

Saturday, October 26, 2013
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament
Ordination of TOR Candidates to the Priesthood
Homily

Many of you, especially my brothers in the Franciscan tradition, are familiar with variations of a story about St. Francis of Assisi in which he was providing pastoral formation or guidance to younger members of his fraternity.

According to one version, St. Francis instructed a few young friars to accompany him into a village in order to spread the Gospel. The young men were excited to observe their Father Francis in action.

The group entered the village and began walking up and down the streets and alleys. St. Francis greeted everyone he met, but he kept on walking. Having passed through every neighborhood of the village, St. Francis and his followers returned home.

When they arrived, one of the young Friars said to St. Francis, “You asked us to accompany you through the village in order to spread the Gospel, but you hardly said a word and certainly did not preach even one sermon.”

As the story goes, St. Francis supposedly said, “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” It’s a sentimental story and I could make it even more sentimental today by saying, “Brother Patrick, Brother Michael, and Brother Augustine, put yourself in that story.”

One of the problems is that the multitude of biographies and commentaries on the life and ministry of St. Francis of Assisi fail to confirm that he ever used that expression.

Some people think the story illustrates the saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” Perhaps that saying is true at times. Others are critical of that interpretation because it runs the risk of devaluing the significance of the words that are preached.

Anyone who knows of St. Francis of Assisi is aware that he used actions and he used words. At times his words were full of compassion and

encouragement to the poor, but at times his words were full of ridicule and condemnation, especially when he would speak to the rich and those who did not see the value in such virtues as poverty or humility.

Since the election of our current Holy Father, many people say that he has a wide appeal because of many personal actions that demonstrate compassion, encouragement, and humility. As examples we can recall:

- his humble request for prayers as he bowed before the world immediately after being introduced as the new Pope
- his celebration of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday in a prison for mostly young people where he washed their feet, including a Muslim woman
- his decision to live in the Domus Santa Marta instead of residing in the Papal palace.

But Pope Francis has not hesitated to preach the Gospel with words. He has not hesitated to preach the Gospel in its entirety, which includes the words that sound like comfort and consolation as we heard in the first reading today from the Prophet Isaiah.

And, Pope Francis has not hesitated to speak challenging words through which he names the evils of our time and in which he calls us to conversion.

It has become a common practice for Pope Francis to focus on three points in his homilies, including his weekday homilies which are packed with all sorts of things that all of us should think about.

At this time in the ordination liturgy I need to address some thoughts to the candidates for Ordination to the priesthood, Brothers Patrick, Michael, and Augustine, so I ask the rest of you to be patient.

These thoughts are taken from reflections of Pope Francis during his August interview conducted in person by Father Antonio Spadaro, S.J., editor in chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Italian Jesuit journal. An English translation of the interview was published in the September 30th edition of *America* magazine.

In view of the readings from today's liturgy take from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Gospel of John, and some

of the observations of Pope Francis, I want to reflect three topics: Identity – Authenticity – Prophecy.

Identity

Brothers Patrick, Michael, and Augustine, what is your identity beginning today as you receive ordination to the priesthood? The Letter to Hebrews states that every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

And it says in the Letter to the Hebrews that no one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. In the same way, it was not Christ who glorified himself in becoming high priest.

This means that with ordination to the priesthood you do not give up your identity as members of the human families into which you were born and through which you were first initiated and formed in the Catholic faith.

This means that with ordination to the priesthood you do not give up your identity as members of the Third Order Regular Franciscans.

It means that your priestly identity must be derived from the person of Jesus Christ and it must be an identity that never becomes separated from your identities that derive from your human and religious families.

Pope Francis observed that “the most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you.” He says that “The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials.” As pastors, your identity comes from the pastor who is Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who we hear about in John’s Gospel.

Your identity as pastors is the shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep; who identifies with them and has a relationship with them through which they can identify not only with you as their pastor, but with Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who they can identify in you.

In the Gospel reading Jesus says that he has care for more than one kind of flock; those who stay near to him and others who are out there, wherever out there may be.

With regard to that dimension of your identity, Pope Francis has said very plainly and directly that your ministry involves two dimensions:

- for those who are near you must “warm the hearts of the people;” you must “walk through the dark night with them;” you must “know how to dialogue and to descend into your people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost;”
- for those who are distant you must go to them because “nearness and proximity” are essential.

Your identity must be in Christ and with the people you are called to serve.

Authenticity

The Letter to the Hebrews says that “Jesus Christ the high priest is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people.”

Pope Francis reminds us that an authentic minister of the Gospel is one who is authentic not simply within himself but as he is seen and experienced by others. This authenticity includes the realization and acceptance that you and I are sinners and that we have been redeemed by the sin offering of Jesus Christ through his death on the cross.

This recognition that we are beset by weakness is overcome by the primacy of God’s grace. Pope Francis reminds us that people can see whether we are authentic in that regard. He says, “I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person’s life. God is in everyone’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else—God is in this person’s life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow.”

