ORDINARY LIVES THAT REVEAL EXTRA-ORDINARY LOVE

Shortly we will enter “Ordinary” Time. I know that this name comes from the word “ordinal,” that is, “counting” Sundays and weeks. But a lot of people think of the word in its “ordinary” English usage, that is, as “commonly encountered; usual.” When I preach during Ordinary Time, I often remind people that God uses ordinary, usual elements like bread, wine, and the human person to reveal the extraordinary and unusual power of God’s merciful, sacrificial, and unconditional love. We affirm this reality every time we gather to celebrate Eucharist and are greeted with: “The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you” (emphasis mine). As Godfrey Diekmann, osb, used to remind his students, the Paschal Mystery is central to our liturgical life, but had there been no incarnation, there would have been no body to die and rise. Had God not taken on ordinary human flesh and blood, “taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance . . . becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2), we would not have known the extraordinary presence of a God whose love for us is so great that God was willing to die for us in Christ, transforming us and even death itself.

Recently, a number of texts about the ministerial priesthood have affirmed the distinction between the baptismal and ministerial priesthood, which certainly is an important distinction—one highlighted in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 4–5. However, some of these recent writings (but not, it should be noted, the General Instruction) have also promoted and celebrated a kind of heroic witness in the life of the ordained—a stance that can be difficult to sustain in day-to-day ministry. Rather than supporting our ministry, such an interpretation of ministerial priesthood can put us on a pedestal (from which one is vulnerable to a greater fall) or imply that the witness we give needs to be perfect. And while the Scriptures remind all God’s people, lay and ordained, that we are to “be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect,” (Matthew 5:48), one Scripture scholar I read years ago noted that the Greek text translated as “be perfect” ought, in fact, to be translated “be perfected as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Why? First, it is a more accurate translation, and, second, only God is perfect. Human beings can grow toward perfection, but no human being can be perfect.

Striving for something that is impossible to achieve as human beings, like perfection, sets us up to experience failure. And many spiritual and psychological writers have noted how perfectionism does great harm to those plagued with it. Jesus certainly came that we might have life and have it to the full. He taught us to love one another, and he taught us to forgive. To live in Jesus the Christ, whether as members of the baptismal priesthood or of the ministerial priesthood, means to grow in holiness, to learn from our mistakes, to grow in grace, and to find the extraordinary presence of God in the ordinary realities of everyday life—like Jesus did.

Jesus transformed bread and wine into his Body and Blood. He gave thanks, broke the bread, shared the cup, and told us to take and eat, take and drink, in memory of him. Jesus used water, a pitcher, a bowl, and the posture of a servant on hands and knees to wash feet, giving us an example of how we are to live—as servants who attend to the needs of others, proclaiming that we must do as he has done in memory of him. Jesus took saliva, dirt, and human touch as instruments of healing that opened the eyes of a blind man. He told another person to wash in the pool of Siloam. Jesus’ voice cried out in agony in the garden and on the cross. He welcomed the woman whose tears washed his feet and whose hair wiped them dry. Jesus’ own tears revealed the depth of his love for a friend like Lazarus. Jesus ate and drank with friend and family, tax collector and sinner. He used the ordinariness of human life and creation to reveal the extraordinary power of God’s love,
forgiveness, healing, surrender, and service.

To be heroic in imitation of Jesus, then, is simply to live the ordinary well, to love in word and in deed and in attitude. If we can embrace our ordinariness, we can be embraced by the God who will touch others with us and through us. Jesus is our model and our master, our teacher and our Lord, our brother and our savior, a servant and a sovereign. Jesus took on the ordinariness of life to proclaim that living the extraordinary presence of God is possible.

**God With a Human Face**

On February 26, 2009, speaking to parish priests of the Diocese of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI said that “we must learn to celebrate the Eucharist, learn to know Jesus Christ, the God with a human face, up close, really enter into contact with him, learn to listen to him and to allow him to enter into us.” Benedict explained that this kind of union with God through Christ “leads me to the other because the other receives the same Christ as I do. Hence, if the same Christ is in [my neighbor] and me, we also are no longer separate individual beings ... we are no longer two separate ‘I’s’, but we are united in the same ‘I’ of Christ.” How ordinary, and at the same time, how extraordinary!

