministry. Equally, Paul called himself Christ's ambassador and understood that what he was doing, and so what all ministers were called to do, was acting in the place of Christ, taking up authentically Christ-like ministries (see Acts 20:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:2; Jn 10:7-30; 1 Cor 1:1; 2:10; 5:20; Gal 1:1). The ministry of Christ did not end with his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, it continues on, in a special way, in those he chooses.

Clement, writing in the late first century, describes the bishops as being the successors of the apostles who were the first to be sent by Christ. Later Church fathers similarly traced back the ministry of the Bishops to the apostles. This was an important theological step for it was seen as tying, in a special way, the ministry of the Church of their day to the ministry of Jesus himself. It made sense, then, for Iganus writing around the year 90 to say that the bishop *presided in the place of God* (*Magnesians 2,6:1*). A little later (third century) Tertullian was able to refer to the Bishop as the Vicar of Christ and Cyprian of Carthage (died 258) wrote that the Bishop acted in Christ's place when he was celebrating the eucharist.

As the presbyters grew in importance in the community and began to take on more and more of the Bishop's teaching and leadership ministries they too began to be seen in terms of their relationship to Christ. This was particularly so in their role as eucharistic celebrants. Through sharing in the sacrifice of Christ in this sacramental manner, they shared too in Christ's priesthood.

In the person of Christ:

One of the key phrases in the development of our understanding of priestly ministry was the use of the term "in the person of Christ" that is found in 2 Corinthians 2:10. In that text Paul is encouraging members of the community to be forgiving in the way they deal with others, particular with people in their community and even with those who have hurt him

(maybe even especially with those who seek to harm him). To forgive is to act as though Christ were standing there in the community with them (literally the phrase reads *in the face of Christ*). For Paul, this is the best way to defeat Satan who thrives on division and hatred within the faith community – act as though you were standing in the presence of Christ in all you do.

Using the Latin translation of this text theologians applied it, first of all, to the act of absolution for the forgiveness of sins but then also to other sacramental acts of the priest. When the priest acted in the sacraments he was acting in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi* in the Latin Vulgate). It was an attempt to stress that these actions were not magical acts performed by the human priest but were the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ acting in and through his priests.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) used this phrase to stress that when the priest acted he was acting as a conduit for the grace of Christ. The focus always remained, not on the priest but on Christ who was acting in and through the priest in these sacramental ways. He was not talking about the priest per se he was writing about the actions of the priest.

An-other Christ?

However, towards the end of the Middle Ages this began to change. The focus gradually shifted from the things the priest was doing (celebrating the sacraments) to the priest himself. The shift began out of a desire to raise the spiritual integrity of the priests at a time when far too many of them were not renowned for their holy lives. The argument went that if the priest was going to have a unique role in the eucharist then he needed also to have a unique way of life. He not only had to act in the person of Christ (*in personal Christi*) he also had to be, in a special way, another Christ (*alter Christus*).

In 17th century France there was a movement that stressed that it was necessary for all Christians to link their ways of living to that of Christ. They were to imitate Christ, to live as he would and to, as best as possible, to identify with him in everything they did. Those writers (referred to as The French School) had in mind imitating the servant nature of Christ's ministry, his humble way of living and his renouncement of self, a humility that is seen clearest of all in the meaning of the incarnation (the hymn from Philippians 2:6-8 was their clearest example of this spirituality). The incarnation and the death of Jesus on the cross proclaimed most eloquently the kind of life to which all Christians were called to be living, a life of self renunciation. They were

called to cling to Christ in all things and to allow themselves to be completely taken over by his Spirit so that they lived and acted as he had lived and acted.

This was never meant to be some austere kind of spiritual life meant for those who locked themselves away in monasteries. It was meant for all who were baptised. Significantly for us today, in a Christian community where everyone is seeking to live this kind of life, the role of the priest was to assist with this identification with Christ. In modern language, he was called upon to model Christ-like living so that all could be Christ-like.

Are the ordained called to a higher level of holiness?

The difficulty came as this spiritual theology was developed alongside a growing belief that the ritual and sacrifice of a religion were of particular importance and the priests who carried out these actions had a religious superiority over those who were recipients of their actions. This came to mean that the priest was placed above the community and his spirituality was seen as being unique. The priest had a different, higher form of spirituality from that of the lay person.

This spirituality, which grew out of the noble desire to lead the priests into being holy men in a world where their standards had indeed slipped, began to present the priest as being someone who was separate from the rest of the community, removed from the world and so removed also from the world of those who were not ordained. This meant that a priest is *another Christ* in a way that the lay people could never be. This view of priestly spirituality as being different from other spirituality grew out of their role in celebrating the eucharist. The priest and Christ are bound together in a special way because of the eucharistic sacrifice.

