

First Mass of Fr. Joseph
Our Lady of Dallas Abbey
August 16, 2009
Fr. Paul McCormick

It is the long standing custom in the Church that a newly ordained priest does not preach at his First Mass (or his Mass of Thanksgiving), but rather enlists another to do so. And yet, when Br. Joseph approached me a few weeks back and asked me to deliver this homily on his behalf, it was quite a humbling and an unexpected honor, one that I even hesitated at first to accept. But trusting that in this, as in most all other things he sets his tremendous mind to, that Br. Joseph knew what he was doing and being so personally grateful for him and proud of him and all that he has accomplished by the grace of God, I accepted.

The one instruction/direction for the homily which he gave me was this: “Keep it short!” No, this actually *was* an instruction I was given, but it was not by Fr. Joseph, but rather by one of our confreres. One who obviously has heard me preach before.

No, *Joseph’s* instruction for me in preparing my remarks for this morning—which is extremely indicative of the kind of new priest with whom we are now blessed—was this: “Fr. Paul, please say something for the brothers. Speak of that which the brothers have to look forward to as priests, specifically as Cistercian priests who live in community as monks and as teachers.” In other words, Fr. Joseph insisted that my homily this morning be not about him, but instead be a gift and an encouragement for the other, for those that will hopefully one day soon come after him. And, so I pray, that it may.

In the gospel reading for today’s Mass, we continue this Sunday as we have for the past several, to recall that most beautiful Eucharistic discourse of the 6th chapter of John’s Gospel. Prompted by Jesus’ having fed the crowd from the loaves that he had multiplied, he now strives in this lengthy conversation from which we have read small sections each week, to lead his disciples away from an excessive preoccupation with all that merely satisfies their physical hunger and need, to that which will indeed feed their deepest hungers. And, as we heard proclaimed this morning, Jesus shares with them the revelation, the climax of the discourse: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven, whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.”

Dear Brothers and Sisters, this is at root what we celebrate as we gather this morning to give thanks for the ordination of Br. Joseph Van House and this is that which the Brothers have to look forward to as they continue to study and discern a vocation to the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Namely, that through the hands of the one ordained this utterly divine and unfathomable mystery whereby the One who from all eternity has reigned in perfect love with the Father and the Holy Spirit, has in his infinite concern and love for each one of us, humbled

himself to become a man, to take upon himself all our sins, and in his once for all passion, death, and resurrection to unite us into this eternal Triune Love, now not as mere Creatures, but truly as his own sons and daughters. And, it was at the Last Supper, that he entrusted to the Church through the apostles and their successors the means to enter as sons and as daughters into his own perfect worship of His Father, and now ours. Though the sacrifice of the Mass made possible in every time and every place through the ministering hands of the priest, the bread and wine which symbolize all that we are and hope to be becomes by the power of the Holy Spirit our food for eternal life. As he says in the today's Gospel, "For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me." As a priest, I can think of no more humbling and yet rewarding reality than being able to speak and act *in persona Christi* in inviting others again and again to find a place at such a table, to participate in such a feast, and in doing so to be transformed by so great a gift. As act of worship and sanctification, there is simply is none greater.

And so, Fr. Joseph, now as a priest, at each and every Mass you can bring your parents, your sister and all your family to this perfect sacrifice of love. All those both living and deceased to whom you owe debts that could never be repaid; you can in each and every Mass bring them to the sacrifice. This is also true for all your friends here gathered who have blessed you over the course of the years and all those who wanted to be here but could not, and it is true for all those with whom you will come into contact throughout the rest of your life and to whom Christ sends you. It is true for those whom you do not know, but who find themselves in terrible spiritual need. You can, should and must also bring them daily to the sacrifice. But this is true in a most special sense, Fr. Joseph, for the students of your Form. I understand that you had the opportunity yesterday to meet many of the young men whom you will serve as form master for the next eight years and beyond. It is good that they were here. It will be a lifetime memory that they will share with you. For you will find that as time goes by and as they mature into adulthood while simultaneously you mature in your priesthood (with them acting upon you as you act upon them) both they and you will come to experience in a most powerful way that the title "Fr." with which they address you, is not merely one of polite or formal respect, but truly expresses the mysterious reality that you will become for them. And with the same keen awareness of his own spiritual paternity with which St. Paul so passionately wrote to his communities, so also you will find that as a pastor of souls your own happiness, ... to your own salvation.. is now intricately interwoven with theirs.