I invite you to take to heart these words of the Holy Father from that same address: “We must all collaborate in celebrating the Eucharist ever more profoundly: not only as a rite but as an existential process that touches me profoundly, more than anything else, and changes me, transforms me and, by transforming me, sparks the transformation of the world that the Lord desires and of which He wishes to make me an instrument.”

You and I, bread and wine, the people in the pews—all ordinary elements—become the extraordinary instruments of encountering the Christ through whom God became one with us that we might become one with God and each other. Grace builds on nature. Love is made visible in ordinary lives. The communion of the Holy Spirit transforms us and our world. Our celebration of the Eucharist and our lives make a difference in ordinary ways. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you. You can count on it!

**Prayers for Priests**

Father, accept this offering from your whole family and from those you have chosen for the order of deacons, presbyters, or bishops. Protect the gifts you have given them, and let them yield a harvest worthy of you [through Christ our Lord. Amen.]

Special form of “Father, accept” in Eucharistic Prayer I for ordinations

Father, you have appointed your Son Jesus Christ eternal High Priest. Guide those he has chosen to be ministers of word and sacrament and help them to be faithful in fulfilling the ministry they have received. Grant this through our Lord . . .

*Opening Prayer, Masses for Various Needs and Occasions, 6. For Priests from the Roman Missal (Sacramentary)*

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**Year of the Priest**

On March 16, during an audience with the members of the Congregation for the Clergy, Pope Benedict XVI announced a “year of the priest” that will open with vespers at the Vatican on June 19, 2009, and will close with a world meeting of priests in St. Peter’s Square on June 19, 2010. The purpose of this special year is to support priests and to foster yearning “for spiritual perfection, upon which the effectiveness of their ministry principally depends,” to encourage vocations to the priesthood, and to examine the ecclesial, communal, hierarchical, and doctrinal dimensions that are “absolutely indispensable for any authentic [priestly] mission,” and which guarantee “spiritual effectiveness.”

Pope Benedict explained that the mission is ecclesial “because no one proclaims himself in the first person, but within and through his own humanity every priest must be well aware that he is bringing to the world another, God himself. God is the only treasure which ultimately people desire to find in a priest. The mission is ‘communal’ because it is carried out in a unity and communion that only secondly has important aspects of social visibility. Moreover, these derive essentially from that divine intimacy in which the priest is called to be expert, so that he may be able to lead...”

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A Membership Service
the souls entrusted to him humbly and trustingly to the same encounter with the Lord. Lastly, the ‘hierarchical’ and ‘doctrinal’ dimensions suggest reaffirming the importance of the ecclesiastical discipline (the term has a connection with ‘disciple’) and doctrinal training and not only theological, initial, and continuing formation.”

The Pope also emphasized the importance of priestly formation which must maintain “communion with uninterrupted ecclesial Tradition, without breaks or temptations of irregularity. In this sense, it is important to encourage in priests, especially in the young generations, a correct reception of the texts of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, interpreted in the light of the Church’s entire fund of doctrine. It seems urgent to recover that awareness that has always been at the heart of the Church’s mission, which impels priests to be present, identifiable, and recognizable for their judgment of faith, for their personal virtues as well as for their vesture, in the contexts of culture and of charity.”

During this year Benedict XVI will proclaim St. Jean Marie Vianney the patron saint of all the priests of the world (he is currently the patron saint of parish priests). This year marks the 150th anniversary of Vianney’s death. A “Directory for Confessors and Spiritual Directors” will be published, as will a collection of texts by the Holy Father on essential aspects of the life and mission of priests in our time.

