

BISHOP UNTENER'S HOMILY AT ROB HOWE'S ORDINATION - 12/4/94

In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea & Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. He went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of 1 crying out in the desert:
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.
Every valley shall be filled and every mountain & hill shall be made low.
The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth,
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' (Lk 3:1-6)

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Part One

Luke's magnificent introduction to the entry of John the Baptist about to walk on stage has a clear purpose: to ground Jesus in the real history of this world. Jesus did not touch down in the enclosed walls of the Essenes at Qumran. He came into the thick of life, into the human affairs of this world.

It should be observed that not every world religion would find that desirable. Hindus, for example, would want to be a-historical, apart from and above the flow of everyday human events. Plato would agree with that approach.

It should also be observed that not all Catholics have felt that everyone in the Church should be so grounded. People at times have wanted to place apart and on a pedestal ordained priests and consecrated religious. At times priests and religious have gladly responded to that invitation.

But it was not the way of Jesus, although he was tempted by the devil to go that way. Instead, Jesus was part of human life, however ritually unclean it might seem at times. And he portrayed in a negative light the priest and levite who went to the other side of the road to avoid the unclean victim on the way to Jericho.

The ordained priesthood has been at its best when it did not go the way of the separated . . . when it did not cross the road to the other side but was exercised from within the community, from within the course of human events.

Part Two

On the other hand . . . When ministries are grounded in the community it does not mean that they are ground down and flattened out so that one is just like the other. We are, as Paul says, one body, but the hand is not the eye, the foot is not the ear.

This ordination, Rob, is real, not mere ceremony. It does not make you separate, but it does make you different. You shall leave here different than you came in, and you shall have a different relationship to this community. In this ceremony, you are by a sacrament constituted as someone who can act in the person of the whole body of Christ, which is the Church. In this ceremony, you are by a sacrament constituted as someone who stands as a symbol of the Church. In the Eastern Church, where this is more emphasized, they would refer to you as an icon of the Church.

This does not mean that you are set above the rest of the community. You are, however, set before us in a visible way, because we need such representation, and in the providence of God, you are called to this role which helps our identity as Church.

You cannot claim to be holier than others. But you are indeed called to be a holy person. Because you stand publicly before the community, you have an added obligation to live up to the baptismal holiness to which we are all called.

Part Three

How does one balance on the one hand being grounded in the community and in the world, not above it, separate, on a pedestal . . . and on the other hand having a role that is different, a role in which you are constituted by a sacrament as someone who acts in the person of the body of Christ, and who stands as a symbol of the Church?

The solution is this: Do it from the heart, and from nowhere else. Do it for God and for the people, and for no other reason. Do it authentically, and in no other way. Then it shall be fine.

- ** When you preside at prayer, pray . . . don't perform prayer.
- ** When you lead, lead . . . don't posture.
- ** When you teach . . . carry out the words spoken to you when you were ordained a Deacon and the Scriptures were entrusted to you with the words: "Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach."
- ** When you listen, listen . . . don't just patiently endure.
- ** When you stand on behalf of the Church, stand tall and stand for what you are, and be neither timid nor melodramatic.

In a word, accept your role for what it is and live it authentically. Live it clear and strong, as John the Baptist lived his. If you do that, and concentrate on that, you will not have to worry about being grounded in real life while still living a distinctive role.

If Luke could use those dramatic words for the entrance of John the Baptist in his gospel, I can use similar words now, Rob, as you are about to step forward for your ordination ceremony:

In the 52nd year of the founding of the United Nations . . .
29 years after the death of Martin Luther King . . .
in the 25th year since people from earth landed on the moon . . .
when Bill Clinton was president of the United States . . .
during the Pontificate of Pope John Paul II . . .
20 days after the death of Francis Reh . . .
let the Spirit now come afresh upon Rob Howe, in this cathedral of
Saginaw.