

**First Mass of Fr. Lawrence Brophy
Our Lady of Dallas, Abbey Church
September 9, 2012
Fr. Joseph Van House**

Dear Father Abbot Peter and Fr. Abbot Denis, dear Cistercian confreres and fellow priests, dear students and other friends in Christ, and my dear Father Lawrence:

At a wedding, the marriage of the bride and the groom is at the center of a great celebration. They welcome guests, they go to celebration dinners, they get dressed up; they exchange vows, they reflect and worship and receive God's blessing; they cut cake, they dance with each other and their families; they often even try to find a few moments to be alone together in the midst of all that is swirling around them. But typically, they are not called upon to give speeches. At that time, other people do that for them.

It's a longstanding tradition that when the Church ordains a new priest, he offers the first mass that he presides at as a special mass of thanksgiving, an occasion where he and the Church can continue to give special and joyful attention to the gift that God has given. And a part of that tradition that many people are not aware of is that the new priest typically does not preach at his own first mass, but chooses another priest to do so in his place. The reason for this may seem obvious enough: the duties and pressures and emotions of such a time are very great, and deciding what to say about everything could be very difficult, or even embarrassing. After all, I think we've all heard wedding toasts by a best man or a maid of honor that ended up somehow being at least a little strange and embarrassing – and they weren't even the ones getting married.

But I think there's also a deeper reason in the case of a first mass. In this case, we're talking about homilies, rather than toasts. And when it comes to preaching on the occasion of a new priest entering into the ministry, it is very fitting that more than one priestly voice be heard. After all, an ordination is not really about the accomplishment of one person. It is about one of the key ways that the Son of God acts throughout the world for the love of souls.

In the first place, then, I'd like to begin where Bishop Farrell left off yesterday, by speaking to the Brophy family.

Charles and Karen, and Madeline, too, when you made the decision, in a variety of ways, to support Ed in his decision to begin following God's call to the monastery and to the priesthood, you were making a sacrifice. No matter how much it felt like it, you were letting go of what human nature tells us it means to have a prosperous family – even as you were making it possible for him to bring into the life, and therefore into your family, sons and daughters of a different kind. All that you have done for your son, all that you have done for your brother, from teaching him how to brush his teeth or use good manners, to teaching him about God, to praying for him at each stage of his life, to taking him to extra baseball practices or taking him rock climbing, have gone to building him up as a strong and healthy man who is able to be good soil for making God's grace fruitful in the special ways that a priest does – to open the eyes of the blind and to loosen the tongue of the mute, to give life to the children of other parents whom you may not know.

By extension, this same thanks goes out to everyone else who has come here to celebrate who also knows him: the extended Brophy and Hays families, faculty and staff at Cistercian Preparatory School, fellow parishioners of Saint Monica's, friends and classmates. You all have had a role to play, and will somehow also continue to. Here is also due a special word of warmth for Father Stephen. I know I'm not supposed to focus on you by name right now, but from the standpoint of Father Lawrence's beginning of ministry, your companionship to him over the years deserves explicit mention, as does Father Roch's guidance -- first as his form master for eight years, and then as his novice master and spiritual guide within the monastery. Father Roch, you were Ed Brophy's primary witness of priesthood throughout his adolescent life, as well as his novice master once he entered the monastery, and God's grace in you has a special responsibility for the ministry that he will carry on for the coming decades.

All that went into Father Lawrence's vocation is somehow made concrete for me by an image that then-Brother Lawrence sent me this week. It's a picture of a very young Andrew Greg and Ed Brophy, as 8th graders, standing on the front porch after school with a somewhat younger Father Roch. I am struck by how they are so much like the boys in my form right now, who are in the 8th grade. Same uniforms, same braces, same haircuts, same form master standing off to the side, somehow not noticing the camera. And I am also struck by how they are so much like my boys in that the care, the life, that I and others have the grace to pour out for those boys, was poured for these boys, too. And, honestly, by how happy I would be if any of my own students should follow the path that you have, Father Lawrence.

In giving thanks in this homily, I speak not on behalf of Father Lawrence, who for his own part will thank you, and thank God, in his own ways. But as someone who is grateful to be his brother in the order and as a priest. As someone whose spiritual ears he will at times need to open. As someone whose tongue has already been loosed by his call to preach today.

And, more importantly, in the name of the whole Church, and especially the host of spiritual sons and daughters who will be able to embrace you themselves only in heaven. So to all of you who have somehow helped Father Lawrence to the altar, thanks be to God for your goodness, and *thank you*.

Father Lawrence, it is now time for me to take a moment to address you directly. You have received years of formation and apprenticeship, of classes and conferences, so I am not aiming to say anything to you that is new. But today it is on my heart to remind you of one thing only, in the hopes that it will be a source of light to you in the future. And that is to encourage you to seek to be at peace with a simple fact:

On earth you will never be capable of fully understanding the good that Jesus does through your priesthood.

Priests, like Christians, typically walk by faith, not by sight.

Father Lawrence, most anyone here could rattle off a short list of priests who have had a major sustained impact on their life without really knowing it. Who have simply sailed across the surface of the ocean of God's grace in their lives.

More often than not, you will have no idea of the sufferings and the life that people will bring to the Eucharist that you celebrate among them.

You will have little idea how far-reachingly transformative is the reconciliation that you will offer in ministry of the confessional.

You may not be very sure of how good your homily was on a given day, but will have even less knowledge about who will remember it throughout the week and will make important, good decisions enlightened by God's grace in it.

You will have little concrete sense of the depth of healing that you have brought to a sick person through the sacrament of anointing, and still less of how exactly a baby's life would have turned out if there had been no one to do the baptism.

And then, there is the level of truly invisible spiritual action. You have already personally experienced the fact that you receive real but limited consolation about the grace that comes to yourself and others from your decision to make your mind harmonize with your voice when you join us to recite the daily prayers of the monastery here with the rest of us. And in a similar way, although you have now become a more crucial intercessor, you will only have the slightest inkling at the end of the month when you sit down with your calendar and sign the list of masses that you offered in that month for the intentions requested of the abbot.

Realize that all this, this condition of ignorance, is not just inevitable, but is at the end of the day actually a wise gift of God, something that God does for priests

- to challenge their hearts to greater depth,
- to keep them humble,
- and to keep them from being overwhelmed by his power.

(As St. John Vianney used to say, if the priest only knew what he was doing, he would die. If God did not keep you at least somewhat in the dark, you would have a cardiac event!)

So please, remain reassured. If you keep close to your heart the calm awareness that this limitation is normal, is ok, is even merciful, then you will get through many trying times in humility, trust, and hope.

Though you may not always be happy – at times you will be unhappy with the world around you, unhappy with yourself and your own exercise of the ministry, and perhaps even with God's providence for your life – if you keep this truth at heart, you will always be capable of knowing that you have great *reason* to be happy. And that can be enough to open your blind eyes and your deaf ears to get through whatever darkness.

In fact, in all of this, I would go even further....

Some of the days on which you are suffering the most will turn out to be some of the most fruitful and efficacious for your ministry – again, in ways that you will not be able to comprehend or perhaps even conceive on earth.

The Son of God has made great promises to you, first as a Christian, and now as a priest, and they sometimes require great faith from you. But he also will be faithful to them.

Father Lawrence, the life of the priest is a wonderful life. You enter into it accompanied by the joy of the Church, and by our very best wishes. May God be praised both now and forever.