This way of viewing the priest represents a significant shift in the spiritual theology of the priesthood. What we see here is a gradual shift away from the ministry of Christ to a concentration on sacred powers that a priest had, powers that enabled him to celebrate the sacraments and so become a channel of divine grace. This power was presented as something (a *sacred character* – an *ontological modification* in theological jargon) that was imprinted on him at his ordination. In a way, the person of the minister became more important than the ministry he carried out in the name of Jesus. He was no longer seen as acting in Christ's place, as the early Church Fathers taught, but truly was *an-other Christ*. What made a priest unique was now who he was rather than what Christ was doing in him and through him.

We can see how this was more and more clearly expressed. The priests lived away from the rest of the community (in the Catholic Church living celibate lives)

they wore distinctive styles of clothing and did things in the Church that were not allowed or expected of the lay people (celebrating the sacraments, sacramentals and saying the Office). The priest was separated from the rest of humanity and was supposed to be surrounded by a holiness that was not possible for the rest of Christian humanity. Even when the community could not see it

Finally, as this theological view developed, we ended up with a view of the priest that saw him as representing the **people to God** and representing **God to the people**. Nowhere was this more clearly seen than in the old Mass with the priest celebrating with his back to the people. He stood at that junction point between God and the community at prayer. The "representative of Christ had become the representation of Christ" (Hahnenberg) but what was forgotten in all of this was that this is a vocation of everyone who is baptised as a disciple of Jesus Christ and not just for those ordained into sacred ministry.

Priestly ministry today:

Today we began this celebration of ordination with an act of washing the feet. This is not done as some kind of gimmick but as a Gospel reminder that all who respond to a vocation from God to serve in ministry of any kind, must carry out their ministry under the mandate of Jesus who at the Last Supper made it clear how he wanted his apostles to be seen.

Our theology of priesthood has become a theology of priestly ministry and that is a significant change. The ministry of the priest is not about the priest, it is about the people he serves, it is about the Church. Priesthood can never be seen in the abstract as if you can somehow be a priest but not act in a servant manner. Everything a priest does and says must be evaluated within the context of the Last Supper and it will be in terms of his servant spirituality that he will be eventually called to judgment. He is only a priest while he is a true servant of the Church and if he has certain "powers of priesthood" these are only valid when they are directed towards the good of the Body of Christ and its divine mission in creation.

Today's ordination needs to be understood of a celebration of the commencement of a different level of relationship and not the act of conferring of a new status onto Rene. He is being ordained not just as a celebrant of the sacraments but as a priest, a prophet and a king, vocations he first received at his baptism.

As a priest he is the helper and supporter of his Bishop who stands in the line of a priesthood that comes from the apostles. Together with his Bishop and through his union with his Bishop, Rene will be a part of the one priesthood which is called together in fellowship to serve God's people. These two realities are fundamental to our understanding of how priestly ministry works in the Church: (a) union with the Bishop and (b) fellowship with others who are ordained into priestly ministry. We cannot go off and exist in an

alternative form of priestly ministry. A valid priesthood only exists in terms of the priest's active relationship with the whole Church and not just a Church that is of his own convenience. It is a sacramental fellowship on which the priest depends for his spiritual strength and authenticity.

It is from this relationship that he will then be for the People of God the bearer of the Divine Mysteries. He is sent out to preach the Word of God by what he says and by how he lives. It will be by the example of his relationship to God and to the Church that the People of God will be helped to grow in their own relationships with God.

Kenotic ministry and priestly ministry:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
as something to be grasped (exploited),
but he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
Being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself,
and became obedient to the point of death –
Even death on a cross (Phil 2:5-8).

In this great hymn we see Jesus Christ as being proclaimed as a self-emptying God. He did not see himself in terms of "grasping" at privilege or "exploiting" his privilege as God, or as holding on to power and position. We see Jesus here being presented as emptying himself (kenosis) and becoming man. His whole ministry began with this first step of emptying and in this way he set down this action of emptying as the model for all ministry.

The self-emptying of Christ is nowhere seen more visible than when he is nailed to the cross where he suffers and dies. That is love and it is a love that seeks nothing else in return. God loves us. He loves us so much that he sent his Son and his Son loves us so much that he suffered and died. The role of all disciples is to go and do likewise. That is the rub for those who seek to minister in the Church. Ministry needs to model the ministry set down by Jesus and that ministry was characterised by his death for love of God's people.

We need to understand that there is a renewal going on throughout the entire Church, a rediscovery, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that the focus of our actions as disciples of Jesus Christ is moving in a single direction: the service of the whole of creation, of men and women everywhere in every manifestation of human weakness, need and sin. Our Church is called to be a servant and this notion of service stands at the very heart of everything we do. The service of God in

the service of creation. We either love God by the way we love others, without exception, or we are not disciples and we cannot possibly be God's Church.

