

19th July 2015

PENTECOST VIII

FIRST HIGH MASS OF CANON GUILLAUME FENOLL

Institute of Christ the King

in the presence of His Lordship the Bishop of Lancaster

Shrine Church of S^t Walburge, Preston

“And I will raise me up a faithful priest, who shall do according to my heart,
and my soul, and I will build him a faithful house,
and he shall walk all days before my Christ.”

— *I Kings 2:35.*



My Lord,
Reverend Fathers,
Dear Friends,
Very dear Canon Fenoll,

This passage from the Book of Kings has for us a special resonance today as we gather to celebrate this First High Mass of a newly ordained priest. Canon Fenoll, before entering the seminary, you were a military officer. You stand here today an officer in a very different army — a sentinel of the Church Militant — whose arms are not those of the world and whose ruler has already overcome his enemies, though he asks us all to wage combat with the world, the flesh and the devil so that we also may share in his triumph. The battle lines for you, dear brother, as for all of us, are not those of trenches and human warfare; these battle lines run through our own heart. A son of Adam, you are now called to sacrifice the old man so that you can be a faithful priest according to God’s own heart.

But what, indeed, is a priest? For what, dear Canon, did you spend seven long years preparing, for what were you willing to turn aside from a career and sacrifice the comforting joys of family life? For what, dear faithful, do you ask when you pour forth fervent prayers to God asking labourers for his harvest? What is a priest?

St. Paul’s definition is perhaps the most beautiful: “ministers of Christ and dispensers of the mysteries of God” (I Corinthians 4:1). A priest is the mediator between God and man, and Jesus Christ — true God and true man — is therefore the supreme and perfect priest. He accomplished the most perfect act of priesthood when He offered himself in sacrifice to redeem us from our sins. Without the eyes of faith it is impossible to understand the priesthood. On a

worldly level, we might view the priest as another professional or social worker, howsoever important. But fundamentally the priesthood is a vocation and not only a function. Simply put, the priest's mission is Christ's mission: to help people go to heaven.

But, dear Canon, do not forget these other words of Saint Paul: "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (II Corinthians 4:7). Though it would be a pleasure for me to describe to our listeners your many human qualities, it was for none of these that the Lord has chosen you. Your vocation is a mystery, for which you must thank God every day. It is not by the eyes of the world that you must judge your own priesthood: in any case, it is not yours – it is Christ's.

On this occasion of your first solemn Mass, I am reminded of these words of Pope Pius XI to a young priest: "may your first Mass be the *least* fervent of your life." With each Mass you celebrate may you enter more deeply into the charter the pontiff gave when he ordained you: *Imitate what you celebrate*. You are henceforth a man of the altar: here, at the heart of the Church, is your place. By the words you speak in the hushed adoration of the Canon of the Mass, heaven and earth are joined. Here, you are closer to God and to his people living and dead than anywhere else. It is at the altar, dear Canon, that you are also closer than ever before to your own dear parents. You now can do for them what St. Monica asked her son Augustine to do for her just as she was on the point of leaving this world: "This only I ask," she said, "that you will remember me at the Lord's altar, wherever you be" (*Confessions*, IX, 11).

Remind yourself every day, as you bow over the host and chalice to pronounce the words which would draw tears from the eyes of the angels if they could but perform the miracle which has been given to the men of flesh and blood that we are, remind yourself that Him whom you hold in your hands, hidden under the outward veil of bread, is the Creator of heaven and earth who one day will be your Judge. When he weighs your stewardship may it not be merely to praise earthly prudence like that of the wicked steward in today's Gospel, but to reward the merits of a steward who has laid down his life for the souls entrusted to him.

The presence of the local bishop at your First Mass is for you a reminder of this important truth underlined so well by Saint Ignatius of Antioch, one of the earliest Fathers of the Church: "Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it" (*Letter to the Smyrnans*, 8). You are a man of the altar and therefore a man of the Church. You are a not a priest for yourself: the people of our world today are hungry – or rather, they are dying of starvation – and it is not our own little

ideas that can nourish them, but only the words that come from the mouth of God. The words spoken through the Prophet Ezechiel apply to you today: “I have made thee a watchman to the house of Israel: therefore thou shalt hear the word from my mouth, and shalt tell it to them from me” (33:7). As a priest of Christ’s Church, your ministry must be marked by unshaking fidelity to her teachings, in a world ensnared by relativism; by filial love for her shepherds, in a world that prefers autonomy to authority; and by deep reverence for her sacred tradition, in a world of fads and desacralisation.

More than ever today, dear Canon, the priest is called to imitate the Lord in this fact of his earthly life: “Behold this child is set for ... a sign of contradiction” (St. Luke 2:34). From the perspective of my own short year of priesthood, allow me to remind you of a truth that our older more experienced confreres here present will confirm: in your life as a priest, the Lord will send you exactly the joys – indescribable joys – needed to encourage you, as well as the crosses – acutely felt – needed to purify you. You need them both to understand the true meaning of your priesthood. Were you to offer only this one Mass, every sacrifice needed to bring you to the altar would be insignificant. If you could only absolve one single sinner and then be called from this world, everything you have given up would be nothing compared to the price of that one soul.

It was in Mary’s womb – where the eternal Son of God assumed a human nature, with a body and soul like ours in all things but sin – that Christ became a priest. It is here that heaven and earth meet, and so you may always be confident, dear Canon, that Mary the mother of priests has a special love for you, who, though unworthy, now share in her Son’s priesthood. Never tire of turning to her: place under her motherly cloak all the souls whom it is your job to lead to heaven. Make her the confidante of your hopes and your fears, of your priestly joys and trials. Ask her to make you that faithful priest according to the heart of Christ. And you dear friends, you see so many people wandering like sheep without a shepherd, perhaps even those closest to you: turn to Mary and ask her to look at the flock with the same merciful eyes she used to look at Christ’s disciples, the first priests, gathered in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost. May her prayers obtain for us the priests we need today: the priests who will give us the truth without which there is no salvation and the sacraments without which there is no life. Mary, Mother of priests, pray for us!

