

**SAINT AMBROSE BARLOW CATHOLIC CHURCH
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**IN PREPARATION FOR THE ORDINATION OF
DEACON PAUL SMITH TO THE PRIESTHOOD
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AN ILLUSTRATED TALK ON THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS

BY PHILIP ROGERSON

"The ceremony of the ordination of a priest is a rich tapestry. It is an interweaving of words, gestures, symbols and images. Each has its own particular significance; each highlights an aspect of the gift of Holy Orders and of the life and ministry of the priest. Together they give eloquent testimony to the underlying fact and truth of this moment: here God is at work."

Archbishop Vincent Nichols

Tonight we're taking a closer look at the Sacrament of Holy Orders, particularly the ordination of priests, so that when Paul Smith is ordained here on 5th July, we can appreciate a little better the astonishing work that God is doing right in front of us when He creates a new priest for us, and rather than being simply spectators, we will be able, as baptised Christians, to take our full and proper part in the ceremony.

First, a question: How long does it take to walk from Mount Sinai in Egypt to the borders of Galilee, the journey the Jewish People undertook when they escaped from slavery in Egypt? How long do you think it would take?

Eleven days.

Yet Moses and the people with him took 40 years. FORTY YEARS! Why?

Because the people just simply refused to listen to what God asked them to do. OK, when they were encamped and received instructions direct from God to Moses, sure, they agreed to do as they were told. BUT... as soon as they got on the move, things went wrong because they ignored what God had told them. They knew better. As a result they had 40 years of misery!

The fact is that what our Jewish ancestors needed was the right people to provide leadership that was in accordance with what God wants of them (even Moses didn't do precisely as he was instructed by God). Today our Church leaders need to remain true to God's word and the follow faithfully the example given us in the life of Jesus Christ. For us, those special leaders, the people who guide us through thick and thin in our daily lives, who give advice and example of how to follow God's way, and lead our worship, those special people are our priests. They are men who give their lives to God through an enduring act of love and sacrifice that will persist for the rest of their lives. And as ordinary, faithful Christians, we need to understand that the priesthood is a gift from God to His Church, and that we should be listening to our leaders and trying to fashion what we do on what they teach us. Otherwise, like the Israelites in the desert, we are likely to find that we get badly lost and confused.

So today I'm going to talk about the way the Church identifies, trains, supports and then endorses its leaders - I'm talking about a process that culminates in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

And in all this talk of leadership, I'm also going to be looking at us, the Christians who are led by our priests. That's us. We too have a role to play in the Church - we're not supposed to be passive, and our involvement both in Church and out in the wider world is just as essential as our appointed leaders. I hope this talk will emphasise the need for that special bond of mutual respect that must exist between priests and people if the Church is going to be effective in achieving its mission in the world.

I was recently asked a very good question, and it was this: 'What is the difference between the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations?' One difference is that as Catholics we emphatically REJECT the idea that Holy Mother Church is just some other ordinary organisation that can be run on the latest management theories.

The work of Pope Pius XII in 1943 and then Vatican II twenty years later have certainly enriched our ideas about how we ourselves picture The Church, so instead of the emphasis being on the idea of the Church being a hierarchical organisation, with the clergy sitting on top of everyone else, today there is far more emphasis on the Church being the "Mystical Body of Christ", with everyone having an their own role to play in their own particular way of life.

"Just as each of our bodies has several parts and each part has a separate function, so all of us, in union with Christ, form one body, and as parts of it we belong to each other. Our gifts differ according to the graces given us."

Romans 12:5

And what holds us together as a united Catholic Church, what inspires us, is that rich source of God's grace, our sacraments. So the answer to the question is this:

The Catholic Church is first and foremost a SACRAMENTAL CHURCH.

- It was established by the authority of God.
- It has been blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- It is the living 'Body of Christ', operating in this world to bring EVERYONE to God.

WE, all of us, clergy and people, are 'The Body of Christ', with each of us having different roles and responsibilities, but all together making a living Church.

It is because of this unique quality of being a living, sacramental Church that the Church does not follow man-made rules. It follows God's rules. And to a lot of us 21st Century Western Europeans, that is difficult to accept.

So how is the Church different? It's different because it is under the authority and guidance of God. And God's ways are not humankind's ways. Examples?

The Church:

- Focuses on what God wants, not what *we* want.
- Its leaders come from amongst its members; *it's not a democracy*.
- It does not necessarily get the leaders everyone expects.

