



## **The Renewal of Ordination Vows and the Blessing of Oils: Tuesday of Holy Week 2016**

### **John 12:20-36**

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- `Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

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It’s probably no surprise to you all that during Lent I’ve been thinking about dying and rising. This is not just because during Lent, I, like you, have been anticipating this week, the week we walk into the heart of the Paschal mystery. It’s because on the First Sunday of Lent, I broke my wrist, the one wrapped in what is now a frayed purple cast. Breaking my wrist has been my school for dying and rising, for something that is wired within me—my self-reliance and speed—in order to receive some things that are actually a gifts--a healthier dependence on others and the practice of slowing down a bit.

On that subject, Roman Catholic writer Ron Rohlheiser describes the Paschal mystery, the central dynamic of the Christian faith in this way: the Paschal mystery, he says, is the dynamic that: “in order to come to fuller life and spirit we must constantly be letting go of present life and spirit.” Or as the Gospel appointed for Tuesday in Holy Week puts it: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Perhaps this dynamic is what our colleague Jessica Schapp was referring to at our first Vocations Day held late last year during a panel discussion in which a moderator and participants asked a panel of priests and deacons about their vocations. I don’t recall what the question was about the life of an ordained person in the Church, but I do recall her response: she said that her vocation had been “character building” which I took to mean that at many turns her vocation as a priest has allowed her to participate in the Paschal mystery—letting go of some singular assumption, some singular cherished way of doing things or even some singular impulse in order to “bear much fruit,” that is, in order to receive something bigger that is of God, something bigger that blesses us and blesses the communities and people with whom we are in relationship.

And so this morning in light of our Gospel and the renewal of our ordination vows, in light of the blessing of oils that mark the outpouring of God’s own Paschal Spirit in baptism and in the anointing of the sick, in light of all these things, I want to reflect out loud with you on the particular kind of dying and rising, the particular kind of letting go and receiving, that in my experience is at the heart of the ordained life that many here have embraced. And, of course, all of what I will say has its grounding first and foremost in baptismal identity, the identity we all received when we were buried with Christ so that we might live a risen life with him.

But before we go there, I want to say that what we are talking about, this dynamic of dying and rising in our lives, is not easy, is not supposed to be easy. The comic Woody Allen put it well when he said “I don’t mind dying. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” And so, if we’re honest, here, we’re talking about places of real struggle for ourselves.

And so as I began to think through this last week, it occurred to me that the particular dimensions of dying and rising in the life of ordained people parallel the dimensions of Benedictine life, something I spoke about when I first came to the diocese. The specific ways we need to practice dying and rising seem to parallel Benedicts’ notions of stability, obedience and conversion of life. And so I’ll make reference to these as I go.

And so, first, stability—in my experience, we, as ordained people are constantly faced with the desire to run—to run from our people, our places, our problems and, yes, the daunting and perplexing potential before us. And what is more, we as ordained people are often tempted to run from ourselves. The forms that this running can take are many—daydreams about leaving where we are, living psychologically and spiritually in the past in some better place with better people, directing our energy to a future imagined better place with better people, simply going through the motions of the work or skating across the surface of the work or as someone has called it “retiring in place,” finding ways to run by getting involved in ancillary things to distract ourselves from the real people, the real challenges, the real joy and the real work before us.

Dying to our urge to run is all about turning toward the people, the places, the problems and the potential of where we are, even if we don’t know what to make of it all. Dying to our urge to run means, with God’s help, steering into ourselves, steering into our gifts in this place, steering into our foibles with these people, and learning how better to work with both. Dying to our urge to run means coming back to the belief that God is alive and moving not in some better place with better people, not through some better self than we already are but through us all in the here and now.

Second, obedience. Recall that for Benedict, obedience, a word connected to the Latin word *audire* has to do with a receptive listening to God in prayer and through Scripture, to others in the community and to ourselves at a level profound enough to shape the actions we take. In my experience, as ordained people we are forever challenged to die to one kind of understanding of our role as we embrace another different understanding of our role. We are challenged to let go of the idea that our primary role is to administer a community or a program in a predictable and tidy way (to keep the trains running on time, so to speak) in order to embrace a receptivity to God through which assumptions are challenged, people and communities are redirected and renewed, and the train schedule is changed!

Dying to our roles as just administrators and perpetuators of programs and embracing our roles as instruments of receptivity to the living God means cultivating a stance of expectation that God is actually speaking to us through Scripture and through what actually occurs in our parish communities. It means looking at information (such as a principal Sunday liturgy that is at capacity, the presence of people of different ethnicities and countries of origin in our parishes, the lack of participation and energy for a once popular outreach effort) not as mere facts but as God trying to tell us something, something that has a claim on our actions.

And finally Benedict’s notion of the *conversatio morum*, conversion of life, the idea that Christ is always at the horizon calling us towards himself. My belief is that we as ordained people are constantly challenged to die to the notion that there will be time when things are finally settled—in our own vocational lives, in the lives of our parish churches, and in the life of the Church more broadly. I will never forget when I realized in parish work that our hard work tackling and addressing the difficult issues before us only meant that we traded one set of issues for another. Christ through us is forever turning over new ground, forever steering us to new challenges, forever on the road. And so we need to die to the idea that it will all ever be sorted or that we will in this lifetime finally and fully arrive. For our God yearns to walk beside us and beside the people we serve on a rich journey of aggravation and adventure, of a troubled spirit and an uplifted heart.

Today we break the bread; we drink from the cup of wine that recalls the blood spilled, we bless the oils that themselves are meant to bless events in which dying can lead to rising and letting go can bear much fruit. Lift up your hearts for the One who has gone before us has passed through death into life, has fallen to the earth like a single grain of wheat and in dying has borne much fruit. Lift up your hearts for our baptismal vocation cleaves to his path. Lift up your hearts for our vocations as servants of the church cleave to his path. Lift up your hearts for, look, his dying and rising, our dying and rising are near.