

First Mass of Fr. Philip Lastimosa
Our Lady of Dallas Abbey
August 22, 2010
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Eighteen years ago, almost to the day, a young boy first entered the 5th grade (Form I) classroom at the Cistercian Preparatory School, with all the excitement and trepidation in his heart that the first day at a new institution can cause. Cistercian was not completely unknown for him: his brother, six years his senior, had been a student of the school then for the sixth year, and so, at home, life was pretty much interwoven with the events of the school of those priests dressed in black and white and with a strange accent. This young boy was K. C. Lastimosa and I was his Form Master – which means his home room teacher – for eight years. Since earlier, for four years, I was the Form Master also of his older brother Kinnier, and as such I knew his family, I knew K. C. already as a young child since he was four years old.

Eighteen years later, the day before yesterday, K. C., then called Brother Philip, along with his classmate at Cistercian Br. Augustine, formerly known as Ben Hoelke, was lying prostrate on the floor of the Cistercian Abbey church as the congregation was singing the litany, begging God and all the saints for their help that these two men would be good priests. A few minutes later, when the Bishop had laid his hands upon their heads, Brother Philip and Brother Augustine became Father Philip and Father Augustine, two newly ordained priests.

What happened during those eighteen years at the heart of Father Philip? God's hands were working gently but constantly in the soul of the growing boy and young man. God blessed K. C. with a serene, pleasant temperament, with good, practical wisdom, and with a positive, optimistic attitude. He was a consistent person who did not like changes; for eight years every day, he brought to school his well-known, staple peanut butter sandwich. The home atmosphere in which he grew up was loving and very devout, at the school he imbued everything that was good and true, and also the close-knit group of his classmates was very supportive to him. In this warm environment K. C. flourished and grew harmoniously, while God, still unknown to K. C., was unfolding in his soul slowly his priestly and monastic vocation. When did he become aware of his vocation? It was certainly not while he was still taking piano lessons or was a boy scout as a little boy, not while, during his high school years, he developed the mastery of the most sophisticated tricks of yoyo or became an expert, able to tell which restaurants in the Dallas-Fort Worth area served the best French fries. He was not aware of it even when, also during his high school years, he did a kind of priestly job, giving to a number of his friends good counsel when they asked for his wisdom and advice by just talking to them to figure out a solution in a tough situation. It was quite a while after his high school graduation, when he was already away from home and away from Cistercian, an undergraduate student at Lehigh University that the

awareness of his priestly vocation came to him as if God were coming to break through all the familiar categories of his daily life and invite him to follow Christ more closely. After a time of careful deliberation, K. C. said readily “Yes” to God’s call and after graduating at Lehigh, next fall, along with Cistercian classmate Ben Hoelke, he took the white habit of the Cistercian novice in this abbey church.

Well, this church became a kind of a second home for Br. Philip. He entered 5th grade (Form I) at Cistercian just a few months after the church was completed and dedicated in 1992, and after that, this church was where his whole family came weekly for Sunday Mass, in this church he participated for eight years at the Class Masses and at all the celebrations like those of opening and closing of school years, he was confirmed in this church, he took the Cistercian habit, made his monastic vows in this church, and finally he was ordained priest in this church.

As we celebrate the joyful event that Father Philip Lastimososa has been ordained priest and is now celebrating his first Holy Mass, let us examine briefly, what is a priest? The English word “priest” comes from the Greek and Latin word “*presbyter*” which in English means simply an “elder.” But another term tells much more about what a priest is. Strictly speaking, the word “pontiff” is used today to designate only the person of the pope but it can be applied for every priest; “pontiff” comes from the Latin “*pontifex*” and means “bridge-builder.” This is exactly what a priest does: he is a builder of bridges between God and the people. The priest is a kind of “go between” who stands between God and the Christian Church community. He speaks to God in the name of the people and he speaks to the people in the name of God; he is the representative of the people before God and the representative of God before the people.

