



## Homily – Ordination of Priests and Deacons

January 10, 2009

St. Anthony Mary Claret Church

**The Most Rev. José H. Gomez, S.T.D.**

**Archbishop of San Antonio**

My dear brother bishops, dear candidates to the priesthood and diaconate, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The readings we have just heard from the Word of God seem very personal. They sound as if they are addressed to each one of our brothers who are about to be ordained this morning in this Holy Mass.

To Deacon Clay and Deacon Jesus—who today will be made priests forever. To our brothers who this day will be ordained deacons on their way to the holy priesthood—our brothers Martin, Gonzalo, Cesar, James, Arthur and Friar Andrew.

To understand what the Gospel is saying today we need to remember its context.

The conversation we just heard between our Lord and St. Peter takes place at daybreak on the beach, sometime after our Lord's resurrection. A few verses before the passage we just heard, the Gospel tells us that they were standing by a "charcoal fire." Why this little detail?

It is not incidental. In fact, this little detail is the key to the meaning of their whole conversation. There is only one other place in the Bible where we are told about a "charcoal fire." It was on the night of our Lord's arrest, in the courtyard of the high priest where our Lord was on trial. It was a cold night and the high priests' servants had made a "charcoal fire" (cf. Jn 18:18).

And while our Lord was being abused and interrogated, St. Peter had stood by that charcoal fire trying to stay warm, trying stay out of sight. While he was standing there, he was asked three times whether he was one of Christ's disciples. And, as we know, Peter denied him three times before the cock crowed.

Now, in today's Gospel, Peter is again getting warm by a charcoal fire. And again he has to answer three questions. This time it is Jesus himself who wants to know: "Peter, do you love me?" *¿Me amas más que éstos?"*

And three times, Peter answers, "Yes, Lord. You know all things, you know that I love you." *Señor, tú lo sabes todo; tú sabes que te quiero.*

For each time he denied him by a charcoal fire, Peter is asked to make a new confession of faith—again, while standing by a charcoal fire.

It is a moment of such tender forgiveness.

We all remember the bold zeal of St. Peter before our Lord was arrested. How he had promised to be more loyal than all the rest. “Even if they fall away, I will not,” he said. He had even promised to lay down his life for Jesus (cf. Mk 14:29; Jn 13:37).

But now, after the dark night of his failure, Peter is humble. He knows the sadness, the bitter disappointment we feel when we have not been true to Jesus. Peter realizes his weakness. But he loves Jesus still. And he wants with all his heart, despite his weakness, to follow Jesus. To serve him.

Isn't this our story, too? All of us here this morning, my brothers and sisters? Don't we all love Jesus, but still sometimes deny him by some of the things we do and some of the things we fail to do? Don't we grieve like Peter did, and in our sorrow and love seek forgiveness, and the grace and strength to begin again?

Jesus knows our weakness. Yet he looks not on our sins, but on our love. This is the great mercy and love of God.

I think this Gospel has a special meaning for you, my brothers who are about to be ordained. Because it is also a reading that speaks about ministry and mission. Three times our Lord tells Peter—“If you love me, then feed my sheep; tend my sheep.” *Apacienta mis ovejas*.

My brothers: You have not been called to ordination because you are perfect. Because you are already holy. Or even because you have some natural ability to preach and teach. You have been called because the Lord knows all things. And the Lord knows that you love him and want to serve him.

In this Holy Mass, God will accept your humble profession of love, just as he accepted St. Peter's. *Señor, tú sabes que te quiero*.

And he will give you the solemn command he gave to Peter, and to all the apostles, and to all their successors down through the ages: *Apacienta mis ovejas*. Feed my sheep. Tend my sheep.

St. Augustine referred to the ordained ministry as the *amoris officium*. The office of love.

My brothers, many are called by Jesus. But you are *chosen* specially to serve him in this apostolic office of love—this office of the Church by which God's love is still proclaimed and proposed to the world.

As we understand from the first reading today, from the prophet Jeremiah: Before you were formed in the womb, our Lord desired you for this office of love.

*Antes de formarte en el vientre materno, yo te conocía! Antes de que salieras del seno, yo te había consagrado!*

This is something I will never stop pondering. How in God's plan of salvation, there is a place for each one of us. What an amazing privilege it is to be a child of God! To know that the Creator of heaven and earth had a plan for you and for me—before we were born. *Antes de formarte en el vientre materno!* Before the universe was created!

Tomorrow we celebrate the great feast of our Lord's baptism. When each of us recalls our own baptism, when we were made beloved children of God. What love the Father has shown us! (cf. 1 Jn 3:1).

And today, in our Father's plan, you my brothers will be ordained as spiritual fathers and deacons to his people. It is interesting, isn't it, that our readings today talk about your youthfulness. You are young! Yet after today, some of you will be called "Father" by men and women much older than you. By your own parents and grandparents!

And all of you, through the laying on of the bishops' hands, will be given the responsibility of leading God's people by your example. By your words—by your preaching and teaching of the Word of God. But more importantly, by your lives—by your witness to purity, and faith, and love.

Do not be afraid of this responsibility, in spite of your youth! *No temáis!* Jesus Christ goes with you as your friend. The words of Jeremiah are God's promise to each of you. Christ will help you to know what to say and what to do.

But you must stay close to him. Walk with him in prayer. Seek to be more like him every day—through your contact with him in the Scriptures and in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and confession. Stay true to his commandments and to the duties he entrusts you with.

What St. Paul tells you in the reading today, is very true. Your ministries will be the source of your sanctification. If you practice your duties with deep devotion—tending his sheep, feeding his sheep—your love for Christ will grow, your friendship with him will become more intimate.

Your progress will be visible for all to see. You will know salvation. And so will those you serve.

Take courage my brothers! *No temáis!* We are grateful, all of us here today, for your great love, for the consecration of your lives. We thank you, my brothers!

As we prepare now to celebrate your ordinations, I entrust each of you and your "office of love" to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of Fair Love. May your love for her grow, too, as you grow in your love for her Son.