

On being a newly ordained priest

I never wanted to be a priest. As a child I wanted to be an architect. I liked drawing. I watched a lot of “This Old House” (PBS’s HGTV before there was an HGTV). I suppose I just wanted to make a better place of this world, a safer place, a kinder place. My mother occasionally refers to me as her Buddha-baby—the middle child born with eyes wide open, calm and observant. If I ever saw things clearly, I also remember wanting for them to be different than they were. I deeply wanted for us to treat each other better than we did. I wanted suffering to stop. I wanted things to change.

I never wanted to be a priest. But here I am. Newly minted *Father* Brendan, and still wondering how I got here. While most everyone around me seems happy enough to have celebrated my ordination, I’m still stumbling into the whole thing full of doubts and insecurities: How did I get here? What difference does it make?

I was ordained six months ago and am now serving at Dolores Mission in East Los Angeles. As I get to know the community I have asked again and again, what draws people to this place? What do they want from their priests? Responses vary, of course—a commitment to justice, community leadership, great food after Mass, etc.—but it is not uncommon to hear that this parish, and the Jesuits who have served here over the years, have a habit

of speaking to and from the struggles and challenges people in the congregation face on a daily basis. “You don’t see that in very many other parishes,” they say. “Their priests just don’t preach about real issues.”

When people hear that I was recently ordained, their initial response is usually some form of “congratulations” — many are sincere, others just polite. Those who know better will ask if I am doing all right, if I have had my first crisis or not. These folks understand that the first year of priesthood, like the first year of many things — marriage, parenthood, a new job — can be full of complex challenges.

The priesthood has its own flavor of this vocational isolation. The priest in the world today is bound to something which is widely thought to be archaic or unnecessary — the antiquated rituals and structures of organized religion. The loneliness of priesthood has less to do with celibacy, as many presume, and more to do with consecration. The existential strangeness of ordination comes from having crossed the line from religious experience into the very structure of religion. Having been publicly anointed for the purposes of priesthood, I am no longer protected from its contradictions and compromises. I find myself newly committed to a way of being in the world that seems less and less convincing to more and more people.

And yet there remains a sense of urgency and relevance to authentic religious commitment. We have need again of a moral

vision, a prophetic voice willing to remind us of our obligation to care for the poor and the vulnerable. We have need again of people willing to give their lives in sacrifice before taking someone else's in spite. We have need again of something greater than the compromised versions of God that have been sold to us for decades—the idols of our time—the gods of privilege, purity and prosperity. We have need again of something more.

Total Surrender

A year before I was to be ordained I accompanied a group of volunteers to Ragusa, in Sicily, to work in emergency refugee reception centers operated by the Catholic diocese there. I had no idea what I was doing. I likely would not be a priest today if not for what happened to me there.

While we were in Italy, refugees were being pulled out of the ocean at a rate of about 2,000 per week as slave traders and smugglers pushed their surplus migrant labor from the shores of Libya into the Mediterranean Sea. There were innumerable needs, but we, being first in the line of emergency support, were asked to begin with the smallest. The work we had to do was the little work—art projects and simple games to pass the time as these men and women were lifted from the Mediterranean Sea into the sea of bureaucracy awaiting them in the asylum process.

As each new wave of arrivals overwhelmed the shelter staff, my principal responsibility became helping people to write their letters petitioning asylum. Every letter began and ended the same way: “I had to leave my country because...” and “...for these reasons I am seeking asylum.” Between those two phrases we filled in some of the most horrific stories I have ever heard. The wrenching process of helping these folks to write their petitions in their own hand, many of whom were barely literate, meant that we had to pass letter by letter and word by word through the most traumatic periods of their lives. “My...my family...my family was...my family was tortured...my family was tortured and killed. And I...and I was...and I was left...and I was left alone.”

For about five hours a day I would walk slowly through these stories. They trusted me with the most painful experiences of their lives. Their hope was tied directly to their vulnerability. They had a deep need for witness and accompaniment. They needed help in the process of making their petition and they needed desperately for their trauma to be heard. They needed someone to be with them and for them, an advocate and an alibi.

Perhaps nowhere have I found myself more powerless and yet more in touch with credible acts of self-giving love than in my time in Sicily. The credibility of sacrifice imposes itself upon us and suffering is not subject to belief. Our experience of suffering is often tied to that of faith because it is an undeniable reminder

of our need for mercy and our longing for freedom. In a way that is hard to explain, Ragusa became a place of consolation for many because it was a place where the truth of our humanity became known in our vulnerability. It was and continues to be a way of the cross.

Does this make a difference? I am reluctant to claim too much here because many of those men and women still sit in those same so-called “reception” centers awaiting someone who will let them be anything more than surplus slave labor pulled from the sea and left to rot in administrative limbo while political and humanitarian attention turns elsewhere. But their resilience and their dignity imposed itself on me in a way that left no doubt of their credibility. I was consoled in the experience not by any foolish faith in deliverance but by the redemptive proximity and undeniable beauty of their humanity. I was moved to love by the depth of their sacrifice, the persistence of their hope and the intensity of their trust.

