

May Christ form your hearts

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June 3, 2006 – Mass of Ordination to the Priesthood

for Father Jason Asselin and Father Luke Meyer

(Given at the Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo, ND)

Jason and Luke, today your lives will be changed forever. Just as on the day of your baptism you became beloved sons of God and members of the body of Christ, today through the Sacrament of Holy Orders you will be configured to Jesus Christ, the head, shepherd and bridegroom of the Church, through the laying on of my hands as a successor of the apostles. You remain members of the body of Christ, but your relationship within his body is changed forever.

John Paul the Great, in his apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV), stated the faith of the Church on the transformation which will take place in your lives today through the laying on of hands and the action of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: "...priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ -- the head and shepherd -- authoritatively proclaiming his word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and his offer of salvation -- particularly in baptism, penance and the Eucharist, showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock, which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit" (PDV 15).

My dearest brothers, note the possessive pronoun used in these words. It is proclaiming *his* Word, *his* acts and *his* loving concern. Note the possessive pronoun is *his*, not mine, not yours, but *his*. Our ministry depends on Christ and it is *his* ministry. As he prays in today's Gospel, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21) you, my dearest brothers, are sent by Christ.

The first sentence of the apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, "I will give you shepherds after my own heart" (Jer 3:15), is important for us today. The promise of the Lord is given to us in those words recorded through the prophet Jeremiah. They are fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is the good shepherd. Jesus is the true shepherd, the true heart of the Father, and the very revelation of the Father. Jesus Christ is the one we are to follow. Our hearts must be conformed to Christ's heart and, like his, be conformed to the heart of the Father. On May 25 of this year, Benedict XVI spoke to the

priests of Poland and reminded them, “The faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter between man and God.” My dearest sons and brothers, the only way that is possible is if you have the heart of Jesus Christ. That heart will develop through personal prayer, the Eucharist and your pastoral ministry. I wish to reflect with you on these three points.

First, in personal prayer, one always develops the heart and deepens one’s relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Each Friday morning in the Liturgy of the Hours, we pray Psalm 51. We pray the words of the Psalmist: “Indeed you love truth in the heart; then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom.” We can taste the desire, the hunger and the longing of the Psalmist that his heart be formed by God, and that God teach him. He restates this later in the Psalm. He prays and we pray, “A pure heart create for me, O God.” My dearest brothers and sons, see that this is God’s work. Our hearts must be receptive. Our hearts must have a desire. As we pray those words, they truly must become our desire. Then we see the fulfillment of the promise given in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart.” Personal prayer leads us and leads our hearts to the discovery that Jesus Christ is the truth.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus prays to the Father, “Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth...And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth” (John 17:17, 19). My sons, let those words penetrate your hearts. Jesus Christ is the truth. He is the only way to the Father. He, and he alone, gives salvation to the world. In your personal prayer, you must discover the loving gaze of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit upon you. Again, Pope Benedict XVI stated to the priests in Poland, “Jesus has looked lovingly upon each one of us, and in this gaze of his we may have confidence.” In personal prayer you enter into that gaze of love. Have confidence! This confidence is essential for every priest to know himself as loved by the Father. We taste the Father’s gaze upon us every time we look upon, in a human way, the loving gaze of a mother’s or father’s eyes upon their newborn child. All of us have seen that gaze. All of us have experienced that gaze when we have held a newborn child in our own arms. That is only a glimpse and a taste of the Father’s gaze upon us.

Benedict XVI reminds us today, “we grow in affective maturity when our hearts adhere to God.” Personal prayer develops the heart, and leads the heart to its true home – communion in the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus when he told his disciples, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14:23). Listen, my dearest sons, carefully to those words of Jesus.

Listen to the promise that is given. When you have hearts that adhere in love to the living God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will make their home in you. What a wondrous promise!

We cannot help but recall the words of St. Augustine, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." In his words about the Office of Presbyters, he refers to it as *amoris officium*, an "office of love," an office of the heart. Personal prayer develops that heart, which leads us to the Eucharist. The greatest revelation of love given to us by our God is in the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and in the sending forth of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, reveals to us God's total self gift for us, for humanity.