The Holy Father reminds us that you and I will be found to be most authentic to the extent that we do not simply keep the doors open, but we step outside of our churches, that we go out to those who do not attend Mass, who have quit or who are indifferent about their faith.

And the Holy Father warns against watering down the Gospel in order to share the good news of compassion and mercy that Isaiah speaks about in

the first reading. He uses the example of a confessor who is too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the well-being of the person.

I used to celebrate Mass at 7:00 am, on weekdays. It was never published in the bulletin, but people in the parish and from elsewhere knew that if they wanted to go to confession before Mass, all they needed to do was to come to the sacristy. In the 20 years that I was in that parish, not one person complained that Mass started 5 minutes late when someone came in on their way to work or in order to participate in the Mass.

In fact, they embraced it by telling others, if you want to go to confession come to our church before 7 am Mass. Those people taught me what it means to be authentic; the one's who sought God's mercy and consolation in the sacrament of Reconciliation and those who encourage them to find me early in the morning.

Prophecy

The reading from the Prophet Isaiah is one of the rare exceptions when the words of any of the prophets did not cause people to squirm in their seats or run for cover. I don't know about you, but I often get that feeling whenever the text from one of the Prophets starts with the words, "Thus says the Lord your God." You know whatever comes next is not going to be very comforting!

Sure there is prophecy that comes in the form of admonition or as a call to repentance. And there is the prophecy which is glorious where we hear about the favors and blessings that come to us from the Lord God. It's not all doom and gloom. Prophecy includes the good news of a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication.

But Brothers Patrick, Michael, and Augustine, what does prophecy have to do with your ordination to the priesthood today? During his interview in August, Pope Francis was asked by Father Spadaro, "What is the specific place of religious men and women in the church of today?"

Pope Francis replied, "Religious men and women are prophets. They are those who have chosen a following of Jesus that imitates his life in obedience to the Father, poverty, community life and chastity."

Pope Francis explains, “In this sense, the vows cannot end up being caricatures; otherwise, for example, community life becomes hell, and chastity becomes a way of life for unfruitful bachelors. The vow of chastity must be a vow of fruitfulness. In the church, the religious are called to be prophets in particular by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection.”

Then the Holy Father says, “A religious must never give up prophecy. This does not mean opposing the hierarchical part of the church, although the prophetic function and the hierarchical structure do not coincide. I am talking about a proposal that is always positive, but it should not cause timidity.”

Finally, Pope Francis said, “Let us think about what so many great saints, monks and religious men and women have done, from St. Anthony the Abbot onward. Being prophets may sometimes imply making waves. I do not know how to put it.... Prophecy makes noise, uproar, some say ‘a mess.’ But in reality, the charism of religious people is like yeast: prophecy announces the spirit of the Gospel.”

The spirit of the Gospel! Isaiah says in the first reading that the Gospel, the good news is prompted by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Brothers Patrick, Michael, and Augustine, you are about to be anointed. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands, you are about to be ordained priests.

You are about to be ordained priests who are needed in this era of the New Evangelization; priests whose identity is united with the identity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and whose identity also shares in the common spirituality of your religious and human families and the people to whom you will be sent to serve.

You are about to be ordained priests who must be authentic. You must put to good use the spirit of the Lord God which will be upon you by announcing the Good News of Jesus Christ in its entirety with boldness and courage as Pope Francis said in the interview.

People do not need, nor do they really want to hear what you think they want to hear. They want to hear the truth about who they are, what their true

identity is as human persons who have a God-given dignity in the image and likeness of God; persons who have the capacity to be loved and to love others; and persons who are called to be one with God in the Kingdom of heaven.

People need and want to hear that you care about them as Christ cares for us; that you lay down your life for them by going out to them, no matter how messy or inconvenient or complicated their circumstances may be, and not simply waiting for them to come to you.

You are about to be ordained priests who are prophets. This is a charism that Pope Francis affirms is especially rooted in your consecrated life; in your identity as a Third Order Regular Franciscan; in your authentic witness in living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience for the sake of the Kingdom.

Your prophetic message must be affirming when people need to be assured of God's mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and gift of salvation. And it must be equally compelling in guiding everyone to the truth about sin and repentance and ongoing conversion.

Brothers Patrick, Michael, and Augustine, thank you for answering your call to religious life, and thank you for answering the call to ordination to the priesthood. Please know that

- whenever you are challenged to think of your identity as priest and religious;
- whenever you are reminded of the need to be authentic ministers of the Gospel;
- or whenever you find yourself in a prophetic moment;

please know that the spirit of the Lord is upon you and that you are supported by the prayers of your family and friends gathered here, as well as countless people you are yet to encounter who look forward to your life and ministry as priests.

As the story goes, St. Francis supposedly said, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words." Here is one final thought on that saying and that story.

Mark Galli, editor of the journal *Christianity Today* and the author of a biography of St. Francis of Assisi, has suggested a different version of this

saying and he says that you may attribute it to anyone you wish. Galli says, “Preach the gospel. Use actions when necessary, and use words always.”

Three words that should remember from time to time are Identity, Authenticity, and Prophecy. Know them, preach them, and live them.