

The Rev. Dr. Patrick Viscuso
Commencement Address
June 3, 2018
Holy Trinity Orthodox Seminary and Monastery

Christ is in our midst!

Your Grace, Fathers, Brothers, Sisters, and Seminarians.

Almost forty years ago, my seminary class graduated from an Orthodox theological school, many of us in preparation for the Holy Priesthood. With all of the excitement during the graduation ceremonies, I cannot even recall what was said by our main speaker or if we had one at all. Like the seminarians at Holy Trinity, we were filled with the joy of graduating and anticipated a journey of lifelong service to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Seminary life for me and my classmates was hard and there was always lots to complain about: the food, the cold, the heat, and the demanding schedules. No doubt the seminarians at Holy Trinity also have plenty to complain about. But despite the living conditions, I must say that we had something that *was* a treasure; the seminary chapel, on which no expense had been spared, and rightly so, since it was during daily matins and vespers that we found our true sustenance.

One last memory that I will share of graduation was the one sole phrase that I can remember of the sermon given by His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos of blessed memory, who when looking out at the graduates assembled in the chapel during the Hierarchical Liturgy, said the following; “we are few, but we are many.” Indeed, we were few, I recall my own class as being less than 25. Your own graduating class from Holy Trinity Seminary obviously does not number in the hundreds. But, as indicated by Archbishop Iakovos, the number is not the real point, since I think he was looking towards the higher goal for which many of us had dedicated ourselves – like many of you – to prepare to serve the Church, mostly as priests.

As a young boy raised in the Greek Orthodox Church, thanks to the insistence of my Greek grandmother that all children be raised Orthodox, I had thought about being a priest since the age of 4 and, as a child, remember quite clearly thinking about the world around me, and feeling the presence of God. Certainly, like many boys, I served in the altar and often felt its mysterious nature. That nature is recalled in the description of ordination by one 16th century canonical text as the “appointing by the imposition of hands and invocation of the Holy Spirit to serve the undefiled Mysteries, into which angels yearn to peer.”

Imagine the poetry of the phrase, being ordained and celebrating “the undefiled Mysteries, into which angels yearn to peer.” The canons of the Church and their commentators, often speak about the sacredness of the priesthood when describing the handling of the undefiled consecrated elements during the Divine Liturgy, with

terms such as “the greatness of the miracle.” The hands of priests used to handle the Divine Mysteries are kissed, because they have come into contact with the Lord’s Body and Blood. Often priests themselves will not kiss icons after the Liturgy for the fear that somehow, they will disrespect the “Good Portion,” the “Gift,” and the “Divine and Holy Communion” - in the words of the holy canons of our Church - which they have just received. One of the joys of the priesthood is to worship in the altar and receive directly from the chalice, especially to concelebrate with other priests and with deacons, and to receive together, while praying in unison the preparatory prayers before Communion.

What compels us to seek ordination? Is it the thought of exercising power and authority with those same hands over other lives? Or does the reason lie in becoming servants of the people of God? Such servants do not seek power over anyone, but are faithful examples, guides, and shepherds, who walk among the flock, go after the stray, and are a source of comfort and nourishment that keeps the people of God close to the Church, rather than trying to set up fences and chains to keep the people in.

When thinking about the influence that a priest can have, there was a haunting story that my mother told me. Typical among Greek immigrants coming to our country after the first world war, out of the great poverty and upheaval of Asia Minor and mainland Greece, my grandfather made his way into the restaurant business, working 17-hour days. He died in 1944. When I was young, my mother told me about his funeral service celebrated in one of the huge Greek sections of a New York cemetery and about the priest who inadvertently kicked her father’s coffin at graveside.

She remembered that priest’s inadvertent action all her life and the sadness for over 50 years that it caused her regarding his carelessness. Unbeknownst to her, this story also haunted me when I thought about ordination. Given the effects of this minor accident, I thought about how much more fearful the effects of a priest’s inadvertent word could be, but at the same how much more powerful a well-intended word could be. While he could destroy someone’s life by causing them to take a wrong turn through thoughtless counsel, a priest is also capable of intervening to save a life. He could alienate someone from the Mysteries of the Church by telling a story for idle amusement, but also commune an entire community and learn names of each and every one. In short, there is always the potential of causing harm – all because of something that was unintended, or miscommunicated, or done frivolously, or said carelessly; but also, to do much good, to pray with the sick, to comfort the bereaved, to counsel those choosing a path in life, to work for the salvation of an entire community, and to give yourself over to the most noble cause on earth – one so important that everyone’s true life depends on it.

Based on my experience of 27 years in the priesthood, I believe that one of the most fitting motivations for seeking lifelong consecration to God is because you have been

gifted to be a σκεύος, a vessel of God, for the reception and imparting of sanctification through the invocation of the Deity, and to do some good in this world, whenever you can and wherever you are in the small part of creation in which you will live – to make present the same sanctifying blessing bestowed by the Savior, so that you can contribute in a meaningful way to the healing and new life of the people of God.

When imparting God’s sanctification and doing good, I can also say that there will be obstacles, for, as a 14th century Byzantine hieromonk once wrote, “Where is it necessary not without blood to struggle on behalf of the Truth?” That blood is the joy of the priesthood in its total dedication – mind, heart, soul, and body – to a loving a God, for whom our efforts are persistent and determined.

