

Homily of Bishop William Crean for the ordination of nine seminarians as deacons

A Chairde,

For some time now Gay Byrne has been interviewing a great variety of people in regard to what gives “Meaning to Life”. Of those you have seen and heard, it would be interesting to ask who stands out for you by way of their clarity and eloquence. Equally, it is worth noting the number who despite their intelligence and education, were quite confused and inconsistent in their responses.

The question of the meaning of life is a key one which demands the attention of every human being alive. For you, as candidates for ordination to the Diaconate today - and God willing, for ordination to the Priesthood - the question of the meaning of your life is pivotal as you seek to journey with people who in turn seek to make sense of the pattern of their lives. The fact that we celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi is especially apt as the Eucharistic celebration is the anchor of our life in Christ.

The meaning of life is first of all a personal quest, and it is never static. It has a dynamic of continual interaction between the synthesis you have arrived at, and the surprise interventions of new events. This can “rattle your cage” and move you to reassess your synthesis. So while you rest your foundations on Jesus’ promise that he came that we might ‘have life and have it to the full’, this dynamic of being disturbed by life’s events is a lifelong one. This is your fundamental reality – we are human, therefore fragile. This you cannot bypass – nor should you try to, because it would have a most detrimental impact on your ministry.

The second element of the meaning of life concerns your ministry. Many different images are used to capture what it is you do, and are, as deacons. To walk with, to journey with, are terms often used to capture the essence of ministry. Your own personal journey will have taught you a great deal and given you valuable insights which will enable us to empathise with those in our care and give them encouragement and reassurance. Do not underestimate the enormous privilege and trust that such encounters entail.

You are not alone when engaged in ministry. The grace of Our Lord Jesus is in you – the Church’s reflections on all issues is conscientious and for a good purpose. These sources are wells of wisdom and inspiration from which you should draw continually. A mentor is invaluable as a friend and guide. In the midst of a confusing situation a mentor can bring an impartial perspective which helps you focus on the essentials. So do not let pride stand between you and good advice. Good advice yields a rich dividend for all.

The wider issue for all in public ministry is the need for clarity of purpose in one’s own public engagement. As deacon, and in time God willing as priest, yours is a prophetic call with all that entails by way of potential vilification and rejection. At this point Ireland through its political and media establishments seem determined to eliminate the engagement of the Catholic Church in the public sphere. This will prove to be a huge challenge for which you need to be prepared. There are many in these systems who have developed a gratuitous cynicism towards the Catholic Church and desire its destruction, believing that it stands between the people and Ireland becoming a progressive society. Our response ought always to be positive.

It is now more than 50 years since the close of Vatican II Council despite some aberrations in its implementation. The Church in the meantime has been graced by the holiness and leadership of wonderful Popes. That mantle rests with Pope Francis who never fails to surprise and challenge. He speaks simply and clearly to the Church and the world. He is a model and inspiration.

His most recent reflection has been on the Family – Amoris Laetitia - The Joy of Love is born of a great desire to support families. He is deeply conscious of the fragmentation of family life due to economic and other pressures. His desire is that the Church be a place of welcome for all – saint and sinner alike. Our gathering for Mass/Eucharist is the place and opportunity for welcome and hospitality. In your ministry make that hospitality your special care. No one individual can accomplish all these things – this is the work of the whole parish community, but your role as deacon and priest is to witness to the joy and truth of the Gospel.

As deacon you will have the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel and break open the Word of Life for those in your care. This is a privileged calling; to help people open their hearts and minds to accept the Lord Jesus, as the way and the path to living with purpose and meaning, through all the events of life.

To-day as you are ordained deacons you embrace the vows of chastity and obedience, both of which confound many even within the Church community. Many are disturbed by what they perceive as a restriction of personal freedom, when in reality these vows enable you to live with a new freedom in the service of others.

Celibacy is not a rejection of sexual identity rather a wholesome and free surrender of self to serve the greater number in a manner Jesus illustrated at the Last Supper as he washed the feet of the Apostles.

To promise obedience is not an exercise in subservience. Rather it is an expression of humility to place your gift at the discretion of another for the sake of the wider community.

These thoughts contain many challenges humanly speaking, yet by God's grace can be joyful and life giving for all who embrace them with faith filled confidence.

Another way of embracing this vision is to contemplate ones obituary or what you would hope to have said of your ministry at life's end.

Father Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J., embraced that opportunity as he faced his death "Into Extra Time" was his final gift to us. "I can't say with the famous French song that says "Je ne regrette rien" but I can die with no crippling regrets. Gratitude for how life has blessed me and allowed me to serve others, that is the dominant feeling and the one that I hope will accompany me at the end".

That is an eloquent and typically concise summation of his life. May that sense of blessing be yours also.

May the Lord who began the good work in you bring it to completion.