

**“Unprecedented and Unrepeatable: the Personal Vocation of the Priest
Sent into the World, Where He Does Not Belong”
Homily for Mass of Priestly Ordinations
June 19, 2021, St. Mary’s Cathedral
Readings: Jer 1:4-9; Rom 12:4-8; Jn 17:6.14-19**

Introduction

Unprecedented is a word we’ve heard uttered quite often over this last year-and-a-quarter. The pandemic from which we are now, thanks be to God, beginning to emerge is something unseen in anyone’s lifetime. We can think back to this celebration of priestly ordinations last year, when we literally did not know until the time of the ordination itself if Fr. Ben and Fr. Ian would be able to be ordained indoors. And, as it turned out, we made it just barely in time, as San Mateo County closed down all indoor gatherings at midnight following the ordination! We rejoice to be able to resume gathering indoors for such happy occasions as this.

Person and Vocation

Unprecedented, though, is something quite familiar in our human experience. In our first reading we heard about the call of the prophet Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.”

“Before I formed you in the womb”: every human life, from the very beginning, is unique, unprecedented and unrepeatable. But this means something

more when we look at the call of Jeremiah: because each person is unique and unprecedented, so is each vocation. Yes, all human beings have the same common human vocation: happiness with God. And all Christians have the common Christian vocation of making Jesus Christ known in the world.

However, God also gives each one a personal vocation, by which that person is to serve God in the concrete circumstances of the person's life, and so give glory to God and grow in holiness, thus attaining the vocation of happiness with God. As the experience of Jeremiah makes clear, God plants the seed of that vocation in the heart of each one from the very first moment of their existence. It is a matter of discovering it and relying on the grace of God to live it out faithfully.

And what does God tell Jeremiah about his call? Again: "...before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you." Dedicate, appoint: this designates being set aside for a sacred purpose. It is what our Lord tells his apostles in the Gospel reading we just heard proclaimed: "Consecrate them in the truth. ... I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth." This is the language of ordination: a commissioning to go forth after an intense, intimate experience with the divine.

Set Apart

Jeremiah had his deep encounter with God, to Whom he could not but respond despite his own reservations. And the apostles are privy to an intimate revelation:

“Holy Father, I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world.”

The concept of “name” in the Bible, of course, means much more than the proper noun which identifies an individual. It is indicative of the person’s character, of the person’s calling and mission in life, the person’s very purpose for coming into the world. But here it is God Himself Who reveals His name to his closest followers through his Only-Begotten Son. This is an altogether new revelation. Others knew about God in the ancient world; even pagans knew something of God, and certainly all the more so the Jews, to whom God revealed His name through Moses on Mt. Sinai. But there is something more here. As St. Augustine explains: “For it was not unknown to the gentiles that He is called God. In the fact that He made the world, God was known to all people. In that He was not to be worshiped together with false gods, God was known in Judea. But in that He is the Father of Christ, He is now manifested through Christ.”

This is the newness of Christ’s revelation: that God is his Father, Whom he has made Father of all those who believe in him and follow in his way. The apostles are the first to whom he reveals this truth; the first, because they are to go out into a dark and unbelieving world to spread the light of this Good News. He is emphatic about it, for he states this point twice just within three verses: “They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.” He sends them to where they do not belong, just as his Father did with him: “As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world.” He sends them into the world with his word – that is, the truth he reveals and

in which the Father consecrates them – and the result? “I gave them your word, and the world hated them.” In other words, the apostles repeat the pattern of their Lord in their own lives.

It seems like the times that we are living in now are also unprecedented for the Church: people being shut out of their churches, and now we face the challenge of bringing them back; a growing number of Catholics who no longer believe the core Catholic teaching of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and what it means to receive him in Holy Communion; more and more Catholics disaffiliating, and losing faith altogether. We see not only apathy, but even increasing hostility toward religion in the practice of religious faith in the public square. But maybe that is not so unprecedented. Yes, the world hated our Lord – hates our Lord – and so will it hate all those who look like him.

Formed

This is the world for which our brothers Nick and Cameron are being ordained! But this is the vocation to which God called them from even before He formed them in the womb. “Formed them”: the story of Jeremiah’s call speaks of God “forming” him in the womb. This word refers to the work of a potter, who molds the vessel into exactly what he intends it to become. Cameron and Nick have likewise been formed for their vocation. They have gone through many years of formation in the seminary

to prepare them for this lifetime of being sent into where they do not belong, to transform it into a place where Christ may find a home.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the faculties of St. Patrick's Seminary here in our Archdiocese and the North American College in Rome for the fine work they do to prepare priests for the work of evangelization in the challenging world in which we find ourselves. Most of all, though, God begins the process of forming that vessel in the home. I most especially, then, wish to thank the parents of Cameron and Nick for being God's hands in preparing your sons for this extraordinary call.

To persevere in one's vocation requires a million deaths throughout one's life, some big but very many small. A priest cannot achieve this without that deep, intense and intimate life with God. Only with prayer and ascetical discipline will he have the spiritual stamina to go forth into a world where he does not belong, that even hates him. But in doing so, he disposes himself to God working out His lifetime project with him.

It is by means of dying those million deaths – a principle that applies to everyone in every vocation – dying to sin and to our selfishness, that we abandon ourselves into God's hands. Then He will bring to perfection His potter's craft of forming us into the person He created us to be. Thus we will know the happiness that He wants us to have with Him now, and forever in heaven.

Conclusion

As some of you may know, the Church's Rite of Ordination includes a homily that the bishop may use. You likely noticed that I didn't do that! But that homily concludes with the bishop addressing those to be ordained on very point of the priest's ordination meaning being set apart in order to go forth and lead people to God. So I can do no better than conclude my own homily with those words:

Remember, when you gather others into the people of God through Baptism, and when you forgive sins in the name of Christ and the Church in the sacrament of Penance; when you comfort the sick with holy oil and celebrate the sacred rites, when you offer prayers of praise and thanks to God throughout the hours of the day, not only for the people of God but for the world – remember then that you are taken from among men and appointed on their behalf for those things that pertain to God.

... exercising for your part the office of Christ, Head and Shepherd, while united with the Bishop and subject to him, strive to bring the faithful together into one family so that *you may lead them to God the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit*. Keep always before your eyes the example of the Good Shepherd who came not to be served but to serve, and who came to seek out and save what was lost.