Some people think that's outrageous. Where do we get such ideas from, that go so much against popular thinking? And why?

Some of the answers lie in our roots, to be discovered in the Bible. So let's have a look at the priesthood in the Bible.

What did priesthood mean under the Old Covenant? Knowing this we can appreciate better how the coming of Jesus as the Messiah brings to completion the full idea of priesthood.

The Book of Numbers in the OT is a good place to start. It's a chronological history of the people of Israel as they spent that horrendous 40 years completing what could have been an 11-day journey.

What's this got to do with Paul Smith being ordained? Well, some of the laws in the Book of Numbers are tremendously relevant for us in respect of priestly ordination. In Numbers, God gives Moses clear laws designed to prevent the people losing their reverence for God. So the 40 years in the wilderness is an example of what happens when we disobey God, when we lose reverence for God.

What the Book of Numbers tells us is that we must approach God with awe and dignity. And it also reminds us that we should worship God on what HE wants, not on our individual preferences. You sometimes hear Christians saying that we need to get away from the "boring" liturgy. Numbers teaches us two things about this attitude: Firstly the liturgy will obviously be 'boring' if you're not interested - we need awe and dignity, and part of that is to understand that during sacramental worship, God is at work, in worship that HE finds pleasing, not necessarily what WE find entertaining.

Secondly, Numbers demonstrates that democracy is a human form of government - a pretty good method by which us frail humans try to avoid authoritarianism and tyranny. But democracy, with all its essential compromises and deals, is not the way God operates.

What do I mean? Here's an example. Only three months after escaping from slavery in Egypt Moses sent 12 soldiers to spy out the Promised Land (Numbers 13: 1-16)? 40 days later they returned with reports that it was a lovely place; they brought back huge bunches of grapes to show how fertile it was. But... ten of the spies said they couldn't possibly win any battles against the inhabitants, so they argued that everyone should return to slavery in Egypt! Only 2 of the spies were more hopeful - they said it would be a tough place to conquer, but with God on their side, they could do it. The majority won - and off went Israel into the wilderness for the next $39\frac{3}{4}$ years!

There's a significant message from God to the Church in this story. Sometimes we can begin to think democracy will provide the right answers to everything. Even moral issues. So we have seen MPs voting to change certain fundamental truths, for example about the sanctity of life. But no amount of human votes will change the fundamental truths that God has established for us. Such defiance of God's plan for us is much more likely to result in some pretty complicated and increasingly difficult social problems - the result of God's natural order being disrupted by human meddling. Of course we can use our brains and try and improve things in the world - indeed, that is what Jesus asks us to do - but there are some things that are the way they are because that is what God intended for us. That's quite difficult to accept sometimes, because our human thinking is not God's way of thinking.

Back to the two guys who dared to put their trust in God when they spied out the land for Moses. What happened to them then?

Their names were Joshua and Caleb. Guess what!

They were the only two out of an entire generation of more than 2 million people who survived the 40 years and entered the Promised Land!

This point says an essential point about people who might think they should be priests: a person does not get to be a priest by being the most popular member of the congregation. Not everyone is destined to be a priest. NO-ONE is entitled to receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

No-one takes this honour on himself, but each one is called by God, as Aaron was. Nor did Christ give himself the glory of becoming high priest, but he had it from the one who said to him, "You are my son, today I have become your father."

Hebrews
5:5

Priesthood is a gift from God, requiring years of preparation, and discernment of the Holy Spirit to ensure the candidate is God's candidate for ordination. So going to the seminary is not simply a matter of passing the right exams, ticking the right boxes and keeping your head down. Poor old Joshua and Caleb had to spend 40 years in preparation for what God wanted of them. They weren't popular, neither were they entitled to anything. Phew!!

So, let's move on to take a look at the office and function of Priests, as they are found in the OT. Remember though that the Hebrew Priesthood in the OT ended when the Temple was destroyed in 70AD. The Jewish people no longer made sacrifices, and the Jewish spiritual leaders we have today, called Rabbis, emerged as the Levitical Priesthood faded. So here, I'm talking about the original ancient priesthood. I think you will see aspects of it reflected in our own Catholic priests today....

To start, Old Testament priests were.....

➤ Chosen from God's people to represent them before God

Saint Peter says that when we are baptised as Christians we become "one people, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart" (1 Peter 2:9). As Christians we're *all* part of a priesthood - we are all in what is called the "Order of the Faithful" - all the baptised people, who share a common, priestly relationship with Jesus.

