

"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son...." (Romans 8:29)

Last week on the Feast of the Cross, we celebrated the ordinations of two of our students—one to the priesthood and the other to the diaconate. Ordinations occur relatively regularly in our chapel, as is to be expected at a seminary. Students come here having heard a call to serve, with many having heard a call to serve in the sacramental priesthood. Although ordinations are a regular occurrence, they are not automatically bestowed. Father confessors and, particularly bishops, take great care to discern and recognize a call as authentic.

The Office of Ordination in the Orthodox Church is surprisingly simple. The rite itself includes liturgical movement and hymns that purposely remind us of the wedding service. The bishop prays three short yet pointed prayers. In one prayer, the bishop prays that the Holy Spirit will come upon the candidate, making him "wholly" a servant; that the Holy Spirit will preserve him in pureness of life and unswerving faith; and that the candidate will worthily exercise the great honor of the priesthood. In another prayer, the bishop prays that the Holy Spirit will make the candidate worthy to stand blamelessly before the Altar; that he will proclaim the gospel of the kingdom; that he will minister to the word of Truth; and that he will offer spiritual gifts and sacrifices to renew the people through the Font of Regeneration. The words are pregnant with meaning, expectation, and responsibility.

During the rite, ordinands may experience a sense of "accomplishment." After all, they have anticipated this event (perhaps, for years), and they have made great sacrifices to achieve it. Or, they may be overwhelmed and wonder: "What, exactly, just happened?" The path ahead may seem unclear, even forbidding. Perhaps, however, a shadowy path, with just enough light for the next footstep, is better!

Ordination only begins life's journey of being **conformed** into the image of Jesus Christ, the One and only High Priest. *The main vocation of the priest is to make Christ present.* Thus, it requires of the priest a continuous conversion of the heart. Stated simply, the grace of ordination allows exactly this: growth in the capacity to present Christ. St. Paul described his own journey of being conformed when he wrote, "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

The interior journey of a priest winds around peaks and valleys. At times he will sense God working through him and confirming his priesthood, while simultaneously facing his own brokenness. He will witness God's hand in the lives of people he serves, and he will come to recognize the limits of his own abilities

and talents—in other words, he will confront his spiritual poverty. Our Lord Jesus Christ also will gently place him in situations that will remind him of his passions and pride. Both need to be rooted out because they serve only to undermine the purposes of God. Throughout his sacramental priesthood, the continual cleansing of his heart will be required.

Even Isaiah, who volunteered to be sent by the Lord, had a vision of being cleansed by the coal from the altar (Isa.6:6) This lifelong, unrelenting process may unsettle the path or journey that the priest anticipates on the day of his ordination, but, the priest's own salvation and the salvation of those whom he serves lie in the balance. St. Paul encouraged "his son" Timothy: "Be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12)... "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Tim. 4:16).

"Take heed to yourself." These words must be the refrain within the heart of every priest.

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