In response to the announcement of the upcoming Year of the Priest, an editorial in America magazine (May 4, 2009) stated that “as the church prepares to observe the Year of the Priest, which begins on June 19, open discussion about how to sustain the Church as a Eucharistic community of faith and fortify the pastoral life of Catholic congregations has become imperative. For making do within the limits set by present demographic trends presents a double threat to Catholic life: Catholic communities will become only infrequent Eucharistic communities, or Eucharistic communities will be severed from the pastoral care and public witness of priests.”

The editorial noted that only seventy percent of current diocesan priests are available for parish ministry. The rest, according to Mary Gautier of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, are “sick, retired, or absent for a variety of reasons.”

The editorial referred to the canonical description of priestly ministry when it observed that the “de facto remedy already applied in many places—making the priest a circuit rider moving from parish to parish to dispense the sacraments—risks narrowing the ministry of the priest and impoverishing the Christian life of the communities he serves. A narrowly sacramental definition of priesthood satisfies the requirements of only one of the three canons that define the pastoral responsibilities of the priest, Canon 530. As a consequence the sacramental office is as a practical matter severed from its integral connection with comprehensive pastoral care. Canons 528 and 529 provide a broader understanding of the priestly ministry. The first sees the priest as one who instructs, catechizes, fosters works of justice, shows special care for the education of children, and brings the Gospel to those who have ceased to practice the faith. The second requires that he should come to know the faithful entrusted to his care; visit families; share their concerns, worries, and griefs; help the sick; and seek out the poor, the afflicted, and the lonely. Diminishing numbers make it difficult to carry out this holistic vision of the priest’s pastoral ministry.”

“We hope,” the editorial concluded, “that the upcoming Year of the Priest will lead to a broader discussion of the priesthood in the contemporary world and, in particular, will open examination of the various ways the shortage of priests can be addressed honestly and with imagination.”

Clergy as Role Models?

A national telephone survey of 750 teens, taken last fall by Opinion Research Corporation for the organization Junior Achievement and the auditing and consulting firm Deloitte and reported in February, showed that, apart from their parents, these teens have few adult role models. Only three percent of those surveyed consider members of the clergy (pastor, priest, rabbi, or imam) to be role models. While most of the teens (more than fifty percent) identified their parents as models, they identified very few other people as offering models for living adult lives. Among the groups and individuals identified were friends (thirteen percent), teachers or coaches (six percent), and a brother or sister (three percent). In fact, one in ten of those surveyed (eleven percent) said that they have no adult role models.

Mirroring America

The men ordained to the priesthood in 2009 in the United States mirror the United States today, according to a report from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. On April 20, the USCCB Office of Media Relations released a statement about this year’s ordinands. They include many second-career men who were computer experts, attorneys, financiers, police officers, teachers, and farmers. Some candidates were born outside the United States, among them refugees Justin Minh Nguyen (Vietnam) and immigrants Quy Vo (Philippines), Pablo Migone (Peru), Pawell Sass (Poland), and Budi Wardhana (Indonesia). Re-careering candidates include Matt Lee (Cincinnati), who was a computer programmer.
for the U.S. Air Force; David Cupps (Richmond), information technology for Capital One; and lawyers Brian O’Donnell (Burlington), Matthew Larson (Spokane), and Charles Cortinovis (Washington, DC). Sean Dowling (Burlington) was a professional baseball umpire. Carl Melchior (St. Petersburg) was an equipment manager for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. John Assalone (Las Vegas) was executive director of entertainment for the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino.

Even though many of this year’s ordinands had careers before they entered the seminary, the median age of this year’s “class” is thirty-three, and the average age is thirty-six—younger than in recent years. Eleven percent of those ordained this year are of Asian descent, twelve percent are Hispanic/Latino, three percent are African American, six percent are from Vietnam, two percent are from the Philippines, and the rest are of European heritage.

In one notable difference from other U.S. Catholics, this year’s ordination class was more likely than other adult Catholics to have attended Catholic elementary school, high school, and college.

**Upcoming Deadline:** Clergy-Musician Duo Discount ($250 each) for the 2009 Convention: June 5