Yet within that common priesthood is a separate "ministerial priesthood" - also know as "The Holy Order" - a separate priestly function of that offers sacrifice , and that exists within the Order of the Faithful, and serves to sanctify us all.

The three Holy Orders we have today are bishops, deacons and priests - and their calling is to take on a leadership role within the Church, to serve God's people:

"The ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood."

Catechism of the Catholic Church n.1547

Where did these three separate ordained ministries come from?

They emerged very rapidly within the new Church, and were known as the 'clergy', (Greek *kleroi* = portion), a link to the OT concept of ministers being 'God's portion', chosen from amongst the Church to serve in a particular way:

"to stand in the presence of Yahweh, to do him service and in His name to pronounce blessings... with no share in the inheritance of his brothers."

Deuteronomy 10:9; 18:1-2

First there were bishops, then deacons, then our priesthood. Over the centuries the deacons virtually disappeared as a distinct ministry, and after the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation, 300 years ago, the Church introduced seminaries for the education and formation of the clergy. So to all intents and purposes deacons disappeared from public view. It was only relatively recently, in August 1972, when Pope Paul VI reformed the structure of the clergy, and with the re-instatement of the public ministry of permanent deacons that you can again see ordained deacons carrying out their duties both in church and out in the community.

Paul Smith has already been ordained a deacon, and will remain a deacon, because all priests share in the ministry of the Diaconate. [Incidentally, watch out for Deacon Andy McCann at Paul's ordination. Andy will be 'deaconing' at the ordination, and the very next day will himself be ordained priest at Saint Augustine's in Solihull. Isn't that nice!]

So - KEY POINT - Christians are not "promoted" to join the clergy; deacons are not "promoted" to priest; neither are priests or deacons "promoted" to bishop. This is a human way of thinking. It is not the way God works.

God willing I'll explain the history and ministry of the restored, permanent diaconate next year, just before I'm ordained. Paul is about to be ordained a priest, with a different, but complementary ministry to his existing ministry of deacon.

Another function of the OT priest was.....

OFFICE AND FUNCTIONS OF PRIESTS IN THE OT

- To represent God before His people

You sometimes hear in our prayers references to Jesus as "a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek". Melchizedek was shrouded in mystery, appearing in *Genesis 14:17*, in *Psalm 110 v4* and in *Hebrews 7*, a priest who brought blessings upon Abraham. And Abraham honoured him by paying him tithes. It is said that Melchizedek's ministry foreshadowed that of the priesthood of Jesus:

Melchizedek was both a priest and a king (which was an odd combination in the Old Testament) but the same titles were later given to Jesus. And he was king of Salem - later to become Jerusalem (meaning City of Peace). So Melchizedek's name was "King of Peace", like Jesus. And finally, Melchizedek's sacrifice was extraordinary in that it did not involve animals. Instead he offered bread and wine, just as Jesus did at the Last Supper. Unusually for an ancient king, nothing at all is known about Melchizedek's origins or what subsequently happened to him - and this highlights the fact that his priesthood was not based on what tribe he came from or what rights he had inherited. Like Jesus' priesthood, it could not be challenged and it has no end.

Another priest was Aaron, Moses' brother, who was anointed by Moses as the first High Priest. Aaron is a sign of Jesus' priestly work of being an intermediary for us with God - the OT priesthood was a fore-shadowing of the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ and of His supreme High Priesthood.

So how will Paul represent God before His people? THE main way he will do this is through RE-PRESENTING (offering) the sacrifice of the supreme High Priesthood of Jesus present in the Mass.

And this, indeed, is another function of ancient priests - being entrusted with offering sacrifices.

The OT lists many different ceremonies all described in English as 'sacrifices'. The ancient priests took material objects (principally food) and used them as a means of mediating the holiness of God to God's people so that they too could become holy. So sacrifices were used to SANCTIFY the faithful.

Does that sound familiar?..... the Sacraments of the Church?

It is from the Letter to the Hebrews (which we think was written between 55-70AD) that we learn how the early Church immediately recognised that the sacrifices of the Old Covenant were a foreshadowing of the sacrifice Jesus made for our sin when he was crucified [I spoke about this in detail during Easter when I talked about the Day of Atonement]

The OT animal sacrifices are reflected in the NT, when Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God:

"Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." -

John the Baptist quoted in John
1:29;

"Christ our Passover has been sacrificed -

1 Corinthians 5:7b

"Then I saw a Lamb that seemed to be sacrificed."

