

ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD OF ANSEL AND ROB

I remember finishing the seminary after seven years of hard graft, thinking: *Thank Goodness for that! Now I can get on!* At the time, my eldest brother was an award-winning baker, a true artist at icing cakes with his nozzles and piping bags. Ordination can feel like a piping bag as if all your past life is being gathered together and squeezed through a nozzle. The only difference is: there's another bag waiting on the other side or rather a new life opening up. Today, we're delighted for Ansel and Rob, as they begin the great adventure of the Catholic priesthood. Over the years ahead, they will need to learn the art of priest-craft. But today, we're full of admiration for them as they lay down their lives for Christ. Both are giving up much, Rob a lucrative prospect in the building trade, Ansel a dazzling career at Man United. We thank their parents, families and friends who've helped them and we're immensely grateful to St. John's Womersley, for all the Rector and community have done to form these champions for ordination today.

*Why, every hair on your head has been counted. There is no need to be afraid.* It's apt we hear these Sunday readings in which, Jesus, God the Son, tells us to have absolute trust in God's loving Providence. *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father knowing.* What an amazing God we have, huge and omnipotent, that He Who made this vast starry universe knows how many hairs on our heads there are, or were! He holds all things in being. He governs history and He loves every detail of our lives. He even tells us not to be *afraid of those who can kill the body.* For as St. Paul says, Christ has redeemed us by His death and resurrection. When things go wrong, we hear Him say: *everything now hidden will be made clear.* We need only unite ourselves with Him to be sure in His love He will make all things work, ultimately, for the good.

Rob and Ansel, as new priests, I want to ask you a few things. First of all, often reflect on the triple *munera*, the three functions of Christ's priesthood: sanctifying, teaching and shepherding. But I ask you: pay special attention to shepherding, to pastoral leadership. Develop really good communication skills so you can proclaim the Gospel to the huge

numbers of people spiritually adrift in today's society and to the vast hordes of inactive Catholics. The Number One Priority in this Diocese of Portsmouth is mission, the new evangelisation. Try to be inclusive. The Catholic Church is a great ship, not a holy huddle; it's a big-tent in which everyone has a place, a part to play. So don't put people off! For this, you'll need the two-fold approach Bernard Lonergan insists on: retrieval and engagement. In other words, you need to be critically in love with our Catholic Tradition, steeped in it, but also madly creative, ever engaging in new ways with the people of contemporary culture. So be faithful, and be creative! Take risks, even if you make a mess.

Now when I was ordained I imagined romantically that soon I'd be parish priest in a tiny country parish surrounded by my books, by great pubs and by adoring parishioners. The reality of 21C priesthood is very different. Many priests have two or three churches to look after; they have diocesan jobs; they're in specialised ministries; they may not even be in a parish. It's hard work, and very varied. It all depends on pastoral needs and how to meet them. Clearly there's a process of discernment, but when in a moment you take the awesome promise of respect and obedience to me and to my successors, remember what you are undertaking: that you will listen to God (*ob-audire*) speaking through His Church. So don't put conditions on this. Take the promise with no limits. It's a huge commitment and I thank you for taking it. But it's also the most rewarding course of all. For God will always see you right.

One last thought. I've been at it now as a priest for 33 years and as I rapidly approach pensionable age, I'm more and more concerned for my immortal soul. I keep thinking of so many areas of my spiritual life skewed or not right, a catalogue of missed opportunity. So be faithful to prayer. Offer Mass every day, even on a day off, and spend an hour in Eucharistic Adoration. Don't model your life on me or on other priests; model your life on Jesus Christ the High Priest, and on those priests the Church has canonised. Keep up spiritual reading and spiritual direction; keep the wood green; always have a theology book or Church document on the go. And don't become a cranky lone-ranger priest: that's a heresy. From today you are one of the concelebrants, a member of the presbyterate under the Bishop. So avoid clericalism. Yes, be men of the Church, but first, be men of Jesus Christ. Journalists love depicting the Church as a political football-match between two teams. This is diabolical. No, be men of Christ! Fill our Diocese with faith, with energy, with authentic humanism, with concern for the Earth and for the poor.

*The Lord is at my side* said 1stR *I have committed my cause to Him. Sing to the Lord; praise His name.* Rob and Ansel, we thank you for what you're doing today. We thank you for obeying Christ's call. We thank you for giving your life to Christ and His Church in this wonderful Diocese of Portsmouth. In Christianity, to be a priest is to be a victim. Priesthood and Victimhood are one and the same. This is why the way of life you've chosen won't be easy. It will cost you everything.

But it will be fantastic. So in this Mass, let's call on the prayers of Mary Immaculate, St. Edmund of Abingdon and Bl PGF patron of our youth. May the Lord bless you. May you be filled with the Holy Spirit. May you persevere in joy. May you reside in the Heart of Christ at every moment. May you one day be found worthy to hear the Lord say to you: *Well done good and faithful servants; come and enter the happiness of your Lord.*