

Vigil of Pentecost

25th Anniversary of Priestly Ordination of Father Tien Tran

St. Matthew's Church

19 May 2018

Introduction

What a wonderful occasion it is today for to gather to celebrate and give thanks to God for the gift of Father Tien Tran's priesthood to the Church. It was 25 years ago, on 22 May 1993, that Deacon Tran lay prostrate on the floor of the sanctuary of Holy Rosary Cathedral as a sign of his utter dependence on God who, over the course of many years, had been calling him and leading him to that day. At the same time, the choir and the congregation called upon the Angels and Saints of every age to wrap their mantle of prayer around the ordinand and also to accompany Archbishop Adam Exner before he imposed his hands on the Deacon's head and invoked the power of the Holy Spirit, whose explosive power we celebrate on this Vigil of Pentecost.

And shortly thereafter, when the principal part of the Rite of Ordination to the Priesthood was completed, when hands had been laid which claimed Tien exclusively for the Lord and his Church, the People of God rejoiced to have a young Father Tran in their service, a priest who would guide their footsteps on their journey to the Father's house.

For a quarter of a century, Father Tran has been fulfilling the ministry gifted to him at his Ordination. On that day he wrote, so to speak,

a blank cheque for the unknown future which lay before him, He trusted that the good Lord would guide him. And today we are witnesses to his fidelity to God, and God's faithfulness to him. Father Tran has served as parochial vicar in several parishes, and, most recently as pastor of All Saints Parish in Coquitlam before coming here to serve you at St. Matthew's. Among his many services to the life of the wider life of the Church is that of Master of Ceremonies for the Archbishop and now as Director of Liturgy and Dean of the Fraser Valley East. Together with all of you, I am very, very grateful for the gift he is to us.

“I Have Chosen You”

“It was not you who chose me, it was I who chose you” (Jn 15:16). More than 35 years ago our jubilarian heard these words sound in the depth of his conscience. The silent voice made itself heard through the circumstances of his life and from the prayerful support his family. In retrospect, all of this was arranged by the guiding hand of divine Providence.

From Christ himself came the decisive but liberating imperative call: “Come, follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men” (cf. Mt 4:19). Father Tran was called by God, called by Christ, called by the Church. And he accepted that call – as all of us must, when the Lord makes his will known to us. The authentic use of our freedom demands that, like Mary at the Annunciation, we respond with “yes.”

Those 25 years ago, the Lord laid claim to Father Tran, so that he would be his ambassador, his minister who would perpetuate his presence among the People of God. He is truly blessed that, despite weaknesses that afflict all of us to one degree or another, he has not looked back but kept his hand steady on the plough (cf. Lk 9:62). For these fruitful years of his priesthood gratitude is boundless – both Father Tran’s and ours.

St. Paul is certainly on the mark when he wrote that a man possesses the ministry “through God’s mercy” (2 Cor 4:1). It is not the priest’s merits which earn him the ministry. The “treasure” of the Gospel that he proclaims is contained in the “earthen vessel” of his frail humanity. In this way, God makes “it clear that [the Gospel’s] its surpassing power comes from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7).

“In Persona Christi”

A priest’s awareness of his frailty, however, should not lead to a false humility. Some people think of the priesthood as just another ministry, one defined solely in terms of its functions, what Father does. Where such thinking dominates, pastoral “skills” become the primary concern of priestly life, and the priesthood becomes a profession for which one studies and then from which one retires. Such a view fails to convey the real wonder of the priesthood.

At his Ordination Father Tran didn’t get a new “job.” Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, he was transformed by the power of the

Sacrament to share uniquely in the priesthood of Christ, the one, eternal High Priest, and thus to become a “dispenser of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1) for the people.

Preachers of the Word

What he first delivers is the Good News of salvation. It is through “this saving Word that faith is aroused in the hearts of unbelievers and nourished in the hearts of the faithful” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4). Like the Apostle Paul, from the day of his Ordination, Father Tran has been “set apart to proclaim the Gospel of God” (Rom 1:1).