Revelation 5:6

"Let us be glad and joyful and give praise to God, because this is the time for the marriage of the Lamb"

Revelation 19:7b

So the Eucharist was very clearly understood by the earliest Christians as fulfilling and replacing the OT sacrifices. It was the person who was recognised as the community's leader who accepted as the presider at the Eucharist.

Why? Because in the early Church there was no separation of worship and daily life, so it followed that the leader in the community also led the worship: ordination was the way in which the community acknowledged the leadership role and conferred it upon an individual. Indeed, by the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD the Church decided that you couldn't be ordained unless you had a community to serve. This holds true today.

Ordination was not something a person had for themselves - they held office for the community. As the Church grew, bishops were unable to preside at enough celebrations of the Mass, and increasingly priests took on this role on behalf of the bishop. [Incidentally, this is why, when a bishop visits a parish, he effectively re-possesses the parish, because the parish priest is actually only looking after it for him whilst the bishop is away.]

And so it is that the communal celebration of the Mass within a community of Christians remains today THE central focus of a priest's ministry, confirmed by Pope John Paul II in one of his last encyclicals:

"The Eucharist is the principal and central *raison d'être* of the sacrament of priesthood, which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist... the true centre of their lives and ministry."

Ecclesia de Eucharistia 31 (2003)

So as a priest, the Mass will be the focus for Paul's spirituality and sanctification. Everything else will be secondary. As with OT priests, he will be offering the sacrifice, but of the NEW Covenant, the new relationship with God opened up to us through the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ.

During the Mass, Paul will be acting 'in persona Christi' (meaning he will act 'in the person of Christ'):

- when he reads the Gospel and preaches a homily he will be making Christ present at the Mass;
- and he will make Christ present through offering up as a sacrifice to God the lives of the faithful and the gifts of bread and wine, invoking the Holy Spirit to change these elements into the Real Presence of Christ, taking them back to the people to make them 'one body, one spirit in Christ'.

Let's take a little diversion at this point to remind ourselves what sacraments are. As well as being 'outward signs of an inner grace', they are also "nourishment for Christian living". They are gifts presented to us through the Church to help us to lead a Christian life. Vatican II said, "the purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to worship God." And who is it who undertakes the sacramental actions that sanctify the people? Bishops, priests and deacons - the Christian successors to the Jewish priesthood!

When Paul is ordained as a priest his life will be transformed, because he will be able to give to people the sanctifying sacraments of the Church. Through his ordination he will be a changed man: he will have a permanent, indelible 'sacramental character' marked upon him - through God's grace he will ALWAYS remain a priest, who will himself then be able to release sanctifying grace into people's lives.

And what is grace? Grace can be described as 'having contact with God and deepening our relationship'. Sacraments, properly understood, will change what we do and the way we do it. Sacraments prepare us to carry out the Church's Mission in our daily lives. They deepen our relationship with God. They bring us grace. This is the priestly life that awaits Paul.

And it links back to what I was saying about the Book of Numbers: sacraments have a special sacramental ritual, a way of worshipping God and making sacrifices to God that was inherited from the sacramental rituals offered by the Jewish priests, rituals that we know through Moses that are PLEASING TO GOD.

And our sacraments reflect human activity, human actions that become ways of encountering, of entering in to a better relationship with God. We wash our bodies, we eat and drink, we touch people as signs of encouragement and understanding, we lay hand on each other to celebrate and confer power.

All our Christian sacraments rely on the word of God: the prayers and words used are taken from the Bible. And being human is also reflected in the fact that the actions we use in the sacraments are ALWAYS communal. ALWAYS.

And this very point leads me into looking more closely at the liturgy of the Sacrament of Holy Orders - let's take a closer look at what is going to happen at Paul ordination to the priesthood. It will be a COMMUNAL celebration. Remember - the Christian community was central to the early Christian priesthood, and it remains so today: the Archbishop will be there, loads of priests, deacons. BUT, I repeat, we too need to be there, to take our own full part. We will be praying too. We will be praying to the saints, to the Holy Spirit. As the "Order of the Faithful" we will be affirming Paul in his ordination.

