

Ordination of Vui Xuan Hoang

29 June 2019

Homily by Emeritus Bishop Peter Cullinane

Sisters and brothers, we rightly regard this as an occasion for great joy. It is the culmination of a long journey and many sacrifices, on the part of Vui, his family, those associated with his Catholic formation in Vietnam, and those associated with his formation for priesthood here in New Zealand.

But there are deeper reasons for joy – they have to do with what Jesus is doing for his Church. So let's ask ourselves: what is it that Jesus does for his Church through ordained ministry?

We cannot claim that ordained ministry is the platform from which all the Church's work is carried out or commissioned. The Church teaches (in multiple ways) that the platform from which all the Church's work is launched is the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist:

- all the baptized/confirmed/Eucharistic people are, according to the scriptures, a "consecrated, priestly people";
- all, according to the same scriptures, are "set apart to proclaim the wonderful things God is doing..."
- all are called to holiness, and the heights of holiness, even in the ordinary circumstances of life;
- all are anointed for the prophetic role of manifesting God's reign – showing what the world looks like where God's will is done;
- all together constitute a sign of God's life-giving, reconciling, healing power, and power over evil;
- all are celebrants of the Eucharist, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphatically teaches.

So, if all of us can be all of these things, how is Holy Orders distinctive, how is it special? I shall answer that question in a moment, but first it is worth re-stating the question:

- if there is no higher calling than becoming sons and daughters of God, which we all do through baptism,
- and if there is no greater mission than Christ's, which we all share through baptism/confirmation;
- and if there is no greater banquet than sitting at table with Christ, which we all equally do in Eucharist;
- if these are the greatest things that can happen to any or all of us, again: what is distinctive, and what is special, about Holy Orders?

The answer begins to emerge when we notice that what I have just been describing is the mission and the calling and the dignity of a people – of a community. A community has its own needs. In the community of Jesus' disciples, He wanted some to have the role for which He chose the image of the Good Shepherd. In the culture of his day, it was an image that suggested closeness to his people, even fondness, and being there for them.

He was alluding to his own role of leading the flock, uniting the flock, nurturing the flock, forming the flock for their mission, sending them out, and providing them with the ultimate assurance of how much they matter to God. The point is: that is the role – His role, His continuing role – to which He gives voice and visibility through ordained ministry.

Those entrusted with ordained ministry don't take over from where the Good Shepherd let off, because He hasn't left off!

He is still our only pastor - ordained ministry gives visibility to his pastoring;
He is still our only priest – ordained ministry makes present his priesthood, especially in the Eucharist and other sacraments;
He is our only teacher – ordained ministry gives voice to what He is saying;
He alone is head of the Church, so when priests preside at the Eucharist, or over the Christian community, they do so as servants of Christ.
So there it is: to give voice and visibility to the Good Shepherd's continuing ministry among us is indeed special, and is a great privilege.

We also know there is plenty of room for failure. St Paul had warned us: we "hold this treasure in earthenware jars.." But it's wonderful to think that even human frailty can serve God's purposes. We ordained can be more convincing witnesses of God's compassion for being aware of our own need of it.

Moreover, it is in ministering to God's people that we are ministered to. Every priest very quickly discovers (perhaps with surprise, certainly with humility and gratitude) that it is the faith, love, sacrifices, goodness and struggles of people that inspires us and enable us to be there for them.

In a recent issue of *The Tablet* a young Polish priest, working in Scotland, was writing about his vocation. He was not down-playing the things that have gone wrong or that need changing. But he was saying why he still wanted to be a priest:

I wasn't put off by the state of the Church, far from it. I think this is just the right time to become a priest. The history of the Church always comes and goes. Some say it is in crisis every 500 years, and that is when God often raises up great saints. In the low times we can only go up. And we have the chance to re-define ourselves. And that, I believe, is quite a beautiful thing to be part of."

Indeed it is. So we thank God for calling Vui. We thank God for Vui's family and his Catholic formation in Vietnam. We thank Vui for accepting God's call and putting himself at the disposal of the Holy Spirit. We thank all who have helped him on the journey. And we thank God for the Church in Vietnam.

There are also New Zealand parishioners to be thanked. One of our seminarians told me that when on pastoral placement in parishes in Taranaki last Easter, he met parishioners who took out photographs of him and Vui they were keeping in their prayer books and told him they had been praying for him. He was very moved that people who didn't even know him had been praying for him and Vui. On behalf of all of us, and behalf of Bishop Charles, I thank all those parishioners who do that. Please keep it up.

Finally, back to the Church in Vietnam: I mentioned earlier that just before Vui commenced his ordination retreat, Bishop Charles had explained that I would be doing his ordination. Then, on retreat, Vui opened that wonderful little book by Cardinal Francis Van Thuan, (*Loaves and Fishes*), and discovered that 20 years ago to this day (the feast of Sts Peter and Paul) I had signed off on a preface I wrote for a New Zealand edition of that book; and now, here we are, ordaining a fellow country-man of Cardinal van Thuan in New Zealand.

When Cardinal van Thuan was auxiliary archbishop of Saigon, he was imprisoned by the Communist regime for 13 years, 9 of them in solitary confinement. During that time, he secretly celebrated Mass when he could. I quote his own words: "Every day, with three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of my hand, I would celebrate Mass. This was my altar, and this was my cathedral... Each day in

reciting the words of consecration, I confirmed with all my heart and soul a new pact, an eternal pact between Jesus and me through his blood mixed with mine. Those were the most beautiful Masses of my life". That's what celebrating Mass meant to him; that's what it means to Vui, and that's what it means to all of us. So now let's get on with it!