This brings us to the second point. You, my sons, will celebrate the sacrifice of Christ, the Eucharist – his total gift of self for us. All depends on Christ, his words and his actions. As you stand each day at the altar of sacrifice, you stand in the person of Christ, the head and shepherd of the Church. It is his words in the Holy Spirit that transform the gifts of bread and wine into his Body and Blood.

The words of institution, "This is my body, given for you" and "This is my blood, poured out for you," must truly become your words. My sons, observe the humility of Jesus in his total gift of self. He, the second person of the Trinity, true God and true man, gives himself totally to simple gifts of bread and wine which truly become his body, blood, soul and divinity. He continues each and every day to make himself a total self gift for us in the Eucharist. Are not our hearts filled with wonder and awe as we meditate on so great a mystery, as we meditate on so great a love? Each time you celebrate the Eucharist, you, together with Jesus Christ the head and shepherd, make yourselves a total gift to the Father and to the people you serve. Like Christ, you lay down your life for your flock. You go to the cross with Christ and make it your home, the place where only love and obedience can take us.

The Church today celebrates the optional memorial of Charles Lwanga and the martyrs of Uganda of the late 1800s. The blood of the martyrs speaks to us, whenever we celebrate their feasts, of the true meaning of the cross, of the true meaning of love and obedience to Jesus Christ, no matter what the cost. We are called to give our lives in no less a manner!

Pastores Dabo Vobis reminds us that the Eucharist is the supreme nourishment for our vocation (PDV 23). It is important for us and for every priest to do what the Church asks of him, to celebrate the Eucharist daily. Whether you go hunting or fishing, hiking or biking, and, yes Luke, even golfing, you must celebrate the Eucharist every day. It must be a part of each one of your days.

Because the Eucharist belongs to the Church, you must have a deep reverence for the celebration of the Eucharist. You must have a reverence for the Church's liturgical norms guiding the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not personally yours. It is not your Mass. The Mass belongs to Jesus Christ and to the Church. The Church guides that. No priest has the right to add or to take away anything from the liturgical rites of the Church. This is especially important as we anticipate the coming changes which will occur in the Roman Missal. We are called to obedience and to reverence—understanding that in the teaching of the Church we believe that every time the Eucharist is celebrated -- whether it is celebrated upon the altar of a cathedral, upon the hood of a truck in the midst of war in Iraq, or upon a table in the room of a sick person -- heaven and earth are joined together. It is Christ who is celebrating the heavenly liturgy.

A few months ago a lay woman innocently asked me, "Bishop, why don't you like polka Masses and why don't you allow them?" I looked at her and said, "Let me ask you a question, then I will respond to your question. What do you think of when you hear polka music?" She smiled and said, "Bishop, I think of beer and dancing." I said, "Precisely! And now in response to your question...beer and dancing and the Eucharist?" And she said, "Oh! Now I understand." You too will need to lead people into that reverence for the Eucharist. Always lead them respectfully and with love. Our eyes need to be open to the great mystery we celebrate. All of us need to see that heaven and earth are truly joined together in every Mass (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7-8).

My sons, it is important too that you adore Christ in the Eucharist – that you make visits to the Eucharist. Benedict XVI stated to the priests in Poland, "Be assiduous in the prayer of adoration and teach it to the faithful." Even if you only have 15 minutes during the day to pray before the Eucharist take those 15 minutes, take those 10 minutes or five minutes, or even an hour, and let that love grow in your hearts. The more you adore Christ in the Eucharist, the more you will come to understand who is present when you celebrate the Mass.

My dearest brothers and sisters of the faithful, the same is true for you. When you make visits to the church and kneel before the Eucharist, even for a few moments, you are in touch with Jesus -- Jesus, who waits there for you, whose heart hungers and longs for each of you. Enter into that love and adhere to it.

Third, concerning your pastoral ministry, my dearest brothers, you will be entrusted to preach and teach, to celebrate the sacraments of penance, anointing of the sick, or marriage, and to celebrate funerals. Remember that your relationship, no matter what you are doing, is in the person of Christ,

the head and shepherd of the Church. The faith of the Church is that there is an ontological change that occurs in your lives. You are changed forever. That means whether you are hearing confessions, anointing the sick, whether you are hiking or fishing, whether you are celebrating the Mass, no matter what you are doing, even in sin, you bring Christ the head and shepherd with you. Remember that always. Your relationship to the body of Christ is changed forever. By your words and actions, you bring Christ to others.