As with all sacraments, we should celebrate them as a Christian community, in worshipping God, praying and offering ourselves as a sacrifice to God. And our particular role as members of the "Order of the Faithful" at Paul's ordination is vital: our gathering at the ordination as a Christian community is to recognise and affirm that Paul's call to be a priest is a gift from God.

So what is the link between what we do today and the Early Church? And how does it reflect our ancestry in the Jewish faith? The Catholic Church teaching about ordination to the priesthood is very clear: Jesus very carefully chose His 12 Apostles, chose them to serve His Church in a special way, to serve in a way that was different to the majority of his disciples:

"Now it was about this time that he went out into the hills to pray; and he spent the whole night in prayer to God. When day came he summoned his disciples and he picked out twelve of them; he called them apostles."

Luke 6: 12, 13

Note that. When it comes to big decisions He prays: Jesus prays before making the decision on who to designate, to ordain as his Apostles. (Incidentally, a good example to us all - pray before making big decisions.)

And what was the first thing Jesus did when he rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples? This is what He said:

'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.' After saying this he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.'

John 20: 21b-23

And we know that when vacancies arose amongst the Apostles others were chosen to continue the mission (Acts 1:15-26); and the numbers grew as the Church expanded (Acts 13:1-3). Firstly deacons were ordained to assist the Apostles with their charitable ministry, then, as the Church grew, priests ("elders") were ordained to assist the Apostles with their sanctifying ministry.

So we have an historic precedent for the way we go about selecting our leaders: in the same way that Jesus selected his disciples, the Church prays for candidates for Holy Orders; it prays when selecting them; then it prepares them thoroughly for their future ministry. Only then, only then, are they ordained when the bishop prays over them and invokes the Holy Spirit.

Note that - the Sacrament of Holy Orders is conferred by the bishop. Our Tradition is that the successors to the apostles are the bishops, and the Church very carefully preserves this Apostolic Succession.

So why it is that only a true successor to the apostles can ordain Catholic priests? [After all, some Christian denominations ordain their pastors and leaders within their own congregations; others may interview candidates and appoint them to their parishes].

Our Tradition arose from problems with unauthorised evangelists who began to spread all sorts of false teachings ('heresies') about the Faith. There's an example of it in Acts 8:9-24, when Simon Magus, who was a magician tried to buy from Peter and John the power of transmitting the Holy Spirit. He was rapidly slapped down by the Apostles..... but the issue of dodgy, bogus teaching came to a head about 100 years after the resurrection; there was a wave of heresies against the Church's teachings which are called 'Gnosticism'.

They basically said that Jesus had taught his disciples certain facts which the Church's leaders were keeping secret. They said that if you joined their sect they would reveal these secrets! What is shocking is that it was very attractive and people got taken in by it. [It is a problem that is still around today - think about the New Age Movement, or the popularity of books and films like the 'Da Vinci Code']

A guy called **Hegesippus** (who lived between about 110 and 180AD) came up with a solution to this problem of false teaching. He said that if it were indeed true that Jesus had taught His apostles some secrets, surely they in turn would have passed the secrets on to whomever they taught. All you had to do was find out the line of succession from the actual apostles, then you could be sure you were getting the real, true teaching, direct from what Jesus had taught. Hegesippus checked it all out. Surprise, surprise, he couldn't find any evidence of any secret teaching, and the Church adopted his recommendation that if you were a bishop with an unbroken line of succession from the apostles, your authority was assured; anyone else would be a Johnny-come-lately, with no authority whatsoever.

If you care to look on the Vatican website you will find very clearly stated the route back to the Apostles which is represented when Archbishop Vincent comes to the ordination. That's why we have Archbishop Vincent there - he is our very own successor to the Apostles. He has the genuine **AUTHORITY** to ordain Paul. Fantastic, eh?

In terms of praying for vocations, this Parish has existed for 29 years. Every week there has been a Mass for vocations and for the religious life. You might think it has all been to no avail, but beware of falling into the usual trap - the trap of 'human thinking'. Of course we see numbers falling in Western Europe and North America, but in the rest of the world many seminaries are full to bursting point.

[Incidentally, do you know how many Catholic priests there are in the world? About 405,000.]

And our own Parish? Nothing. Nothing for 29 years?

NOT TRUE! Not only has John Stark has been ordained a deacon and Father Neil ordained a priest in that time..... here is an extraordinary thing that is happening NOW:

on 5th July Paul will be ordained priest in our own church;

on 6th July Andy McGann will be ordained priest at Saint Augustine's in Solihull.

and on 19th July John Peyton will be ordained at Holy Souls in Acocks Green!

