

Homily for the Admission to Candidacy

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**Kenrick-Glennon Seminary
Saint Louis, Missouri**

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Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated religious, seminarians, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: in the main chapel at Mundelein Seminary in the Archdiocese of Chicago, where I was ordained to the diaconate and to the priesthood, the entrance into the sanctuary contains four steps with four different inscriptions on each step. These inscriptions are the Latin words for the four minor orders that were historically conferred upon men as they progressed in their seminary formation on the way to priesthood. In the sanctuary itself, there are three more steps leading up to where the high altar once stood with inscriptions for the three major orders of subdeacon, deacon, and finally, priest.

This layout offers a very fitting image of the journey that a man takes on his way to the destination to which he has been called. There is a sense of ascending to a higher level with each new step, an ascending which, if followed through to its completion, will result in the man having the

supreme privilege of celebrating the most sublime action, that of celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. For it is in that sacred action that humanity is united to God through our participation in the saving sacrifice of His Son on the Cross.

We can also say that the man who makes this journey toward the altar also grows in dignity. In our egalitarian society, we tend to shy away from speaking of any person or group of persons as having a greater dignity than another. To do so, specifically in the case of those preparing for, or already in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, is seen by many as a form of clericalism by which one claims a place of higher importance and exhibits an attitude of entitlement and superiority.

As a result of this, speaking of those in holy orders as having a unique and special dignity is often avoided. In its place, many prefer to emphasize the dignity that all the baptized share as sons and daughters of God. This, of course, is a good thing, because it encourages all of the faithful to see that they have a privileged place in the Mystical Body of Christ, one that is to be held in very high esteem.

At the same time, we should not be too quick to see the unique dignity of those in Holy Orders as something from the past and no longer

relevant in our modern understanding of the Church. Rather, given this understanding, we have the opportunity to clarify what is meant by this dignity and see how it is indeed not opposed to the common dignity of the baptized, but rather, at its service.

First of all, it is important to recognize that, regardless of our particular vocation, our dignity derives not so much from ourselves, but from the one whom we have received, namely, Jesus Christ. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council state it clearly in this way:

Therefore, the chosen People of God is one: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (cf. Eph. 4:5); sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity. There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because “there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all ‘one’ in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28; cf. Col. 3.11).¹

The same is true when we consider the unique dignity that belongs to those called to Holy Orders. Their dignity derives not from who they are,

but from Christ who has called them to participate in a special way in the continuation of His saving work among men. Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, priests are “signed with a special character and are conformed to Christ the Priest in such a way that they can act in the person of Christ the Head.”² This conformity to Christ brings with it a special relationship by which men are more totally immersed in the life of Christ, so that they can make the words of St. Paul their own: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Or, to use a term so often identified with the priesthood, those chosen by the Lord for this vocation are to be an *alter Christus*, another Christ.

Therefore, you who are called to ascend to this position of sacerdotal dignity must make it your constant desire to let your lives be more and more of an imitation of Him with whom you will be united in this great sacrament. This demands that even as you ascend in one sense, you must likewise descend by embracing the path that He took, that of humility, obedience, sacrifice, and service.

For those of you who are to be admitted as Candidates for Holy Orders this evening, even if you have already been in seminary formation for a few years, you are still very much at the beginning of that ascending

which will, God-willing, one day conclude at the altar as a priest. For now, you are declaring, with the Church's witness and consent, that you intend take the next step forward.

Seeing that the final destination of the priesthood is still a way off should not leave you with a lack of urgency, however. The time that lies ahead of you is a very privileged time in which you are urged to grow in the virtues necessary to be a good priest. One such virtue that will be absolutely essential is the virtue of humility, the fostering of which will fix your gaze on Christ and the members of His Mystical Body to whom you will be called to minister. This will ensure that you will truly be formed to be the servant after the likeness of Him who "did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

When seen from this perspective, we better understand the true meaning of the dignity of the priesthood as a profound expression of humble self-sacrifice at the service of others. When your attention is totally fixed on Christ and the people He has called you to serve, you will not have the time or interest to be concerned with grasping for the honors and privileges that are sometimes sought by those who have been chosen by God to be His ministers. St. Paul's words from the Second Reading

summarize this well: “If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it!” (1 Cor. 9:16). Indeed, how sad it will be if you live your vocation without humbly giving yourself completely to the service of the Gospel in word and deed. Yet, what profound joy, peace, and fulfillment will come from the sincere gift of yourself for others.³

It should go without saying, but it is worth reminding you of the words of Jesus, who said that “much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more” (Luke 12:48). The Lord is, of course, very generous in giving you every grace necessary to be good stewards so that the demands of this way of life do not become overwhelming.

Once again, humility is required, like that of Jeremiah in our first reading, who recognized his human limitations in the face of so great a task as being a messenger to the people of God. It was only by God’s initiative and blessing that he was able to fulfill his role. So too with the disciples in the Gospel, for their special role of being His closest collaborators in ministry came not from their ability, but by virtue of the fact that the Lord chose them, telling them, “Come after me, and *I* will make you fishers of

men (Mark 1:17).

You, too, must humbly recognize that your effectiveness is not based on your own competency and ability, but upon that fact that He has chosen you that He will grant you every necessary grace, for as He reminds you: “without me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). At the same time, you can take great confidence repeating the words of St. Paul, who said: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13 RSV).

It is through an intense experience of union with Christ through prayer that this virtue of humility will take root in your souls and grow. You must, therefore, make an even greater commitment to taking on the mind and heart of Christ by taking very seriously the development and growth of your spiritual life.

In a culture so obsessed with efficiency and getting things done, it can be easy to fall into the trap of justifying the substitution of your time of prayer for the various apostolic works and other activities that make such demands on our time. Do not fall victim to that temptation, for if you do, you would quickly become a mere functionary whose spiritual vehicle will always be running on fumes. If you operate for too long in this way, you risk succumbing to a burn out which will render you incapable of

continuing the ministry to which you have been called.

I would therefore strongly urge you who are asking to be admitted as Candidates, and indeed for all here present in formation, to invest yourselves totally in whatever amount of formation lies ahead for you, but especially in your spiritual formation. Your taking advantage of the many opportunities for spiritual formation now in the seminary will set you on a lifelong path of always staying close to Christ, so that your life and your ministry will be a bright reflection of Him, inviting people to come to you, so that you can lead them to the heights of holiness in this life and to the reward of eternal happiness in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, §32.

² *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, §2.

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, §24.