

This column was originally printed in the June 2016 issue of *New Earth*, the magazine for the Diocese of Fargo.

The priest: A man of mercy

Bishop John T. Folda

On Saturday, June 4, I had the privilege of ordaining three new priests for the Diocese of Fargo: Father Patrick Parks, Father Steven Wirth and Father Robert Keller. Each of them has spent years in formation, preparing for the ministry that they will now begin in the Church. The day of a priest's ordination is always a joyful day in the life of a diocese, and ours this year was no exception. As you can imagine, ordination day is one of the happiest days of the year for any bishop, including this one.

One aspect of this year's ordination, however, stands out. We are in the midst of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. For several months now, we have been contemplating and experiencing in a special way the abundant mercy of God and our own call to be merciful to others. So, in the context of this Jubilee, it is important to realize that the priest is called to be a man of mercy. He is ordained not only for himself, but for service to the People of God. In the tradition of the Church, we say that the priest is *alter Christus*, another Christ. And thus he must be a man of mercy, like Christ himself.

Throughout salvation history, God has chosen frail human beings to carry out his work in the world. He called the prophets and appointed kings for his people Israel. And finally, he sent his Son, Jesus, to be our High Priest, the One whose sacrifice would redeem us and save us from sin and death. But Jesus also chose certain men as his apostles, and he sent them out to proclaim the nearness of God's Kingdom. They preached the Good News, healed the sick, and cast out demons, making present the mercy of God to all, especially the poor and the lowly. Then, on the night before he died, Jesus configured those apostles to himself through the Eucharist, constituting them as priests of the New Covenant in his own blood. As priests, they became mediators of the mercy that Jesus had come to pour forth upon the earth. They were the foundation stones on which he built his Church, and they were the missionaries who went out to invite all to share in the grace and mercy of God.

In all ages, the Church has been blessed by the ministry of Christ's priests. The priesthood itself is a gift of God's mercy. Jesus promised that he would not leave his people orphans, and he gives us the priesthood so that he can be present to us now and until the end of the world. Through Holy Orders, the humanity of the priest, in the power of the Holy Spirit, becomes a sacramental sign of God's merciful love. And Pope Francis reminds us that priests are called to be "faithful servants of God's mercy." Just as Jesus Christ is "the face of the Father's mercy," the priest who stands in the place of Christ must also become "the face of the Father's mercy."

Every time we participate in the Mass, we experience this abundant mercy of God. When he celebrates the Mass, the priest offers the sacrifice of Christ, the sacrifice of mercy. He feeds the people of God with the Body and Blood of Christ, just as Jesus fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes. In the Eucharist, Jesus satisfies the deepest longings of our hearts by giving us his very self, and he does so through the hands of the priest.

I believe our greatest desire for God's mercy is expressed in our need for the forgiveness of our sins. When the paralyzed man was brought to Jesus, he pronounced his sins forgiven, and he was healed (Mk 2:2-12). To the woman caught in adultery Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more" (Jn 8:11). These and so many other episodes show us the merciful forgiveness of Christ, and now he offers that forgiveness to us through his priests. We all know we are sinners; even Pope Francis describes himself very simply as "a sinner." But Christ offers us his mercy and forgiveness through the sacrament of Reconciliation, and the priest is his instrument of mercy.

Times of illness are especially trying and even terrifying for us. But Jesus had a special love and concern for those who suffer, and he healed the sick wherever he found them. Even now he reaches out to them through the hands of the priest. In the sacrament of Anointing, the priest offers healing and strength to those who are sick and suffering, or to those who are weakened by old age. To the dying, he offers

peace and consolation, along with hope for eternal life. The priest is a man of mercy, an instrument of God's mercy to all those who suffer.

The priest is also a teacher, one who shares with us the Good News of God's love and mercy. The Second Vatican Council tells us that "it is the first task of priests...to preach the Gospel of God to all men." As evangelists and ministers of truth, priests open up to us the beauty and power of God's divine plan. They reveal to us the tender mercy of God our Father, and they guide us into the fullness of truth. There are some who deny the existence of truth, but Jesus prays that we will be "consecrated in the truth" (Jn 17:17). The priest is the teacher and servant of truth and therefore the servant of mercy.

In a hundred other ways, the priest is called to be a man of mercy, a servant of Christ and his people. We all know priests who have lived out this lofty calling with humility and grace. I hope you will thank God for them. We also know that priests have all the weakness and sinfulness of other human beings, so they need our patience and our prayers. Please pray with me that our priests will be men of mercy, men who incarnate the merciful love of Jesus among his people.

It is a great blessing for a small diocese like ours to celebrate three priestly ordinations this year. But several priests who are serving here will also return to their home dioceses this year, so our need for priests remains. Let us all work and pray for vocations to the priesthood, and ask Christ the High Priest to send us priests who will be "men of mercy" in our midst.