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, we are reminded priests are configured to Jesus the good shepherd and are called to imitate and to live out his pastoral charity. Jesus had compassion on the crowds. He went in search of the lost and stray. He called people by name. In today's Gospel he tells us that he protects and guards. He provides living water. He admonishes the self righteous. Every aspect of his ministry is grounded in pastoral charity -- to lead persons to the encounter of the love of the Father. Your ministry must be grounded in his pastoral charity, so that you may lead others to that encounter with God. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* states "the essential content of this pastoral charity is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church, following the example of Christ" that "determines our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people" (PDV 23). This pastoral charity is expressed in many ways.

First, my brothers, today you are ordained diocesan priests. You are called to a particular Church. You are called to serve in the Church of Fargo for the rest of your lives. In this Sacrament of Orders as diocesan priests, you make a commitment, a lifelong commitment, a gift of self, to this Church of Fargo. You give yourselves for her as Christ gave himself for the Church.

Second, in your preaching and teaching, always teach the truth and charity. In the second reading, as St. Paul spoke to the presbyters of Ephesus, he reminded them to "keep watch". "Wolves will come among you...be vigilant" (Acts 20:29-31). My brothers, those words are spoken to you today. You too, in your preaching and in your teaching, must keep watch. There are the wolves of relativism, of subjectivism, of narcissism, and of self-adulation. You must be vigilant, for the Gospel is counter to all of these. With fortitude preach and proclaim the truth! Have no fear!

Third, you must have a true love for the faithful and compassion for them. No matter to which parish you are assigned, from the smallest rural parish to the largest city parish, your words and actions will speak volumes. My dearest sons, as we discussed last night, your words and actions can either lead people to Jesus Christ and the sacraments, or your words and actions can lead people away from Jesus Christ and the sacraments. Have the heart of Jesus to proclaim the truth. Yes, there will be

times that, in proclaiming that truth, people will walk away from the Gospel, just as they did in the times of Jesus. But remember that as they walked away, Jesus looked at them with love. Jesus always desired their return. He did not look at them with bitterness or resentment. Even on the cross he prayed for them: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Finally, in your pastoral ministry, there is the obedience to Jesus Christ, lived out in obedience to the Bishop. You are called to do the will of the Father. My sons, reflect upon the obedience of Jesus. In the words of Philippians, Paul writes that he became obedient even unto death. In the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed that the cup be taken away from him. Yet he said, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Lk 22:42). At times, I as your bishop may ask you to do something you do not will, or one of my successors may ask this. Yet you are called in obedience to follow that will.

Have true devotion to Mary, your mother, and meditate upon her words, “I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). You make yourselves today a total self gift to Christ and the Church, to go wherever you are called. Pray through her intercession to have the same obedience, the willingness to give of yourself as she gave herself.

Jason and Luke, as you are ordained today, my prayer for you as your bishop and as your father, is that as you are configured by the Holy Spirit to Christ the head and shepherd of the Church, you will have confidence in the Father’s, Son’s and Holy Spirit’s gaze upon you. Trust, my beloved sons, in the Father’s promise: “I will give you shepherds after my own heart” (Jer 3:15). Long for, hunger for and desire that heart.

The Spirit you receive today is the Spirit spoken of in the prophet Isaiah in the first reading. This is the same Spirit that Jesus proclaimed and received as he began his public ministry. You begin your public ministry today as priests and these words will be fulfilled today in your hearing. Benedict XVI stated, “Christ needs priests who are mature, virile, capable of cultivating an authentic spiritual paternity.” Christ needs you, my brothers. The Church of Fargo needs you. The spiritual paternity that Pope Benedict speaks of is only possible if you have hearts truly formed by Christ himself, most especially in spousal love for the Church, the total gift of himself for her.

My dearest brothers and sons, I use the words of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* to express my heartfelt prayer for you, as you are ordained priests of Jesus Christ: May your lives radiate Christ’s spousal character and “be a witness to Christ’s spousal love and thus be capable of loving people with a heart which is new, generous and pure” (PDV 22). The Father, Son and Holy Spirit give you that heart today. May

you have the grace to receive it and live it throughout your priesthood!

Pastores Dabo Vobis can be found at

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis_en.html.

Pope Benedict XVI's message to the priests in Poland can be found at

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060525_poland-clergy_en.html.