In that place there was a laying on of hands. In that place I was being ordained by and for self-giving love. In that place I was practicing priesthood. One man in the camp actually took to calling me his “chief priest.” I tried to explain to him that I was neither a chief nor a priest, but he insisted. “You are my chief priest,” he’d say. “I’m happy to have a chief priest with us.”

The priesthood was not my idea. It was a surrender to the invitation of others, to a litany of saints and a laying on of hands that have imposed themselves on me over a long period of time. I returned from Sicily and immediately wrote my own petition letter, not seeking asylum, but priestly ordination. There was a mysterious resonance between the two experiences. Both were stories about the laying on of hands; both included moments of help and of harm. Both ended in a surrender to the will of the other. Both were written not by choice but by necessity. The hands imposed on me were supportive, while many that touched them were violent. My petition was accepted, while many of theirs never will be.

No congratulations necessary

One thing that has been clear to me from the beginning is an attraction to middle ground, to in-between places, to horizons and frontiers. That was the bait that led me into a Jesuit vocation and, ultimately, to the priesthood. My mother's buddha-baby found his way to ordination because the priesthood plays in borderlands—it lives in liminal spaces. The priest stands between a people and their God, not as an obstacle or gatekeeper to that relationship but a bridge. The priest has no real power without the cooperation of both sides. I know this because, for most of my friends and family, the Catholic priesthood has no claim on their lives. They have no need of a priest; my ordination was “good for me” but has little impact on them.

It is for this reason that the polite congratulations one receives upon ordination don't really satisfy. They fail to appreciate the necessity of priesthood. They don't understand the stakes. To congratulate the newly ordained is to relegate the priesthood to a nice thing they have accomplished, a reward for their work, rather than to recognize it as a deeper induction into service. The newness of ordination might suggest congratulations, but priesthood itself should not. The next time someone visits you in the hospital, helps you with legal documentation, accompanies you in your prayer or your grief, imagine congratulating them and you'll feel for yourself the strangeness of such praise.

The priesthood, rightly understood, is not about power and prestige, but about mediation and solidarity. We stand with people so that they can stand with each other. Some will say that God has no need of mediators, but we have need of one another. We have, more than ever, a deep need of solidarity. As W. H. Auden observed on the eve of the Second World War, the core of our human predicament is how “we crave what we cannot have — to be loved alone.” The priest is a reminder of the religious wisdom that tells us that we cannot, in truth, be loved alone.

Looking through me

Those suspicious of the priesthood often ask, “Can't I confess directly to God?” Of course. But God seems concerned that you find yourself and feel yourself forgiven in the real presence of a

beloved community. That you feel yourself loved by them and that you dedicate some energy to the work of forgiving and loving them, too. For this we need other people. We need priests because we need each other. God needs us to love and forgive one another. And ordaining people for this service is (or ought to be) a way of ensuring that it happens, that we actually do for one another what God wants for us to do.

In all the confessions I have heard so far, I have had no doubt of God's closeness and mercy to the experience of human frailty and fault. What is clear in confession is how much we hunger for someone to remind us, to affirm in us the truth of that loving relationship. We want to know that we do not stand alone in our need of mercy. No one stands alone before God, and if someone leaves the confessional having experienced themselves respected in their vulnerability, understood in their frailty and accompanied in their humanity, then we truly go forth in peace.

And so, every Sunday at Dolores Mission, I stand in the back of the church, careful not to block the door as the crowd drifts in and the people find their usual places in the pews. They have been praying long before I showed up. They will be praying long after I am gone. I pass through them, coming into their presence with humility and reverence, as one comes into the presence of God. I bow as I enter the sanctuary. I kiss the altar. And then I look up, always it seems as if for the first time, at the

faces of the gathered congregation. I tell them what is already true, what I already know and long for them to realize: that the peace of Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Spirit is with them.

It is a great privilege to stand in that place—a privilege to look into the faces of those who are looking for God. It is a difficult thing to describe, but even though they are looking at me, looking to me, they are in a very real sense looking through me. Surely they notice my faults and stumbles, but they're not really looking for a perfect priest. They're looking for a credible sign of God's presence in their midst. They are not really expecting relevance, but rather relationship. I look at the faces of a community assembled in search of God, a community hungry for a reason to believe that this strange thing we're doing makes sense, makes a difference, and might actually put us in contact with real, merciful and self-giving love.

We come to the sacraments because we long to make invisible things visible and impossible things possible. People come to Mass because they want to be moved, because they want things to change—bread and wine into body and blood, sin and suffering into communion and reconciliation. We come because we need something to change and we realize that we cannot do it alone. I want to be a good priest. I am often not convinced that I am. But I want more than anything to experience the conversion for which we pray in every sacramental encounter. I want things to change, and I cannot do it alone.

Above the back door of our church hangs a large painting depicting the assassination of Blessed Oscar Romero, who was murdered while celebrating Mass in a small hospital chapel where he lived in El Salvador. It is a haunting image to look at as I stand at the altar with my own arms held outstretched in prayer. It is a poignant reminder of what sacrificial self-giving love looks like, a reflection of what the priesthood entails—mediation and solidarity, reconciliation and communion. As I look through the congregation at that image of Romero being shot through the heart, I take the bread in my hands and I say to my beloved community what Christ said to all of us: Take this. All of you. And eat of it. This is my body. Which will be given up for you.

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