THREE in one year, all in this little corner of Birmingham!

Let me quickly repeat the pattern of formation for ordination coming from the apostles:

- There were prayers for suitable candidates to become known
- There was a reliance on the discernment of the Holy Spirit
- There was a period of careful preparation
- There were special prayers and a commissioning by existing apostles through prayer and the "laying on of hands"

Barnabus and Paul ordained (Acts 13:3);

Timothy ordained (1 Timothy 4:14);

advice to Timothy not to be hasty in ordaining (1 Timothy 5:22)

Does this process sound familiar?! Echoing down the centuries is our Tradition, originating in the Book of Numbers, of being VERY CAREFUL, out of awe and reverence for God, concerning WHO can ordain successors to the Apostles, the liturgy of HOW we ordain them, and last (but not least) WHO is chosen to be ordained to the clergy.

So now, let's go through the ordination service, so that when it takes place you can put things into their proper context. Just like other sacraments, the sacrament of conferring Holy Orders takes place during the Mass.

Listen carefully to the readings and psalm, selected by Paul, that will be read during the Liturgy of the Word.

After the Gospel the Archbishop will give a homily. [You may be interested to read Archbishop Vincent's book, which is a collection of his ordination homilies. It's called 'Missioners - priest and people today'. It's worth reading before the ordination.]

In preaching God's word the Archbishop is fulfilling a priestly function - something that will become a regular part of Paul's new life as a priest. Ordained ministers have the privilege and responsibility to explain the Word of God, and in doing this they are again speaking *in persona Christi*, making Christ present amongst His people. Paul has been preparing for this preaching role for the past seven years, and as a priest will continue to study and learn so that he can minister properly to the faithful. It is hard work, and it's a major part of being a priest.

CALLING OUT

After the homily, Paul will be called out from the congregation, where he will be sitting with his family, and he will be presented to the Archbishop. Remember the ancient origins of the priesthood, how a priest is chosen from God's people to represent them before God? Paul is being called from among the people.

When you see Deacon Paul you will see that he is wearing a stole, the symbol of ordained ministers; he will be wearing his stole over his shoulder - that's the way deacons wear them.

TESTIMONIAL

The Archbishop will then be given testimony that the candidate for ordination has received proper training and is worthy of ordination.

PROMISE OF OBEDIENCE

Then Paul will be asked to affirm publicly his commitment to celibacy. There isn't really time now to go in to the thinking behind priestly celibacy, but it has a very long Tradition and is required as part of Church discipline (except in exceptional cases, when the candidate is already married).

He will also undertake to carry out the requirement to pray the Prayers of the Church (the Daily Office) and to shape his life accordingly. In saying his prayers as a priest, the focus of his prayer life will shift. Priests have a duty to pray for the people in their care. The requirement upon priests to say 'the Daily Office' reflects this need to pray for others. When we pray the 'Prayers of the Church' we are not saying our private prayers: we are joining in the communal prayers of all the faithful who are saying them, everywhere in the world where people are awake, 24 hours a day. That's a tremendous strength for a priest, for each one knows that even if they've had a long, hard, lonely day, and are finding it difficult to concentrate on prayer - they are not alone: their individual prayer is supported by millions of the faithful.

Don't forget, (and I've said this before) the Divine Office is not something secret or restricted to ordained ministers. All Christians can say the Daily Office. If you say the Office you are joining all our priests in prayer, and it's a powerful support to them in their ministry.

EXAMINATION & PROMISE OF OBEDIENCE

Then he will promise to obey his Diocesan bishop - that is, he will obey the man appointed by the Pope who leads the Archdiocese of Birmingham. Paul is being ordained as a "secular" or "diocesan" priest, and this means he will probably remain working as a priest within this Diocese for the rest of his life. [The other kind of priests are called "regular" priests. They belong to religious orders, such as missionary orders, and are organised on a national or international basis.]

PRAYERS OF ALL THE SAINTS

At this stage in the liturgy something rather dramatic happens: Paul will lie face down in front of the altar whilst prayers are said invoking the prayers of all the saints. Remember, we are a living, sacramental Church - what we are seeing here is us invoking the prayers of the Communion of Saints in Heaven. No human organisation in the world does that. In lying prostrate Paul is symbolically declaring that on his own he is unworthy to become a priest, and that he needs God and the prayers of the Christian community to help him.