This struggle, on behalf of Truth, is to sustain the flock of the Church - an apostolic charge of Christ. As a minority, in a sea of disbelief and secularism, as ἀλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων, “fishers of men,”¹ we are continually challenged to work for the spiritual perfection and the salvation of the faithful. The upholding of canonical standards that reflect the strength of our faith and our community will be tested, over whom the “gates of hell” will not prevail.²

In the poetic words of a late Byzantine hieromonk, the holy canons – the canonical standards of the Church - are the “precious stones” that are “varied” and “differentiated” used in the building of a house constructed on the foundation of Jesus Christ. They are a divine-human reality parallel to the two natures of the Savior and are an expression of the Church’s Theandric economy. They express truth in the circumstances of history to address specific situations and circumstances, categories of behavior, specific persons, and institutional structures. In a word, our canonical standards are incarnational; they are the application of Truth to the specific circumstances of history and an expression of our Church’s pastoral life.

The parish priest is the practitioner of this canon law par excellence when he celebrates the Mysteries and administers them to the people of God; preaches and teaches; and acts as a shepherd in counseling, supporting, and manifesting this foundational love of Jesus Christ. In each case, he is applying the dogma of the Church to the practical lives of Christians.

As a practitioner - as the representative of Holy Tradition or Παράδοσις - he has a sacred obligation to obtain a sufficient knowledge of that Tradition. He must become a historical theologian - one who knows the history of the Church’s pastoral life - and one who can recognize the application of the Church’s teachings to the present - preserving - while at the same time dynamically creating solutions for the present.

¹ Matt 4:18; Mk 1:17.

² Matt 16:18.

Again, returning to some simple advice, based on experience in the priesthood, when walking among your flock and acting as a shepherd in serving and ministering to the people of God, please keep in mind, that when you are most tempted *not* to do something because you are too tired; *not* to stay and help; *not* to take the turn to celebrate; *to allow* yourself the indulgence of talking instead of praying in the altar; and *not* to take the time to reach out to that person that needs you, but to postpone and put off to another time - more often *than not* – this will be a sign that the one who opposes all good is active. Satan is the cause of great suffering and confusion – and is described at various times in canonical texts, as being a “wolf” and “imposter;” and as “counterfeit,” “deceptive,” as a “withering into non-existence” and possessed of “madness.” His attempts at temptation will be a sign for you to know that at that moment, the opportunity to do the greatest good is present.

Part of your persistence and determination should be to never minimize or ignore the activity of Satan in this world, but to be aware and on guard, lest, in the words of one Byzantine commentator on the canons, “the evil one might not appear to derive an advantage, blazingly pilfering the eternal from the one performing priestly functions.” Satan must be opposed in your sermons, in the Mysteries that you celebrate, and especially in the confessions that you will hear, through which you may be able to help people turn away from sin and be healed.

A few years ago, I made a pilgrimage to Mount Athos, with my son and a close friend. Among the first things that we did upon arriving was to venerate two of its most central icons, the Παναγία Πορταΐτισσα in the monastery of Ἰβήρων and the Ἄξιόν ἐστὶν in the Πρωτάτο, the 10th century cathedral temple, the καθολικόν, located in Καρυές, the capital of the Ἅγιον Ὄρος.

Standing before the icon of the Ἄξιόν ἐστὶν, I thought of the generations of priests that had also stood before the Θεοτόκος in that holy temple, asking fundamental questions about their worthiness to have been ordained and whether they had done some good in the world.

Although extremely important, we must remember worthiness is not a question that a candidate for ordination can answer – only the bishop exercises the responsibilities for resolving uncertainties and ordaining - just as a 12th century Byzantine canonist describes in commenting on the obligations of the bishop contained in the first Apostolic Canon, “This Apostolic canon speaks concerning laying on of hands (χειροτονίας) that is celebrated by a hierarch in church, just as Paul the Great states, ‘lay hands (χειρας...ἐπιτίθει) on no man quickly, nor share sins in others...’”³ and elsewhere commenting on the twelfth Apostolic canon, “those who are going to ordain them, when they examine matters regarding them, and perhaps discover some uncertainties, put off the ordination, until the uncertainties regarding them might be resolved.”

³ 1 Tim 5:22.

Nevertheless, when venerating the icons of Mount Athos and reflecting on standing before God's presence, I felt strongly that so much can be done to serve our Lord Jesus Christ as a priest and so much can be done to live authentically as a disciple of Christ – to truly fulfill the words of the Psalmist, "I will meditate on Your commandments, I will not forget Your words."⁴ Your class gives me hope that you will be inspired to join hands with your brothers, to take the first steps towards ordination, and to offer yourselves in service to the Body of Christ.

With all my hopes and all my prayers, from the depths of my heart, I congratulate you all on your accomplishments in your studies and preparations to serve our Lord Jesus Christ as priests of His Holy Church, if that is what you desire and are able to do.

May all of you live according to the ideals expressed by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in its second canon, and continue to be "eager to study the sacred canons, the Holy Gospel, the Book of the Divine Apostle, and all Divine Scripture searchingly and not in a passing manner; and to pick out its meaning with zeal, to live it according to Divine Scriptures' commandments, to strongly persuade others to do these things, and to be prepared with a defense for all who demand reasoning concerning the hope among us."

Thank you for your attention, glory to God in all things, and please pray for me an unworthy priest.

⁴ Ps 118:16 (LXX).