In the Name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is not possible to grasp the wonderful thing which happens at an ordination without first reflecting on the church. What is this whole enterprise of “church”? What is it all about?

It is easy for us to think about the church primarily with reference to ourselves. The church is where our spiritual lives are nourished and where our children, we hope, will learn things they need to know in order to live good lives. In the midst of the city, the church is a community in which we are not anonymous passers-by, where others pray for us and we pray for them, where we are cared for and in turn care for others. These and many other things could be said about the role the church plays in our lives, and they aren’t wrong. But they are incomplete; they do not get to the heart of what the church is all about.

In our Epistle Lesson, St. Paul is teaching us what the church and its ministry are all about: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” It isn’t God’s intention simply to give us better lives on this world’s terms; he means to give us a different kind of life altogether. God is bringing the whole present order of things to an end; and what he is introducing in its place is so different, so unexpected, that St. Paul calls it “new creation,” as though God was just starting over from scratch. In his mercy, though, God is not starting over with nothing, but he is starting over with us to make us new people.

Now, we all know about that old order, in the way that fish know about water: we are immersed in it all our days. It is the order, or disorder, that is all around us, the world in which people are driven here and there by desire and anxiety, running over one another and betraying one another in pursuit of goods that won’t make them happy and power that won’t make them safe. It’s the order of things dominated by those mysterious powers of destruction and deception of which the New Testament speaks. It is the order of life on which God has passed sentence: “Dust you are, and to dust you shall return” – therefore life which moves relentlessly towards death.
These old things, St. Paul announces, have “passed away.” The old order lingers on, obviously, but its time is done. Something quite different is already on the scene, already arriving: “Behold, the new has come.” A better translation might be: “Look, new things have come to be!” A new kind of life, a new order of life, has come to be, an order in which human beings need not be slaves of desire and fear, oppressed by the devil’s misrule.

How is this so? Where is this new order to be found, in the midst of a world which seems so very old? “If anyone is ‘in Christ,’” the Apostle tells us, “there is a new creation!” If we pay attention to St. Paul’s way of speaking, it will be clear that the phrase “in Christ” points directly to Baptism. We are baptized, St. Paul says more than once, into Christ (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27), so it is through Baptism that “anyone is in Christ.”

This, then, is where the church stands in the plan of God. The church is the fellowship of those who have been snatched away through Baptism from that old order whose time is up, and gathered on the threshold of the age to come. The church is the assembly in whose midst new things have already come to be, even though they are still hidden except to the eyes of faith.

Certainly in the Holy Eucharist, a new thing comes to be which doesn’t fit into the present order of things: the crucified Lord who has conquered death feeds his people with his own life-giving body and blood. In the church, we are surrounded and enveloped by new things which don’t fit into this present age, not only the body and blood of Christ but also the forgiveness of sins, the praise of God, and fellowship with brothers and sisters who come from different tribes. None of these things are native to this present age.

Furthermore, none of these new things has been achieved by human labor. Human beings cannot break out of the present order of things and fashion something truly new. Only the Creator can bring about new creation. Only the freedom and compassion of God can bring about truly new things.

And so St. Paul insists that “all this comes from God,” and it comes in a twofold way. “...through Christ [God] reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

First and foremost, then, there is the great act of God in Christ, who “died for all,” who “became sin for us,” as the Apostle mysteriously says, “so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” In a way that we can never fully comprehend, God’s only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, has taken upon
himself the whole burden of the sin and wrong that separate human beings
from God, offering his life to God in our place. In himself, in his own body,
Christ endured that separation and overcame it by his love and obedience. He
accepted death, the wages of the sins of others, and just in that way, the
power of death was destroyed, overwhelmed by immortal divine life
incarnate in the unstinting human love of Jesus. Risen from the dead, he is the
new creation in person, the Last Adam in whom humanity gets a new start,
with sin and death overcome and left behind once and for all in the past.

All this is real, actual, irreversibly real and final. Righteousness and goodness,
love and purity, are no longer only ideals to which we don’t measure up; in
Christ they have become flesh, and in the flesh, they have overcome sin, death,
and the devil. Christ lives, and his risen humanity is there for us, now and
forever, to be the unfailing fountain of new and unconquerable life for the
whole human race.

The old order of sin and death really came to an end at the cross, and the new
creation has already come to be in Jesus’ resurrection. Yet before bringing the
old age to a final end, God takes time for those trapped in the present
disorder. He has instituted a ministry of reconciliation. He sends messengers
to bring Christ’s new things to the prisoners of this age, to those who revel in
corruption and those who are beaten down by it, to the respectable and the
lawless, to people of every nation and language and tribe. He sends out
ambassadors to make peace with those who are estranged from him. And so
they stand before the nations: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be
reconciled to God.”