But before preaching to others Father first has to be a hearer of the Word himself. Like a two-edged sword, this Word has to pierce his soul. It is only because he listens attentively to the Word of God that he has been able to preach the Church’s faith forcefully to others.

Father Tran’s words are effective because they come from his heart: “Say what you will,” wrote St. Francis de Sales, “the heart speaks to the heart, the tongue only speaks to the ears” (cited in Michael de la Bedoyere, *Francois de Sales* [London, 1960] 103).

Like every good preacher and teacher, Father gives the Risen Lord a voice. He educates them in the truth, a truth that sometimes may make them uncomfortable when it hits close to home and calls for conversion. A priest acting in the name of Christ and the Church is not sent to proclaim his own opinions and ideas, learned though they might be, but to preach

Christ and him crucified (cf. 1 Cor 1:23).

Gathered in the Upper Room

In tomorrow's Pentecost Gospel, we are in the Upper Room on Easter evening when Jesus appeared to his Apostles and commissioned them to carry on his mission now that his public ministry on earth was over: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:21-23).

Tradition places this giving of the Spirit in the same Upper Room where celebrated the Last Supper and instituted the Sacraments of the priesthood and the Eucharist. The Spirit which transformed Father Tran at his Ordination is likewise present whenever he celebrates the Sacraments for the faithful.

His ministry to proclaim God's merciful love becomes concrete and specific in the word of absolution he utters in celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation with penitents. Here he not only announces that our God is "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4) but his own human word of absolution truly and really brings about divine pardon. Through him, Christ's word of forgiveness has been spoken thousands of times to sinners.

Our Catholic faith is clear when it teaches that the priesthood reaches its summit in the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the source and center of the Church's life. For all priests, the Eucharist is the "high point"

of his life and ministry. This is the point from which everything else comes forth and to which it all returns. Wherever and whenever Father Tran celebrates Mass he makes present the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Upper Room, where the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Apostles giving them the power to forgive sins, is likewise the place of the gift of the Eucharist. “Here began a new presence of Christ for the world, a presence which constantly occurs wherever the Eucharist is celebrated and a priest lends his voice to Christ, repeating the sacred words of institution (John Paul II, Letter to Priests, Holy Thursday 2000, n. 13). How many times has Father Tran lent his voices to Christ through the 25 years of his priesthood!

Evangelize

When Father Tran was ordained, it was for service to the Church, for the service of God’s People. And this service called him to be immersed with them in the tumultuous and challenging experiences of the world today. You know how close he is to you. And he is close because he is zealous in seeking out those who have need of God’s love. In the Church today, it is no time to raise the barricades or surround the wagons. Father Tran knows this – and that is why is he such an ardent evangelizer who encourages others to bring the Gospel into the highways and byways of our world.

I would like to read to you the stirring words that Pope Paul VI addressed to my Ordination class many years ago. They apply, I believe, to the ministry Father Tran has been living. This is what the Pope said:

The world needs you! The world is waiting for you. Even in the hostile cry which the world sometimes hurls at you, it is proclaiming its hunger for truth, for justice, for renewal, which only your ministry can satisfy. Know how to accept as an invitation the very reproach which perhaps, and often unjustly, the world hurls against the messenger of the Gospel. Know how to listen to the groan of the poor, the candid [clear] voice of the child, the thoughtful cry of the youth, the complaint of the tired worker, the sigh of the suffering and the criticism of thinker. Never be afraid! . . . The Lord is with you (Homily, 29 June 1975).

Conclusion

The Lord has been with our beloved Father Tran for the past 25 years. As he looks back over the years he recognizes, with the grace of hindsight, the hand of God in his life. And we are grateful for having said “yes” and for having remained faithful. Let us praise the Lord in thanksgiving for the graces received through Father’s priesthood.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver