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Priest Jubilee Celebration

(Bishop Sullivan gave this homily at the jubilee celebration Mass in the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, May 16.)

I welcome all to the special observance of anniversaries of priestly ordination.

At the top of the list is Father Paschal – who was ordained 50 years ago.

Then there are two 40-year winners – Monsignors Bill Pitt and Tom Shreve.

The next group is special to me, because of the seven being recognized for 25 years of priestly service, I ordained five in 1976: Fathers Pat Apuzzo, Joe Clark, Mike Duffy, Chris Haydinger and Jim Kauffmann. The remaining two jubilarians are: Father Dave Bergner - who is director of Commonwealth Catholic Charities and a member of the Salvatorians (Society of the Divine Savior) and Father Don Cavey -- who serves as chaplain for the Veterans Administration and came to us from the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

At the anniversary observance last year, each of the honorees spoke after communion. We will spare you this trauma for them and for us this year. Monsignor Tom Shreve will do the honors today for all the honorees.

I have been tempted to do an anecdote on each priest. Again, out of charity – and perhaps out of justice and mercy – I will spare them and you that ordeal.

Suffice it to say that all together we have 305 years of priestly ministry.

To our honorees I greet you in the name of the priests of the diocese with sentiments of friendship, appreciation and gratitude for your years of priestly dedication and for being models of priestly spirituality as well as successful ministry.

Today we gather to uphold priesthood as a special vocation from God – in the words of Jesus – “You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.” Each of our

honorees has a personal story to tell of being called, of responding to that call and of persevering in that call. The call to priestly service is not a one-time event, but a daily response to the promptings of the Spirit – “Here I am, Lord. Send me”.

As I recall my own priestly journey, I can say for all of us that we have no idea where the Lord’s Spirit will lead us. But, at our ordination, we said loudly *adsum* – “here I am – present”. We made ourselves present on that day of ordination and have trusted ever since that we are where the Lord wants us to be.

The priesthood is not an elitist group, or a privileged class. We are set apart for a particular role in God’s plan of salvation, but we are not set apart to remain apart – to be separated or distant from those whom we are called to serve. In fact, we are one with them since all of us – by reason of baptism – share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Each of us is incorporated into Christ to become a self-gift to others – a self-offering according to our chosen vocation.

For us who are ordained, the words of institution at Mass must be a lived reality in our very lives: “This is my body being offered up for you. This is my blood being poured out for you.” Every day these words set the tone and direction of our ministry. Should we accept being any less than Christ when we respond to the words of Jesus in the Last Supper discourse: “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for others.”

For a wide variety of reasons, priestly ministry is not simple or easy today. Our expectations of ourselves can easily differ from the expectations that others have of us. For many of us, we were formed in one church culture and found ourselves thrust into being church in new ways. For those who longed to be on a priestly pedestal – there was swift disillusionment when altar rails were removed and everyone ended up in the sanctuary. In seminary training, we never learned about conflict resolution, personnel policies, staff meetings, pastoral and finance councils – and the list goes on and on.

Yet, despite the daily stress and strain of today’s ministry, I am sure our jubilarians can rejoice in the grace and fulfillment they find in priestly ministry. As Chet Michael reminds priests at the end of his retreats – go home thinking of all the good you do and the fact that there is no vocation that touches so many lives as that of the priest. The words that Charlie Kelly spoke to me just before he died also come vividly to mind today – words which capture the essence of today’s celebration – “Walter, I have always loved being a priest”.

Yes, the priest is a man called to fall in love first with Jesus who says in today’s gospel: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Live on in me as I do in you. My heavenly Father is glorified in you by your bearing much fruit and being my disciples.” The love of Jesus then flows out to those we are called to serve. I

firmly believe that the love of people for us is less important than the love we share for all the persons we encounter in ministry.

The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles seems apropos to today's celebration – not as a discourse on circumcision – but as a recounting of the struggles that the early Christians underwent to make the church work. The Apostles had to respond to the early conflicts that arose whether a Gentile had to become a Jew before becoming a Christian, and whether or not Gentile Christians had to observe the Mosaic Law.

Let me give a few timely examples:

- One of our cardinals issues a statement that condemns religious pluralism and another responds with the assertion that true unity must allow for diversity.
- Greek Orthodox leaders are tangling with the Holy Father over papal authority and the Holy Father is calling together the cardinals to explore the role of the papacy in the quest for Christian unity. Also to be discussed for the umpteenth time is the relation of the local church to universal church.
- Closer to home, the church is rejecting capital punishment and condemning nuclearism while the majority of American Catholics still believe in vengeance and advocate the use of violence and retaliation. Even as I speak, our nation is embroiled in the spectacle of executing Timothy McVeigh.
- Right in our parishes, we find liturgical watchdogs who spend their time and energy – and everybody else's – finding fault with our priests and attacking their very integrity as ministers of word and sacrament. I fear that new liturgical norms will become the latest round of contention.

Enough said!

To be church today is not easy and we can too easily give in to self-pity, being discouraged or having a martyr complex. The struggles of the first Christian churches are the same struggles of today – and our struggles, in whatever form, pale in terms of the struggles of Jesus. His followers were slow to learn, and his enemies were quick to go on attack – even to the point of putting him on a cross.

To be successful in priesthood requires us to fix our gaze constantly, day in and day out, on the person of Jesus who came to serve and not to be served. Our spirituality must be centered in the person of Jesus who calls us once again this Easter season to take our fingers and touch the nail marks in his hands, and feel his pierced side. This we encounter in daily ministry. Do we not encounter the nail marks of Christ in the suffering and pain of others? At the same time, we

experience newness of life, refreshment and joy in the call we accepted years ago to be Christ for others. Hopefully people can truly proclaim, "We have seen the Lord!" – because they have seen the living Christ in us.

Again – I congratulate and thank our jubilarians for reflecting in their lives Christ's mission to our world. I pray that God will bless you with abundant joy and freshness in your priestly ministry as you reach out to others in his name.

May we apply to ourselves the words of Jesus in the gospel to his apostles: "My heavenly Father is glorified in you by your bearing much fruit and being my disciples."

+ Walter F. Sullivan
Bishop of Richmond