

## Sermon for the Mass of the Oils 2006

Our diocesan life has been dominated in the last two years by consultation and discussion as we have sought how best to respond to the contemporary challenge facing us as we seek to respond to the Lord's invitation and command to be a Gospel and missionary community.

*Growing Together in Christ* has given rise to many precious insights, good initiatives and ideas, much enthusiasm and a huge commitment from everyone that we should become more and more a missionary community. Increasingly, we are conscious that the Spirit of the Lord has been given to us and that we have been anointed for this task. Through uncertainties, and even fears, we have journeyed in the strength that comes from knowing that the Lord is with us as we seek to work with him to "proclaim the year of His favour."

For me, one of the most striking features of our response of faith as a diocese has been the constant affirmation and esteem for the work of those of us who have been specifically called – bishop, priests and deacons – into the work of the ordained ministry. Priests and deacons are loved and revered in this diocese.

In the eagerness to enhance the consciousness of the laity of the importance and dignity of their baptism, there may have been some who seem to downplay the importance of priesthood. There may have been times when I, in my enthusiasm to build up that consciousness, may have seemed to undervalue - or rather take for granted - the dedication and ministry of our priests and deacons. If that has been the case – and I have never consciously wanted it to be so – then I am sorry.

Our celebration today is a beautiful and significant occasion for the whole diocese, but it concentrates in a special way on the place and importance of the ordained ministry. Listen carefully to the Preface of today's Mass. From within "the dignity of a royal priesthood", which Christ has given to all the people he has made his own, "with a brother's love, he chooses men to share his sacred ministry by the laying on of hands. He calls them to renew in his name the sacrifice of our redemption as they set before your family his paschal meal. He calls them to lead your holy people in love, nourish them by your word and strengthen them through the sacraments. Father, they are to give their lives in your service...grow in the likeness of Christ and honour you by their courageous witness of faith and love."

That is a wonderful description of the vocation of priests and deacons. It is a high calling and lays enormous stress on the importance of the ordained ministry, without prejudice to any other calling in the Church. We cannot be Church without Eucharist and the other Sacraments, and we can have no Eucharist without priests. This is why priesthood is at the centre of what we do today, in terms of thankful celebration, generous commitment and recommitment to service. And it's why we pray fervently that others too will hear and respond to the call the Lord puts before us.

In a few moments, my brother priests, our deacons and I will renew the promises we made when we were ordained. Listen carefully to the words, as we seek to recapture and reassert the joy and the enthusiasm which led us to the moment of our ordination.

We are resolved – and will continue to do our best - to unite ourselves more closely to Christ, setting him and his call first, ahead of our own needs, as we seek to be true to our sacred duties. We are resolved to centre our lives in God's mysteries of Eucharist and the other sacraments, teaching and preaching, both by word and example, that God is at the heart of everything we are

and do. We promise, once again, despite the failures and sinfulness of our lives, to follow faithfully in the footsteps of Christ.

We pledge ourselves anew to that life of single-minded loyalty and love of the Lord who is ever inviting us to “come and see” and spend time with him. We pledge ourselves joyfully because we do so in the presence of each other and in your presence too. We are sustained by your prayers and by the huge value that you place on us, on our ministry, and on the leadership that we do our best to give.

Continue to love and sustain us, as you have always done. Isaiah writes of those who are called to be priests and deacons: “You will be named ‘priests of the Lord’... ‘Ministers of God’... ‘famous throughout the nations’... ‘a race whom the Lord has blessed’”. We need your prayers if we are to be faithful to that description

I am a Jesuit boy and that tradition dies hard, so often my prayer for myself is couched in Ignatius’ words:

“Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous.  
Teach me to serve you as you deserve;  
to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds;  
to toil and not to seek for rest;  
to labour and not to ask for reward,  
save that of knowing that I am doing your will.”

Words like these are constantly on our lips as we seek to serve and be faithful to our calling to serve God’s people. Pray also that, through fidelity to our call, others too will hear the call of Christ to leave everything and follow him. My own experience – and I’m sure it’s echoed by all of my brothers here – is that this commitment brings huge joy and fulfilment – even the hundredfold promised by the Lord. Pope Benedict, quoting St Teresa of Avila, puts it like this: “‘Already in this life, God gives a hundred for one.’ We have only to have the initial courage to be the first to give that ‘one’, just like Peter who, on the word of the Lord, pushes out again into the deep in the morning – he gives one and receives a hundred.”