But at this point we find ourselves in front of a problem. How can a sinful human being stand before God as the people’s representative? How can a sinful human being stand before the people as the representative of the all-holy God? No human being is ever worthy to do that. No one, except the one who one day dared to face his audience and ask them the question: “Can any of you charge me with sin?” (John 8:46) And none of them did. This man, the man without sin, is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God: He is at the same time, in one person, the all-holy God and a real human being, truly one of us. He is the only person who can be and who is in full right a priest, a builder of bridges between God and men. Yes, he is our sinless high priest who intercedes for us before God. He is our all-knowing teacher revealing to us who God is and what God expects from us: He is the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Yes, in the real sense of the word, there is and there can be only one priest, and this one priest is Jesus Christ. But Jesus wanted to be present as priest through all the ages and at every point of the world where people live, and to achieve that He shares His one priesthood with others, and He makes unworthy men at every age, in every country His fellow-workers. Jesus made His apostles the first priests. At the Last Supper, after the institution of the Holy Eucharist, He gave to His apostles the ability to repeat the same action of changing bread into Christ’s Body and wine into

His Blood by this simple order: “Do this in memory of me.” On Easter Sunday, when He appeared the first time to the apostles after His resurrection, Jesus gave the apostles authority to forgive sins in God’s name; He said: “Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain, they are retained.” Jesus, by passing on these powers to other human beings who were far not as holy as He was, made these men “*alter Christus*,” “another Christ.” Every priest, with all his weaknesses, with all his sins, has been made by the priestly ordination “another Christ.”

This power, this authority later on has been passed on by the apostles to their successors, bishops, priests, and deacons and this power finally reached the day before yesterday Fr. Philip when the bishop laid his hands on him and ordained him priest. This unbroken chain of priesthood, originating from Christ Himself, going through each generation of priests through many centuries, and finally reaching those persons who are priests today, is called the “apostolic succession.”

To be a priest is a tremendous honor; no human being is worthy of it. A priest is humbled by this great dignity; he can be frequently shaken by this awareness and ask himself: “Who am I that by my simple words over the bread, ‘This is my body,’ I can transform the bread into the Body of Jesus Christ, the all-powerful Son of God, that by saying the words of absolution I can forgive sins in God’s name?” The realization of his unworthiness for this great honor must keep a priest always humble while the greatness of the priestly job and status should push him toward holiness that by his closeness to God he would be less unworthy to perform such sublime tasks. This great honor has two important impacts or consequences on the man who has been called to be a priest.

One impact is positive: The priest is called into a great intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ. Since he’s Christ’s partner in proclaiming the word of God, Christ shares with the priest His concerns, His friendship, and His thoughts with great tenderness. Jesus talks to the priest as to a friend. He says, in the words of John’s gospel: “I no longer call you servants: I’ve called you friends because I’ve told you everything I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). This intimate friendship is the source of great peace and joy that a priest can have in his heart.

The other impact is rather negative: the priest has been taken out from among the people, so that he is, in a way, separated from them; as a priest, he’s not only the one who worships God, who offers the Eucharistic sacrifice, but, with Christ, he’s also the victim, the gift of the sacrifice. That means for him a considerable loneliness which he has to carry and which, at times, can be very painful. Every priest is a lonesome man, lives in solitude, standing at a certain distance from other people. He’s a lonesome man because he’s carrying a mystery. What you can see of a priest with your eyes is (as they say) just the tip of the iceberg: you see this fragile, weak, mortal human being, but this is just a small fraction what he really is: the infinitely larger part of what he is, remains invisible, and that larger part is God’s mystery. God’s mystery can be

approached only by faith because we'll never be able to grasp it with our minds, and thus we can approach also a priest only with faith and we have to see in every priest, be that a holy man or a sinner, with the eyes of faith that tremendous gift which with our physical eyes we cannot see.

Let us welcome Father Philip as a new priest of Christ and wish him many years of happy and satisfying service in God's vineyard for the sake of those who will be entrusted to his loving care. Let us pray for his family so that those who raised him, accompanied him, and guided him to reach this day, would be richly rewarded for their sacrifice and for giving a new priest to the Church. Let us pray to God that Fr. Philip would stand strong in his fight for souls, during the sunny days and during the stormy weather of his life, that he would shepherd wisely God's people, persevering faithfully in proclaiming God's word and administering the sacraments so that one day, after many decades of faithful service the Lord may receive him at the gates of heaven with these words: "Well done, my good and faithful servant... Come, share your master's joy" (Mathew 25:21).

Amen.