



Homily for the Ordination to the Priesthood of

Rev'd Nicholas James Williams

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Cardiff Cathedral

Archbishop George Stack

You will know that seven is a mystical number. All the way from the seven days of creation in the Book of Genesis, through the seven ages of man in Shakespeare, up to and including the celebration of the Seven Sacraments. The number seven speaks to us of completion, of wholeness, of holiness. My favourite book of all time is “The Seven Pillars of Wisdom” by T.E. Lawrence of Arabia. It is an autobiographical account of a British soldier in the middle of an Arab rising in the Middle East in 1916. E.M. Forster wrote of this book: *“Lawrence has hung an incomparable fabric of portraits, descriptions, philosophies, emotions, adventures, dreams and poetry”*.

We are now used to Pope Francis speaking and writing on the priesthood with an “incomparable fabric comprising of portraits, descriptions, philosophies, emotions, dreams and poetry”. It is as if the Holy Father sees the priest almost as a poet of the invisible. In spelling out the seven ‘pillars’ of priesthood the Pope writes:

- 1.The strength of a priest depends on his relationship with Christ.
- 2.He must be close to the people he serves.
- 3.The authority of the priest must be linked to service, especially to those who are poor and weak.

4. He must be a minister of mercy.
5. The priest is called to a simplicity of life.
6. He must be a model of integrity.
7. The priest should be a source of blessing for his people.

Those are the bare bones of who we are as priests, and what Nicholas Williams is called to be. The challenge for us priests is, of course, how we can be an effective sign of the transformation of human lives – including our own. The task of the ordained priesthood is to empower God’s people to become what they are through Baptism: a priestly people, worshipping God, not in so many individual ways, but in and through and with the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is made real in the Holy Communion which we both celebrate and receive during Mass. *“The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life”*. (Lumen Gentium 11). In this sacred action, we certainly receive Jesus. But equally, we are received by Him into his Mystical Body which is the Church. *“The Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist”*. (Henri de Lubac)

This *“divine and human interlocked reality”* which is the Church (Lumen Gentium 8) is equally true of the priesthood also. The priest is most identified with the Mass and all that

flows from it. This is surely the significance of the words of Jesus in today's gospel: "My body given for you. My blood poured out for you". The new covenant. The identity with sacrificial gift of Jesus. The abiding promise to be the source and means of reconciliation and healing. The forgiveness of sin which is expressed in another great Sacrament the priest is called to minister.

Pope Francis again. *"When Jesus tells people "Go and sin no more" he is not speaking in the legalistic tone of someone who believes he must determine the parameters of divine mercy. On the contrary, these words need to be spoken in a way that enable the sinner to look ahead and not behind. The right tone of the words 'sin no more' is heard in the tone of the priest willing to repeat them 70 times seven".* **(Pope Francis, Mass of Chrism - 29 March 2018)**

The ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness demands truth on the part both of the penitent and the priest. *"Truth" the Pope says "makes you name people with their real name, as the Lord names them, before categorizing them, or defining 'their situation'."*

He warns priests to avoid the "terrible' tendency to define people by their "adjectives" their faults and virtues, rather than their "noun" their name as a child of God". (ibid). If we

‘know the truth’ about ourselves and our people, we will be able to benefit from the prayer of St. Paul which we heard at this Mass: *“the word of his grace which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified”*. That building up comes, not just on a personal level, but by recognising and sharing the gifts and qualities, the inspiration and example of the dignity and potential which lies within each human person. *“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them”* because *“though many, we are one body in Christ”*.

The priest needs to be a spiritual talent scout, recognising gifts in people and drawing them out, building confidence, investing time in formation so that each one may flourish.

The rule of St. Benedict is a wonderful handbook for the spiritual life of the priest. In his admonition to the Abbot of the monastery, Benedict writes:

*“Let the Abbot so temper all things
that the strong may have something to strive after,
but the weak may not be crushed” (64)*

To plumb the depth of that short sentence, the priest needs to remind himself that no person is completely strong and no

one is utterly weak. There is weakness and strength in each one, needing to be discerned and supported, channelled and cherished. A lifetime's work for us all – priests and people alike.

All of these “portraits, descriptions, philosophy and theology” even the emotions and the poetry of our new priest are expressed in the symbolic actions of the ordination. These are powerful reminders that the priest is not alone. The laying on of hands: a symbol of the apostolic fellowship. The anointing of the new priest with the Oil of Chrism, the Oil of Christ. The clothing with priestly garments: being enfolded by Christ in these sacred duties. The gifts of the people to be offered to God and transformed by him: the Bread of Life and the Spiritual Drink.

Nicholas, let the final words come from the Rite itself:

*“May God who has begun the good work in you
Bring it to fulfilment.”*

Amen.