

**Ordination to the Priesthood
of
Reverend Paulo Bagini
Reverend Andrew Connick
Reverend Andrew Gallagher
Reverend Graham Stokes**

Westminster Cathedral

Saturday 2 July 2011

At the heart of the faith we celebrate at this Mass are the words of St Peter we have just heard: ‘Set yourselves close to him so that you too, the holy priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifices which Jesus Christ has made acceptable to God, may be living stones making a spiritual house.’

This is the theme we must explore this morning as we ask of God our Father the gift of the priesthood for these four young men. These words also bring to mind the powerful exhortation of Pope Benedict, given to us in this Cathedral, that we are ‘to discover again the great dignity of being a priestly people, called to consecrate the world to God through lives of faith and holiness.’

We are to set ourselves close to Christ. That is the invitation which awaits us every morning as we wake from sleep. We respond in prayer: Lord, during this day, may I be always close to you in everything I say and do. May your life fill me today. Use me as you wish to draw closer to you this wonderful world of ours, so amazing yet so full of ambiguity and contradiction, and grace it with your blessing.

As candidates for ordination, such a morning prayer must have sprung to your lips as you awoke on this your ordination day. For you, this is a day of radical self-giving and of radical fulfilment. It is a day of dying to self and rising again in the dignity of the ordained priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Indeed this ceremony and its Scripture readings are much about the themes of life and death. The Gospel described for us the death of Christ, in its final details, which are so precious in the eyes of faith. We see his broken body hanging in death on the cross, for us. We see his opened side from which flows blood and water, the fountain of the sacramental life of the Church.

This Christ who has died is then described for us as the living stone. Out of death he becomes the living cornerstone and such is the vitality and strength

of this stone that no-one 'who rests his trust on it' will be disappointed. Indeed, only through his death do we come to life. Only in the one who died can we find the true purpose and fulfilment of the life we cling to and treasure so keenly.

Here is the great paradox of our faith. By dying we live. In death we find the fullness of life. In emptying ourselves we receive the love for which we long. This is the paradox which makes no sense in the eyes of the world. It is indeed the stone that is rejected which becomes a stumbling block. Yet this pathway of self-emptying is the only way of becoming 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, consecrated nation, a people set apart.'

And this is certainly the pathway embraced by those to be ordained this morning.

One moment will spell out this truth with stark clarity. Shortly, these candidates will prostrate themselves on the floor of the Cathedral, taking up a posture of utter vulnerability, of self-abandonment. They do so as a sign of dying to self, so that Christ may raise them up to a new life in him. They do so in the midst of you, their families, friends and fellow disciples, so that your prayers may strengthen and sustain them. They do so in the company of St John Southworth, whose mortal remains, our precious relics, are there alongside them.

But if we look more closely, we will notice that the saint lies with his face turned upward to God, already full of the glory of the risen Christ. For our part, we prostrate ourselves face downward, knowing that we depend on God's mercy and grace. The one who is dead is now fully alive in God. We who are alive seek to die in Christ so that he may live in us.

Only in this way can we truly become the holy people of God, living stones of the Church. Only in this way will there be, in your inner souls, the emptiness, the openness, that God can fill with the spirit and power of Christ the High Priest so that you may become his hands, his mouth, for his actions and his words in the Church and in our world.

In this act of ordination God exercises a total claim over your lives, setting you apart for himself in a particular way. Such is the nature of priestly holiness.

Yet it must not be misunderstood. Holiness is a setting apart. Everything we bless and consecrate is indeed set apart for God. Yet this being set apart is, at the same time, a being sent out on mission. This is true of Christ: consecrated

by the Holy Spirit, abandoning himself to death on the cross, yet at the same time fulfilling the mission given by the Father of bringing love and compassion especially to those most in need. Our consecration to God, as a baptised people, as priests and bishops, is inseparably our mission of service to others. The holiness we receive, for which we strive, lies always in our being for the world.

This is the lesson we learn from St John Southworth. Risking his life, he returned again and again to his ministry in the streets around this Cathedral, bringing comfort and love to the poor and the dying, opening for them the sacraments of Christ's love and the Gospel of his mercy. He is a model for every priest. And, like his Master, our saint gave up his life in a painful death, and we, today, treasure his remains and reverence them with love and gratitude.

But, like every priest, St John Southworth wants us to turn our gaze away from him and onto Christ alone. As the Gospel has told us, we are to gaze on the one whom we have pierced. We are to gaze each day on the wounded Christ, for from his wounds flow life and grace and in his wounds we are made whole.

This is what our new priests will do. Each day they will gaze on Christ, our wounded Saviour, in prayer and contemplation, knowing that he alone is the source and power of their ministry. Each day at Mass they will hold him before us as, at the consecration, they raise his Body for our adoration. And each day they will attend to the pierced Christ in the pain, dismay and brokenness of so many of his people.

This, then, is the business of the priest: to be a companion in brokenness, in, through and with Christ who himself was broken for our sake. We may not be very good. We are ordinary people trying to fulfil an extraordinary vocation. And so we, more than all, must set ourselves close to Christ each day. For he alone is our hope and our salvation. To him alone is all glory and power. He alone is our priest, bringing us home to our Father through the trials and failures of life. It is the greatest gift of all, our highest dignity, to share in this priesthood, and for these men, two Andrews, Graham and Paolo, to do so through ordination this morning. We pray for them today and always, with all the angels and saints, that their ministry may be blest and our Church enriched. Amen.

✠ Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster