

CHAPTER 19

ORDINATION DAY

There is one Sunday morning that I will never forget for the rest of my life. It is the Sunday morning that I woke up the day after being ordained a Catholic priest.

I remember opening my eyes and thinking, “Oh my goodness. I am a priest. I was ordained a priest yesterday. My soul is ontologically changed into the image of Jesus Christ and that change will last forever. I will be a priest forever! I can hear Confessions and forgive sins. And this morning, I am going to celebrate Mass for the first time. I am going to offer the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and confection bread and wine into the very Body and Blood of Christ. I better get up, say my prayers, and get myself a cup of coffee!”

The day of ordination and the day of his first Mass are two of the greatest days in the life of every priest. Priestly formation is a long, arduous process that can last eight years or longer, and it all culminates on a Saturday morning in late May or early June in the diocesan cathedral—with the man lying face down on the marble floor, praying to be a good and faithful priest.

Ordination is a Day but Priesthood is Forever

In Pre-Cana courses, it is stressed to a young couple preparing for marriage: “The wedding is a day; the marriage is a lifetime.” It is an expression to remind the couple that they should carefully prepare to live the sacrament of marriage and not spend all of their time preparing for the one-hour wedding ceremony. The same is true for those to be ordained priests. The ordination is a day, but priesthood is forever. Both preparations must be made, but the second is much more important and extensive. I have described in earlier chapters some of the formation the

Church gives the men who would be priests. Now I want to briefly describe the months, weeks and days leading up to the day of ordination and some things about that very solemn Mass.

Mass and Penance Practicums

The last year of seminary is the most enjoyable and exciting of all the years, in my opinion. Formation becomes very practical. The seminarian has already been ordained a transitional deacon and he is usually serving on weekends in a local parish, preaching the homily, baptizing, and witnessing marriages. He has just returned from spending a summer in a parish acting as a deacon. He knows that he is moving quickly toward his goal. Usually in the fourth year of theology the man takes the Mass and Penance practicums to practice celebrating these sacraments. Many seminaries have “practice chapels,” or “deacon chapels,” where the men practice celebrating Mass. Some even have video systems so that the deacons can review their performance, note errors, and correct them.

“If it’s in black, say it. If it’s in red, do it!” This expression describes how to use the Sacramentary, the large red book which a priest uses to celebrate Mass. The Sacramentary has the words printed in black and the rubrics printed in red. The men love doing practice Masses and many do one every day in their last months before ordination.

The Penance practicum class is also enjoyable as the seminarians hear one another’s practice Confessions, then give good spiritual counsel, a penance, and absolution. In the seminary where I work, the fourth-year men know that at any time during their final semester, any faculty member can walk up to them and say, “I feel sinful. Absolve me.” And the man must be able to say the words of sacramental absolution from memory! They are also required to have memorized the words for the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick and the Apostolic Pardon (a special plenary indulgence that a priest can give a person who is dying). By the