It is this servant ecclesiology that must permeate what we are doing today and must guide how you minister when you move on into your pastoral placements beyond today. No matter what happens here in this liturgy, if you are not a servant who is constantly undergoing a *kenosis* (an emptying as Christ emptied himself), then you dare not call yourself a priest.

The washing of the feet as the foundation of ordained ministry:

When we look at the washing of the feet of the disciples by Jesus, we are drawn to the meaning of his death. The one who was in the form of God is to undergo a humiliating and degrading death on the cross. This is what Jesus had in mind when he carried out that prophetic action and why he commanded that the disciples saw themselves as being foot-washers of all peoples. If the disciples wish to share in the ministry of Jesus they must wash each others feet.

The message here is glaringly clear and obvious. Anyone who wants to be a part of the Kingdom of God must become a foot washer. That is, they must be defined by self-giving love. They must love to the point of death, with no exceptions and no limitations. Anyone who wants to be a disciple must empty himself or herself and take the risk of loving others, even when it leads to death. Indeed, it is the love that kills them that is the greatest love of all – which is precisely why so many pull back from total love and engage in a selective love, a love that is convenient, that bounces back and fills us with a sense of well being that has no relationship whatsoever with Golgotha. That is not the love to which you are being called in ordination. Priestly ministry that is padded and propped up by self serving love, which is not prepared to die rather than to act in an unloving manner, is not the priesthood into which we are called by Christ. As soon as your love for others calls you to suffering and even death, then you are starting to become a true priest. As soon as you stop loving, even a single person, you cease to be a priest of Jesus Christ.

Priestly ministry is a Christ like ministry, one of total self-sacrifice on behalf of others and what you are being called upon to do today, before we proceed any further with your ordination is to commit yourself to accepting this self-emptying, this dying as the definitive aspect of your priesthood. You need to be fully aware of this demand before you stand up in front of this congregation and make your promises.

Authority to serve:

Rene, you will be sent out with a share in my own authority and will be authorized to minister as a priest among the people of God and so it is important that you understand what the Church means by authority. The secular world sees it as the power to make decisions, to give directions

and to expect them to be obeyed. Authority is seen as having influence, controlling, ruling and taking charge. But that is not a description of servant authority.

When you are authorized to minister the Church expects you to be ruled over, to carry out commands, to accept the laws that are laid down, to be controlled, or in other words to become an instrument through which the One who possesses all authority exercises his authority in creation. You are under authority and you will remain under authority if you wish to serve as a priest. You are to be an instrument of the Rule of Christ and he makes his Rule known to you in and through the Church which is his Body, a Church which you serve.

What we are expecting of you, Rene, is something of a revolutionary understanding of priestly authority. The Church looks not for priests who will lord it over them, who see themselves as the essential links between God and humankind. The days of that kind of priesthood have passed. What we want of you, no what we demand of you and expect of you is something refreshingly new, a rediscovery of a priestly life that goes back to the Master himself. The authority you have through this ordination is an authority to serve, an authority to wash the feet of others, an authority to care for others, to serve others, to consider the interests of others first and an authority to give your life as a ransom for many. And this cannot just be for your friends and supporters, for those with whom you agree and those with whom you find a comfortable and supportive relationship and friendship. You are authorized to empty yourself as Christ emptied himself. Nothing more. Nothing less. And that is what is revolutionary about it. Rene should decrease more and more and Christ should increase more and more in your life, so that you truly become a window through which people can look upon God in their lives.

The only real power in priesthood is the power to serve and if you seek to take up this ministry of leadership among the people of God then you must do so in a way that serves the greater good of the whole community. Nothing will kill your priestly integrity more quickly than becoming turned in on your own self and your own interests and your own needs.

This diocese is empowered by the Spirit of God through the many gifts that you bring to us. Equally, you are empowered when you respond positively to the grace that same Spirit gives you to empty yourself in the service of the People of God. What happens when you minister in that fashion is that you incarnate the presence of Jesus among us and there is no greater service you can offer. If Christ can be encountered in you then you will have faithfully fulfilled the fundamental vocation of priesthood. Of course we are all called to the same vocation, all who are baptised are to be

“Christ present” in the world and it will be your task, by the way you live and act among us, to show us what that means. But if you want to be a model of the image of Christ in the Church, and that is what you must be, then you will have to first of all surrender power and become a servant priest.

Rene this is not about giving up power it is about “self-abandonment, self sacrifice, self-mediation through weakness” (Karl Rahner). See the difference? It is not about avoiding acts that are harmful, though you need to do that. More importantly it is about an active taking up of the call to an emptying of self. It is not good just becoming neutral and not displaying a misguided form of authority and power. You are being called upon to vigorously and enthusiastically empty yourself in the service of others.

Conclusion:

“Do you understand” he said, “what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master have washed your feet, you should wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example, so that you may copy what I have done to you”.

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