It is also in this context of Form Master and as teacher, that you will come to see even more clearly how the celibacy of your priesthood is less a giving up/sacrifice of something so good, precious and holy, as it is a generous, lifelong embrace of this spiritual fatherhood. And, as you work closely with parents, you together celibate and married will support one another, complement one another, in nurturing young men through the trials and temptations of adolescence into the truth of their sexuality. Without ever even saying a word, I do believe your gift of celibacy is one of the greatest gifts you as a priest will give young people and old alike in

today's culture. It was this already with this very realization, I understand, that Matthew Van House, six years ago asked for and was granted the name of Joseph.

Along with the other sacraments, you and the Brothers, Fr. Joseph, I am confident will discover as a priest that the sacrament of the confession/reconciliation shall become a most amazing instrument through which God will use you to unburden and to heal His people. In fact, Fr. Joseph shared with me recently that it was this sacrament which late in his high school studies proved so important during his early years of discerning of a priestly vocation. What a remarkable gift this sacrament is not only for the ones forgiven, but also for the one administering, as well. To be invited as a priest to enter into the very wounds and brokenness of others lives and to be edified by their courage and faith, to share the joy of their forgiveness. You will meet some who have been a way for so long, who enter burdened, physically and literally weighed down by their sins and their alienation from God, from others, and from self, and for whom you become the instrument of Christ's forgiveness, peace, and healing, enabling them to leave restored and empowered to witness to the power of God's love.

Then in the sacrament of the sick, you will be invited to bring Christ into the homes and hospitals as you anoint and pray for those who are aging and suffering spiritually from their physical trials. Expect to be inspired by the strong faith of those who are prepared for their final journey, to be humbled by those that in such final moments finally come back to the Lord, and then to be challenged as you strive to counsel and console those left behind with the certainties of our Lord's resurrection and promises of hope. Helping them to grieve, yes, but as St. Paul insists, not as the pagans do.

It is in these and so many other ways, Fr. Joseph, that you and the Brothers will be able to go to bed each night and awaken each morning with the call and the challenged to make Christ present in ministering to his people. What could be more rewarding? What could be more humbling? And, in truth, at times what could be more overwhelming? And yet, our priesthood as lived out in a monastic community affords us the luxury no of being inspired daily by those fellow priests with whom we live. To see and admire their dedication and devotion to their own priestly vocation lived for some over more than 50 years. And to witness first hand all the lives that are forever changed by their ministry.

It is also a luxury in our community to be reminded, as are our students in the school each year, that no two priests are exactly alike. To live out one's priesthood is to do so bring to the altar, to the confessional, to the class or hospital room, Christ with your own unique and in the case of Joseph formidable talents and skills, personality and experiences. Knowing that your call to priestly ministry is not merely a sharing of the truth of who you are, nor is it limited in this way, but as we are reminded again and again that it is truth of who He is who works through us and in us. As Paul insists we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the surpassing power is from God and not from us.

And yet, what qualifies any man to be such a part of so many lives? It is not a question unlike that posed in today's gospel in response to Jesus assertion "I am the bread of life." We read that the Jews quarreled among themselves saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to

eat?” Indeed, My brothers and sisters, as we gather one day after the ordination of Fr. Joseph to the priesthood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that very same question can be raised toward him, the fruit of our celebration. “How can this man (one some of us have known since childhood, most of us since his entry into our Cistercian Monastery over 5 years ago). How can this man give us Christ’s own flesh to eat?

The answer of course, is only by the undeserved and unmerited gift of the most Holy Spirit, of the one who can write straight on crooked lines.”

Fr. Joseph yesterday, you promised to serve us the People of God in word and sacrament as a faithful priest for the rest of your life. Today, we as a grateful community give thanks to God for such a blessing to have you in our midst. And, we owe it to you to make promises of our own to support your ministry and priesthood. That among many other things, we will strive to the best of our abilities to receive fruitfully the sacraments that you offer, that we will heed the Word of God that is spoken on your lips, and that we will strive to the best of our ability to support you in prayer. Not just prayer, but daily prayers. And will be praying for helpers in the near future to assist you in the vineyard.

Fr. Joseph, in closing, I am afraid I did not do a very good job of heeding the instruction of our confrere, but I do hope that I have at least partially satisfied yours. *Ad multos annos.*