God gave this ministry to the Apostles of the Lord, but it was handed down
from them to the apostolic church, for it must continue until the very end of
the age. So here we come ‘round again to the church. Not only is the church
the assembly of those who have been delivered from the present disorder by
Baptism; it is the ambassadorial people, the company of messengers who
stand in the midst of the world as the Apostles did, bringing new things, new
life, to the world and making the same appeal: “Be reconciled to God!”

It would be grand if I could stop here, with a church set free from sin and
death, boldly representing the new creation. But it’s not that simple, is it?
Were that the whole story, St. Paul would not have needed to write his two
Letters to the church in Corinth. He would have had no occasion to write, later
in this very letter: “I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I
wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be
quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder”
(12:20). That’s quite a catalog; those who have been liberated from this age
are evidently still capable of bringing its ways into the church itself – just as they are capable of losing heart and forgetting their hope.

The reason for this is not hard to understand: the new things that have come to be are not obvious to us either. Christ is present in the Eucharist, but we don’t see him, shining with love and glory. We hear his promise, “This is my body, this is my blood,” and we walk by faith as we are able, taking and eating and trusting that his word is true. In every part of the Christian life, this is the pattern: we walk by faith and not by sight. We take our bearings from what we hear, reckoning as we make our way through life with the still-hidden victory of Christ.

And this is not easy. What we see is generally far more imposing than what we only hear proclaimed. The world around us insistently claims to be the final reality. It threatens that we will fail at life if we do not follow its ways. It promises us success, respect, power, freedom, and all manner of desirable things, if we only conform and play its game. It dresses up corruption in prestige and celebrity and coolness, so that what we see looks appealing even though, up close, it stinks of death. And all the while, the world has an agent in our own hearts, a tangle of desires and fears and anxieties that responds eagerly to the world’s threats and promises.

And so we need someone to remind us of what is real. We need someone to do for us what St. Paul did for the congregation in Corinth. The ministry of reconciliation needs to be exercised in the church and for the church, not only by the church for the world.

And with that we have come to pastors and so to ordination.

The early history of the Christian ministry is obscure, but it is clear that the church was never understood as a flock of wise sheep that needed no shepherd. From the beginning, pastors have been placed at the heart of the church’s life, ministering Baptism, presiding over the assembly and the Eucharist it celebrates, preaching and teaching, visiting and encouraging those who are in need or trouble. But amidst this round of activities, the pastor has really only one job: to remind us of what is real, to remind us that Christ is risen, and to bring us up against the new things which have come to be. In all those various activities, the pastor is calling out to the church, calling out to us conflicted and shaky and maybe fallen-down Christians: “I implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Pastors often seem to their congregations to live quiet lives, filled with routine. But don’t be deceived: a faithful pastor is a long-term subversive. A
pastor has to be continually undermining the world’s narratives, even the ones we hold dear. Week by week, liturgy by liturgy, sermon by sermon, visit by visit, the pastor has the task of chipping away at the ever-changing lies we have been told – or tell to ourselves – engaging us ever more deeply instead with the true story of the love of Christ and the reconciliation of the world.

This is the holy ministry to which we have gathered to ordain Caleb Douglas. In a few moments, he will promise to “assume this office.” It is a promise with no expiration date: he will be committing himself for life to this ministry. He will indeed promise to live his life with us in mind, so as to be an example to the flock.

The bishop will lay hands on Caleb, as the priests in the Old Testament laid hands on animals about to be sacrificed. That isn’t the only meaning of the laying on of hands, but it is a significant one. In the accompanying prayers, the bishop will in effect dedicate Caleb to the Lord, asking that the Lord give him back to us as a pastor. The prayers will allude to a passage in Ephesians in which ministers are described as gifts which the exalted Christ bestows on his people. Caleb will indeed become the Lord’s gift to us, the gift of a shepherd, the gift of a pastor to remind us of what is real.

Given the greatness of the task, is entirely appropriate that the church ordains chiefly by praying for the candidate: “Pour out your Holy Spirit!” It is also fitting that we will be asked to promise to keep on praying for Caleb. Let us take that promise to heart, and let us be sure to include Lynnae and Eli and Nathaniel and Joel in our prayers – for you will notice that they too are being claimed for Caleb’s ministry.

An ordination is an occasion for rejoicing. It is not only a joyful turning-point for Caleb, the culmination of years of discernment and study and preparation. An ordination is a living reminder of Christ’s love for the church. Our exalted Lord Jesus Christ has not forgotten about us as we stumble through the wilderness. He gives us gifts, he gives us, pastors, he is giving us Caleb, as a sign that he remains our Good Shepherd, who will guide and guard us until the old things pass away once and for all, and nothing is left but truth and life. To him be glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forevermore. Amen.

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