IMPOSITION OF HANDS

Then Paul will kneel before Archbishop Vincent, who, in silence, will lay his hands on Paul's head. This action echoes what Jesus did when he ordained His Apostles - do you remember - when he "breathed upon them".

THE PRAYER OF CONSECRATION

Then the Archbishop says the Prayer of Consecration, invoking the Holy Spirit to come down upon Paul:

"Almighty Father, grant to this servant of yours the dignity of the priesthood. Renew within him the Spirit of holiness. As a co-worker with the order of bishops may he be faithful to the ministry that he receives from you, Lord God, and to others be a model of right conduct."

This laying on of hands and prayer of consecration is the essential rite of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. It is an action that will give Paul the sacred "character" of becoming a priest, and it will set him apart for the special ministry of priesthood within the Church. Note how the Archbishop's actions follow very closely the way the Apostles ordained the first deacons and priests, "through prayer and the laying on of hands".

Upon being ordained priest, Paul becomes part of the Order of Priests, and just like the apostles all prayed together, and as a sign of welcome into their order, it is at this point that all the priests present at the ordination will then reach out with their right hands towards Paul, showing how they too are praying with their bishop in the creation of a new priest and welcoming him into their ranks.

VESTING

Paul will then have his stole re-arranged so that it hangs around his neck, indicating that he is now a priest. And he will also put on a chasuble - that is the outer garment worn by priests.

ANOINTING WITH THE OIL OF CHRISM

Do you remember how, every year, priests renew their ordination promises, at the Chrism Mass held at the Cathedral during Holy Week? At this stage in the ordination the Archbishop will anoint Paul's hands with the Oil of Chrism that was blessed at the Chrism Mass.

We must remember that this oil of chrism is not only used at ordinations - all of us were baptised and confirmed with this same oil. Anointing with oil stems from the Old Testament and indicates that someone or something is being set apart for a sacred task or duty, a sign of being handed over to God. Through such holy anointing at baptism and confirmation we are ALL given an abiding mark that strengthens us to live out our lives dedicated to Jesus Christ.

At the ordination, the anointing with chrism will strengthen Paul in following his new, priestly way of life.

Why anoint his hands? Well, olive oil strengthens our bodies, preparing us for what lies ahead. As he anoints Paul, Archbishop Vincent will say,

"The Father anointed our Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. May Jesus preserve you to sanctify the Christian people and to offer sacrifice to God."

The palms of Paul's hands will be anointed to strengthen them for his work

- the work of raising his hands in prayer for and on behalf of his people
- when holding out his hands to consecrate the bread and wine
- when absolving sinners
- when blessing people
- when anointing the sick.

When they are anointed, Paul is giving his hands over for Christ to use them.

Note carefully the words of that prayer. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, which means 'the anointed one'. This particular anointing sets Paul apart for a sacred task. That special task is to sanctify the faithful - Paul will be prepared for this priestly ministry by having his hands anointed - the hands he will use to give the Sacraments to his people.

You might be interested to learn that anointing the hands with oil during Catholic Ordinations is something that originated in England, something that we gave to the whole Church - it is something the Church first did in this country, and the practice was only adopted by the whole Catholic Church in the seventh century.

Incidentally, this part of the ordination ceremony is the origin of the traditional custom of receiving a blessing from a newly ordained priest and of kissing his hands: it is because the oil of chrism is still there - the oil that makes them Christ's hands.

CHALICE AND PATTEN

To emphasize the centrality of the Mass in the life of a priest, Paul will then be given a patten and a chalice as a gift from the Christian faithful - they are signs of the Eucharistic sacrifice that he will offer on behalf of the people.

So there I come to an end of this brief look at the Sacrament of Holy Orders. I hope you have found it interesting, but more than that, I hope you take away with you an appreciation of the marvellous gift from God that His people enjoy through the Church of the sacraments, and in particular the gift of our priests.

In preparing this talk I have been struck by the mystery of Holy Orders, the ancient origins and the way our Tradition preserves something that was very deliberately created by Jesus for His Church. Our priests are very precious and very special, and soon we will have that very special privilege be able to witness God at work, in our own time and before our very eyes, creating a new priest to continue His sanctifying work in the world.

Please pray for Paul before his ordination, then come and take part fully in the celebration when he receives the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

END