

Convocation of Priests
Diocese of Sacramento
Keynote, 10-12-15
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I recently returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was my first time there. As has been related to me by many people, walking in the places where Jesus lived, served, died, and rose from the dead gave me a new perspective when reading the scriptures. It also provided me a new and challenging perspective from which to consider the priestly ministry the Lord Jesus has shared with us.

The days in Jerusalem were very dramatic. The ancient setting of the City of Peace was a stirring backdrop for recalling the events that led up to Calvary and the empty tomb. It continues to be an unsettled place, a still seething cauldron of charged religious passions.

The days along the Sea of Galilee were more personally provocative. In Capernaum, Bethany, Nazareth, and the other villages scattered along the shore, Jesus called his disciples and cultivated deep, lasting friendships with them. The heartfelt fellowship was an essential dimension to the ministry of Jesus. Otherwise, the gospel would be a series of events: provocative teachings, amazing works of wonders, and curious encounters. Even the death and resurrection would have been news worthy of gossip, in the manner that the two disciples initially shared it with the stranger on the Road to Emmaus, but nothing more. That Simon Peter would say to Jesus at the end of chapter six of John's gospel, "Lord, to whom shall we go," tells us that the profound companionship Jesus forged with those first disciples was at the heart of the salvation story. They were

saved by their personal friend. In sharing his friendship with others, they would bring His saving grace to the world.

It is at the heart of our story too. That is reason for these days together in the company of Jesus. He is the High Priest of New Covenant. Our priesthood is part of his priestly sacrifice. Our priestly anointing flows from the spirit he gave as he breathed his last on the cross. Our ministry of mercy comes from the water and blood that flowed from his pierced heart.

I would like to reflect on this as we begin these days together. We are gathered as fraternity forged by the charity of Christ.

- The charity of Jesus calls us with a brother's love to serve the priesthood of the faithful in the ministerial priesthood.
- The charity of Jesus for us is what we share in our ministry.
- The charity of Jesus is the binding force of our fraternity.
- The charity of Jesus sends us to be his charity in the world.

Let me briefly develop each of these themes.

The charity of Jesus calls us with a brother's love to serve the priesthood of the faithful in the ministerial priesthood.

In the Eucharistic preface for priesthood, used on the occasions of ordination and the chrism mass, we recite these words: "Christ not only adorns with a royal priesthood the people he has made his own, but with a brother's

kindness he also chooses men to become sharers in his sacred ministry through the laying on of hands.” More succinctly, because Jesus loves His people, he chooses us with a brother’s love to share in his ministry to them.

There is no greater honor or blessing than to be part of the priesthood of the faithful. The baptism we share with all the faithful is the beginning of Christ’s preferential love for each one of us. We are part of his flock, the sheep who know the voice of the shepherd and follow him. In the unfathomable mystery of his affection for the people he has called his own Jesus then chooses us to be sharers in his saving sacrifice for their sake.

The preface uses the language of the brother’s kindness. We can also borrow from the words of John the Baptist, in the third chapter of the gospel according to John, when he speaks of himself as being the friend of the groom. “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease.” This English translation, “the best man,” is not my preference. In Spanish the expression is translated, “amigo del novio,” the friend of the groom. Jesus is the groom. The Church is the bride. We are the friends of groom who, like John, announce to the bride his coming.

It is vital for us to savor this relationship with Jesus recognizing that our fraternity is at the service of his love for the Church. With a personal affection he calls each of us to this sacramental association with him so that through us he can sanctify, teach, and govern his people. We share this calling. Our fraternity is not accidental. It is intentional. We also share in his brother’s love for us. Jesus

desires that we care for one another with the same affection that he has called us.

The charity of Jesus for us is what we share in our ministry.

Borrowing the inspiration Pope Francis found in the words of St. Bede the Venerable about the call of Matthew, we recognized that Jesus has mercy on us and has called us, *miserando atque eligendo*. The authority to teach, govern, and sanctify is the fruit of the Lord's mercy for us. As Jesus said in the Johannine discourse at the Last Supper, "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you." (Jn. 15.16) The mercy Jesus has shown us is the same mercy we are to communicate as we seek to pastor God's people with the heart and mind of the Good Shepherd, who gave his life for his sheep.

