

ORDINATION TO PRIESTHOOD of AARON DAMBOISE
St. Michael Parish (St. Mary of the Assumption Church), Augusta

June 7, 2008

Aaron, in just a few moments, before you prostrate yourself for the singing of the litany of supplication, you will make six promises:

- to discharge without fail the office of priesthood
- to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely
- to celebrate the sacraments faithfully and reverently
- to pray for your flock unceasingly
- to be united more deeply each day with Christ
- to be respectful and obedient to your bishop

While each of those promises requires of you a full and earnest response now and in all the years to come, the readings you have selected for your ordination prompt me to focus my reflections on one promise in particular, the promise to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely, preaching the Gospel and teaching the Catholic faith...your ministry of evangelization and catechesis.

Let's think about these Scriptures we have just now heard. In the first reading, we have the call of Jeremiah to be prophet, messenger, spokesman for the Lord. God tells the young Israelite that he has been God's chosen one, dedicated and appointed to God's service, long before he was ever aware of his vocation. It is as Jesus told his disciples "You have not chosen me. I have chosen you, to go forth and bear fruit."

And so it is with you. Your calling, your ordination today as a priest is best understood in the light of the unfolding of God's saving will, as one bright star in the glorious, mysterious constellation that is the Father's eternal saving plan for the world.

A humbling, even daunting consideration, isn't it? So perhaps you, Aaron, like Jeremiah, like most every priest, like me, have sometimes known a bit of anxiety about the awesome responsibility that will be yours, even wondering at times, am I really up to all that it demands of me? We've all asked that question at one time or another. The answer is that, on our own, we are not up to the task. With God's grace, all things are possible. And that is why it is good for you, on this, your first day as a priest of God, to decide to recall every day God's reassuring words to Jeremiah when the young man protested that he was too young, too uncertain of his ability to carry out the essential prophetic task: to speak God's word. Hear the Lord's words to Jeremiah as his words to you: "Say not I am too young. To whomever I send you, you shall go. Whatever I command you, you

shall speak. Have no fear...because I am with you to deliver you.” And then, the handing over of divine power to the new prophet: “See, I place my words in your mouth!”

You know, Aaron, that your ministry as priest is a profound sharing in the threefold munera that extends Christ’s own ministry as prophet, priest and king in this time and place. Through him and with him and in him, you too will proclaim, sanctify and shepherd God’s people. The three gifts and responsibilities are interwoven, of course, and never separate from one another in a priest’s daily life and ministry.

I think, though, that at this time in our history as Church there is a need to emphasize the prophetic, that is, the preaching and teaching dimension as a real priority. This is where the urgent need lies. Our Catholic tradition is so deep, so rich, so powerful, so compelling in the truth it proclaims and the hope it promises. Yet, so many of our good people are often sorely lacking even the most basic knowledge of the faith, whether it concerns the elements of the Creed, the principles of morality, or the doctrine of the sacraments. Even adults with high levels of education in other areas often admit that their understanding of the faith, of Scripture and Catholic tradition, is at the adolescent level.

One sees evidence of this challenge in the recently completed study “Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice Among U.S. Catholics,” published by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. Among other findings, the CARA Research shows that while 57% of adult Catholics believe the Church’s perennial teaching that Christ is really present in the Eucharist, 43% say that his presence is merely symbolic, that Christ isn’t really present in the consecrated bread and wine. 61% say that the sacraments are essential to their faith. What of the other 39%? Only 21% go to confession once or more times a year. And on and on. And this research is only in the area of sacramental belief and practice. The commitment of Catholics to the Church’s moral doctrine is another area of serious concern. You chose a text from II Timothy for today’s liturgy, a text that describes our own time as well as it does the first Christian century: “The time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine...they will stop listening to the truth...”

The fact is, I believe, that so many of our good people have barely heard the truth, or gotten beyond the surface of it. To proclaim this truth will be your holy work. Vigorous evangelization and effective catechesis are the answer. Your priestly charism calls you to leadership in this critical area. And so how encouraging it is to me that you wanted the message of II Timothy to resound over your ordination: “I charge you to preach the word, to stay with this task, whether convenient or inconvenient—correcting, reproofing, appealing—constantly teaching and never losing patience.” And you must proclaim it as a shepherd, whose voice is known and loved by the flock. You will attract your people to enter through the gate that is Christ, not on the wisdom of your words alone, nor because of your knowledge of doctrine, nor by the cogency of your arguments...as important as all of that is. It will be because of your pastoral charity, your love for your people, your passionate longing to bring them ever deeper into communion with Christ...to make them holy and bring them salvation.

In fact, the way we preach and teach can either draw people to the Lord or keep them at a distance. Pope Saint Gregory the Great warns about what he calls the “teaching of the arrogant,” whose “words betray what they teach”...who “give the impression that they live on lofty heights from which they look down disdainfully on those they are teaching.” Gregory’s answer? “...teach by words and demonstrate by living example—humility, which is the mother...of virtue. Its goal is to express humility among the disciples of truth more by deeds than by words.”

Aaron, the time has come to ordain you a priest. I conclude these thoughts with a few words from a prayer by Henry Cardinal Newman that was shared with me by a Trappist monk during a recent retreat. Listen to what Newman writes, and make his prayer your own:

Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of yours. Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come into contact with may feel your presence in my soul... Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine, so to shine as to be a light to others... Let me preach you...by my example, by the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears for you. Amen.