

50th Ordination Anniversary Homily

June 14, 2015

Today I am celebrating the 50th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. What has become increasingly clear to me as I prepared for this day is that this celebration is not primarily about me ... what I have done, where I have been, what I have accomplished. In fact, as I look back over these past 50 years - high school, JVC, Christian life Faith Communities, caring for my mother, parishes - I'm wondering if any actually survived whom I served. This celebration today is not about me, or my faithfulness to God or to those whom I have served. Today we celebrate God's faithfulness in my life and in yours.

I have to admit I had my doubts about this whole priesthood thing when it first occurred to me in high school. I saw priests then as one who taught high school, preached in pulpits and said Mass on Sunday. They always wore a black cassock, never had fun, and never got to go to movies. You can see why I wasn't too keen about the whole idea in the beginning.

Fortunately my understanding of priesthood has deepened over these past 50 years. I have come to see that it is not simply a role that I fill, or a rank that I have, or a position of privilege that I enjoy, or about answers that I give. Priesthood for me has to do with reliving the memory of Jesus through the quality of my presence - whether I am in a collar, or leading a community in prayer, or enabling the laity to participate more fully in the life and leadership of the Church.

Priesthood for me has been the experience of exploring life and being drawn to share it with the poor, the disadvantaged, the hurting, the wronged, the loving, the seekers. Priesthood for me is not taking myself too seriously, of being able to cry and to laugh. Priesthood for me is not a life of routine and certainty. It is one of challenge and mystery, of being led beyond one's self, of being taken to levels of life beyond one's understanding and capabilities. Priesthood is not the life I expected to follow when I was young. It is clearly not the life I follow by my choice alone now.

The question for me is - is my experience of God in my life as priest really all that different from your experience of God in your lives? Are not all of our lives ones of question and surprise? We've all found ourselves in places we wouldn't have thought of, in situations we wouldn't have expected, and doing things we wouldn't have chosen. At times we like the Church, at times we don't. At times we like our vocations, at times we don't. At times we like our lives, at times we don't.

My point is ours is not a life that follows our choices alone. Yahweh tells Jeremiah: "*Say not I am too young. To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak.*" Jesus says in John's Gospel, "*It was not you who chose me, it was I who chose you.*"

Yes, our anniversaries commemorate our fidelity to our dreams and commitments. But more profoundly, our anniversaries, whether as priest or lay, commemorate God's faithfulness to us which calls us to live out the sometimes dangerous and the sometimes reassuring memory of Jesus who fed illegals - who attended wedding receptions - who clothed the naked who were on welfare - who went to dinner parties - who visited the sick and cared for those on death row - who hosted anniversary gatherings - who comforted the downtrodden who were labelled enemies by the government and disloyal by the Church - who ate with outcasts, even when it put him at odds with his family and friends - who went to his companions for comfort - who chastised the self-righteous who obeyed all the laws but had no compassion in their hearts - who saw to his Mother's welfare before he left - who witnessed against the cruelty of racism and militarism and

resisted national policies that oppressed the helpless to favor the wealthy - who prepared breakfast for his closest friends.

Our anniversaries commemorate God's Faithfulness to us which cries out: "*If I washed your feet, I who am Teacher and Lord, then you must wash each other's feet ... Love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you.*" Our anniversaries commemorate God's faithfulness which continually comforts us with, "*Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest ... Fear not, for I have called you by name. You are precious in my eyes and glorious, and I love you.*"

Yes, our anniversaries of experiencing God's loving and challenging presence within us are every day, whether they be 50 years of priesthood, or 50 years of marriage, or one year of being alive. Thank you for commemorating this day with me. Wherever you are, whatever you do, whomever you are with, may your lives be filled with the energy and hope and joy of knowing the mystery and surprise of God's relentless and gentle faithfulness.

This is a celebration for your anniversary, so

Happy Anniversary, Everyone!