

ORDINARY TIME TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY YEAR B 2009 HOMILY

FATHER DAVE GWINNER'S TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

(Genesis 2: 18-24; Hebrews 2: 9-11; Mark 10: 2-12 – Short Form)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PRIEST TODAY?

In reflecting on my own ministry as a priest, I have often come up against this question: what does it mean to be a priest today? What does it mean to be a priest in a time when sacrifice of any kind is not in vogue; in a time when commitment is hard to come by; in a time when the church has shot herself in the foot by the clergy abuse scandal and other abuses of power? The only answer I have ever found is that to be a priest today is to be a sign that God still loves us. Just as God so loved the world that he gave us his Son to save us (John 3: 16), so he gives priests to remind us that this donation of his Son is forever. For the priest, as the church teaches, stands in the place of Christ – never mind that the priest is always unworthy to do so and never mind that it is absurd (from a human perspective) for anyone to stand in Christ's place. Yet it is the will of God that it be so. The theologians call it the "scandal of particularity" that some men are called to be Christ in the offering of the Eucharist and in the administration of the Sacraments. It is a true scandal that such weak instruments – the men we call priests – are entrusted with such profound and life-giving mysteries. And yet this trust is also beautiful because it is from God and because it is a witness to the truth of the Incarnation. God became flesh in Jesus Christ and the reality of Christ's presence to his holy people is guaranteed through priests who by the grace of the Sacrament of Holy Orders become mediators between God and humankind – just like Jesus. I have never been one to get too wrapped up in the Romance of the priesthood. And yet there is something romantic about it; it is a love story – the story of Christ's abiding love for his Spouse the Church.

And this brings us face to face with today's scripture readings! It is certainly a wonderful coincidence that the readings for this Sunday focus on marriage – on this Sunday when we celebrate the Silver Anniversary of a priest. When I was young, I was an altar boy – and a good one. When there was any great Mass or ceremony, I would always be among those asked to serve. When the bishop came for Confirmation, I saw that he wore a ring. A sister told me that this was a sign that he was married to the church. Later, someone else told me that priests were also married to the church. But priests, at least in those days, did not wear rings. So were their marriages just "single ring" ceremonies – or what? As I grew older and even after I became a priest, I reached the conclusion that the marriage analogy for the relationship of priests and the church limped. And in fact, there are some Catholic priests who are married (as we at St. Paul's know). And this marriage relationship is logically a priority for such men, even over the priesthood. And yet the priest, celibate or not, often feels like he is in a marriage with the parish. There is certainly a relationship where the priest becomes one with his people, where there is a bond that is indeed similar to what God intended for a man and a woman in marriage – the intention that Jesus affirms in today's Gospel of Mark. If he is faithful to his promises, the priest does not share his bed with anyone; but he is "in bed" with many folks.

The priest is a privileged person who is ushered into the lives of many, many people – in the good times and the bad, in the happiest of times and in the saddest of times. His own loneliness enables him to

understand and assuage the deep loneliness that we all feel at times, whether married or not. His own inadequacy and even stupidity enable him to lift up those who have fallen flat on their faces. His own lack of loveliness allows him to embrace those who are on the margins of society, the cast offs of a culture that worships beauty and success. His own sinfulness moves him to pity for the crushed sinner. In short, the priest's own need for others impels him toward relationships that are myriad and of great diversity. "It is not good for the man to be alone," God announces, in today's reading from Genesis. And indeed it is not good, including for the man who is a priest. If he is doing his job, the priest is never alone. It is shocking that Janis Joplin, that most rebellious symbol of the rebellious seventies, perhaps captured what I am getting at best when she said of herself as an entertainer: "I make love to 20,000 people every night, and then I go home and sleep alone." So it is with the priest. And here at St. Paul's, where we estimate that there are as many as 15,000 parishioners, the priests who are assigned here rival Janis Joplin in our love-making!

And on this twenty-fifth anniversary of a priest, we mark it with the celebration of the Mass. More than this we cannot do, because there is nothing greater than the Eucharist which is no less than Christ present to us in his life and death and resurrection. And today we do not really honor one man, though we are very happy for him on his anniversary. "No," to paraphrase the great theologian Karl Rahner, "we are honoring only the priesthood of Jesus Christ. We are honoring the Church, the entire Church of all those redeemed, made holy, and called to eternal life. We are honoring Her to whom we all belong, whether we are priests or 'merely' believers and sanctified. For we are all knit so closely into one body that the grace, dignity or power that comes to one man graces and lifts all the others – and in one man's call to service, we glimpse the holy dignity of all" (Fr. Karl Rahner, S.J., *Meditations on the Sacraments*; English edition by Seabury Press, New York, 1977). Fr. Rahner hits the nail on the head. We are all in this together and we all have a share in the priesthood of Christ, whether we are ordained or not.

Our honoree has the joy of celebrating his jubilee in the "Year of the Priest," proclaimed by Pope Benedict. It is fitting that we have such a year because it is good for Catholics to be mindful of the need for priests and of the need to support priests. But I recently read an article in which Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles said that the Year of the Priest is also a perfect opportunity to remind the faithful that we all share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ through Baptism. It is one of the best kept secrets of the church that all Christians are priests who offer the sacrifice of their lives to God just as Jesus did. And through our Baptismal call, we all offer, along with the ordained priest, the sacrifice of the altar in which we too are present along with Jesus' holy Body and Blood. I like Cardinal Mahoney's suggestion and I do not think it detracts one bit from the entirely appropriate honor due to the priests who are in Holy Orders.

It is also good to remember, in light of our Scripture today about marriage, that married couples give their own powerful witness in our society to the possibility of commitment and to the fruitfulness of living sacrificial lives – and that they do so just as effectively as faithful priests. It is interesting to point out that Jesus made his comments today in Mark's Gospel about the holiness of marriage as he was beginning his journey to Jerusalem – that is, as he was beginning his journey to the cross. It is Christ's sacrifice on the cross that inspires married couples and priests (and all the faithful, for that matter) to be self-giving in the service of the community of God's Holy People. And remember that, in the sacramental

life of the church, it is marriage that is the preeminent symbol of the reality of Christ's abiding love for the church.

So we are all full of congratulations to you, Fr. Dave Gwinner. Your twenty five years of sacrifice and commitment are indeed a holy sign that God still loves us. Your life as a priest is another chapter in that age-old love story – the story that is part of the mystery of the life of a priest whose dedication confirms Christ's love for his Spouse, the church.

Dave, it is a blessing for me to share priestly ministry with you. You are a true servant to the folks of St. Paul's and you have been a true servant to countless others the world over as a Navy Chaplain and as a priest of the Diocese of Columbus. May your joy this day spill over to color all the rest of your days with the happiness that comes from fidelity to God's call and with the happiness that has flowed from your "yes" to the beautiful vocation we Catholics call the priesthood!