

Homily by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez
The Rite of Admission to Candidacy for Holy Orders
Theological College, Washington, D.C.
October 9, 2019

1 Cor 12: 4-11

Let us celebrate together, dear brothers, the gift of our priestly vocation! The young men who will receive candidacy tonight are a tangible sign that the harvest is plentiful and that there is a great deal of pastoral work to be accomplished in the church and in the world. In fact, there is an immense hunger for God in a post-modern society.

These brothers, our friends, have given their Marian “Yes” to the call to service, and they have been accepted by their bishops and rectors to advance in their journey toward holy orders.

Indeed, they are ready and willing to dedicate their whole lives to the Lord in service of his body, the church, as St. Augustine would call it: the *totus Christus*.

Tonight we are ritualizing this mysterious, existential reality of the gift of a priestly vocation in the ceremony of candidacy. Our brother seminarians are anticipating their total “Yes” to Christ, their response of “Here I am, Lord, send me!,” which they will repeat again at the very beginning of the ordination ceremony for holy orders.

Tonight’s ritual reveals, as well, the joyful “Let it be” of their bishops and formators who support our brother seminarians on the way to priesthood, encouraging these candidates to pursue this noble vocation. We are all united in the prayer that they may have a greater love for the Lord every day in chaste celibacy as future spiritual husbands and spiritual fathers to the faith communities that will be entrusted to their pastoral care in their respective local churches.

As a sponsoring bishop of one of the seminarians at Theological College, allow me to publicly express my gratitude to the Sulpician Fathers who were *my own* first formators at the Séminaire de Philosophie in Montreal, Canada, in the mid-1960s – to you young men that must seem like a hundred years ago!

The church is deeply grateful to the Society of Saint Sulpice for their charism of forming priests with such dedication and competence. Their unique ministry finds expression in the humble service of preparing men for the priesthood, reflecting a sort of spirituality of Nazareth...like Mary and Joseph, they are faithful custodians of the Lord, forming his priestly ministers day by day, *poco a poco*, without great recognition or notoriety.

We heard tonight a tiny fragment of the teachings of St. Paul to the dynamic early Christian community at Corinth. His few words actually reveal a great vision of church. It is a church fully animated by the Holy Spirit, made visible by the presence of so many ministries and so many people involved in pastoral care.

Paul expresses his deep appreciation for those who are involved in tasks that might be easily taken for granted. He also recognizes that the community can be threatened by some members who look down on others who are less affluent or less educated. The church at Corinth seemed to be challenged by the jealousy of some, or the insecurity of others who resented those in more prominent roles of leadership. I imagine that, as Paul wrote those words, he was remembering what the Lord Jesus himself said to his apostles, “*It cannot be that way with you*” (Mt 20: 26).

In his guidance, Paul invites the community to be docile to the presence of the Trinity in action and to recognize the Holy Spirit as the source of the many and varied ministries given generously for the good of the totality, as a sort of a harmonious symphony of gifts. In the mind of Paul, diversity in the church does not undermine its unity but enhances it all the more!

In light of this ecclesiology of the Body of Christ fully empowered by the Holy Spirit, I envision the parish priest of the 21st century as a passionate *servant-leader* who has a rich capacity for discernment of the gifts and talents of the laity. Yes, the priest enables his people to reach the highest expression of their capacities, both in church and in society. Clericalism, as Pope Francis rightly warns us, is self-referential; in contrast, a true priest is *fully energized* in building up the Body of Christ. Like St. Paul said, a priest’s deepest passion is evangelization: desiring that Jesus Christ be known, loved, and served by all.

The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, coined the intriguing phrase, “soy yo y mis circunstancias.” Roughly translated, this saying has the sense of: “My identity is essentially related to my environment, my surroundings, my community.” This is true wisdom for the priest of today.

Let me note, in closing, that Theological College is providentially situated across from the magnificent National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. In both a symbolic and a real way, the loving gaze of the Mother of our Lord is directed toward all of you during the time of your priestly formation. In turn, you will be very blessed to seek her assistance and protection, and I encourage you to keep always in your heart the words she spoke to the servants at the Wedding of Cana in Galilee: “Do whatever He tells you” (John 2:5).