This understanding places us alongside the disciples as they shared the company of Jesus. They not only witnessed his compassion and mercy with those to whom he ministered. They also personally experienced the Lord's mercy during the many times they dined together, when he would take them apart to unfold the hidden mysteries of his parables, the way he listened to them often asking them questions, even his reprimands that would then be followed with, "Come, let us go."

We must not forget to let the Lord care for us. Otherwise we will never understand the profundity of his command, "As I have done, so you must do." Our prayer together and privately, meals together as well as other fraternal gatherings, regular confession and spiritual direction, personal engagement in the

sacraments we offer, and regular retreats – these are all ways we join in the timeless fellowship of the disciples in the company of Jesus along the Sea of Galilee. We should also recognize that he chooses us to minister to one another. These are ways Jesus' mercy regularly washes our feet so that we can do for others what he has done for us.

The charity of Jesus is the binding force of our fraternity.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed to his Father, "Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are." (Jn. 17.11) The oneness for which Jesus prayed gives meaning to the communion we receive in the Eucharist. We become what we receive. The theologian Ives Congar refers to the prayers following the words of institution as a second epiclesis calling down the Spirit to unify the assembly as, for example, in the second Eucharistic Prayer we say, "Humbly we pray that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit."

We should all note that concelebrating priests join with the bishop or the presider in a unison of prayer and gesture for the epiclesis, the Institution narrative, the anamnesis, and the oblation. That we pray and act together is a sign to the assembly as well as an affirming sign for us of our communion with the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus in the Holy Spirit. There is a mystical intimacy to our common memory, our common prayer, and our common action together as those whom Jesus has chosen with a brother's kindness to share in the offering that brings about the oneness, the communion for which Jesus so earnestly prayed to his Father. His voice echoes in our own as we implore the Father to "be gathered

into one by the Holy Spirit.” The words as well as the gestures shared in unison among bishops and priests reveal for us the nature and the intention of our fraternity in Christ. Even when we offer the Sacrifice of the Mass in our separate parishes, there should still exist in our minds and hearts a harmonious communion in fulfilling the Lord’s command to us, “Do this in memory of me.”

The charity of Jesus sends us to be his charity in the world.

Our proximity to the altar should make us tremble. The Lord’s brotherly affection has brought us anxiously near his sacrifice. It would be natural for us to feel the same trembling fear of the disciples who abandoned the Lord at the sound of the soldier’s approach to the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter’s stuttering stammer at being accused of being one of his followers can be our own.

We are an extension of the same group, that while fearful, gathered in the upper room because of their familiarity with Christ. Their personal nearness to the Lord would bring them close to his sacrifice. Thomas’s timid touch of the wounds would eventually result in his bearing those same wounds as it would for many of those who were so close they could touch the Risen Christ. Even Paul, who did not know the Lord Jesus during his earthly ministry would speak with personal familiarity of Christ crucified because of what he suffered for him.

The sacrificial nature of charity is something we should ponder during our days together if we truly seek to know Christ more nearly. In the priesthood preface, I had mentioned to you earlier, we also pray, “As they give up their lives for you and for the salvation of their brothers and sisters, they strive to be conformed to the image of Christ himself and offer you a constant witness of faith

and love.” These words are about us. The sacrifice of Jesus was a fusion of both charity and worship, the extreme act of charity for those he loved and the perfect offering of obedience to his heavenly Father. Our own lives must seek this same conformity of charity and worship.

This is timely topic as we approach the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Pope Francis has made clear that mercy is the most compelling and persuasive testimony to the power and truth of the gospel. He sees mercy as the medium for the New Evangelization. To become more effective messengers of this mercy, we must first know the depth of His mercy for us. This cannot be something we see or read. His mercy is something we must experience. The words of James are helpful to us in this regard, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.” (Js. 1.22) In the doing of sacrificial charity we become more familiar with the words of Jesus echoed over the bread and wine we offer.

Like the many martyrs’ feast that honor one individual and his companions, this sacrificial dimension of our common life can be encouraged and supported in companionship with one another, doing charity in memory of him.

I hope these thoughts are helpful as we initiate this privileged time together. Let us together invoke the Holy Spirit over this priestly assembly. In sharing the one bread and the one cup we can all be one in Christ.