

## Trinity Sunday/ Jeff Mello's Ordination

Rev'd Anne C. Fowler

June 3rd, 2007

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'* Isaiah 6:8

*"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when she, the Spirit of truth, comes, she will guide you into all truth."* John 16: 12-13

There's only one reason I wish I were a bishop, and that's so that I could ordain women and men to Holy Orders. My own ordinations to the diaconate, and more especially to the priesthood, were among the most extraordinary and profound spiritual and emotional moments of my life.

The sacrament of ordination is for most of us, a landmark, a goal, an accomplishment achieved after years of study, discernment, trial, prayer, doubt, confusion, anger, disappointment, and struggling with the institutional Church's demanding and sometimes arbitrary ways. At the same time, the sacrament of ordination is, for most of us, an occasion of grace: unearned, free, *given*. I know what it is to be the recipient of that grace, that gift that seems at the same time so hard-won and so impossibly unmerited. *I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips*, cries Isaiah. *How can I possibly be worthy?*

The power of the moment overwhelms the receiver, the newly commissioned of God. What must the power be like for the bishop, I wonder? How does it feel to be the one conferring the commission in the name of God and the Church? Is the moment similarly awesome?

That curiosity makes me yearn sometimes, momentarily, to be a bishop – but only momentarily, because otherwise, I don't envy much of what bishops are called to do. Moreover, I believe that in the laying on of hands and ordaining men and women, the bishop represents all of us, all of us who have participated in the calling and formation of those men and women, those of us in the communities who have raised them up and attested to their fitness for ordained ministry. All of us who have been at St John's for any length of time, and all of us who are here today as Jeff Mello's friends and family to celebrate his ordination – all of us participate in this sacrament of the Church.

We are all called by God, as Christians, to ministry, to lives of love and service. But the call to ordained ministry is a call only to some, and it is a call from the community. We are that community. Theological correctness would say that the call to ordained ministry comes from the Church – and I sometimes say that myself. But I know that not everyone assembled here this morning is the Church, nor would you want to be, I suspect. Nonetheless, you are Jeff’s community, and I know that you have all recognized his gifts for ministry, his call to the priesthood; therefore you have been part of his call, and will continue, as will we all, to be the blessed recipients of his priesthood.

We have participated in Jeff’s formation by recognizing his distinct and extraordinary gifts for ministry. We have participated by following his unmistakable leadership, by responding to his pastoral concern and care for us, by learning from and being inspired by his sermons and prayers and by the incomparable way he swings a thurible. We have encouraged him in his moments of doubt and anxiety, and we have celebrated the milestones of his progress on the journey. We have been, and are, his community of faith, without whom he would not have been called, not have been formed, not have been chosen.

Those of us at the ordination yesterday were asked, *Is it your will that Jeff be ordained a deacon?* And we replied, ... *it is!* And then we were asked, *Will you uphold him in his ministry?* And we replied, *We will.* Those questions and responses are, to me, the heart of the sacrament of ordination, just as they are the heart of the sacrament of baptism and the sacrament of marriage. These holy rites of passage do not take place privately, in isolated moments with God. They take place in the midst of the community of the faithful, with all of us as sacred witnesses, and our responsibilities to Jeff are as profound and as real as his to us.

In a few moments, as part of this celebration, we will all come together and lay our hands on Jeff and Paul and Ardani, to bless them as they embark on this new chapter of their lives and ministries. In that moment of grace we will witness to all I’ve just said—our love and care for Jeff and his family, our participation in Jeff’s formation to ministry, and our ongoing responsibility for his spiritual well-being.

One of the refrains I’ve heard from Paul recently is that this is not about him, it’s about Jeff. Well, Paul, you aren’t quite right about that. Jeff would not be here today, would not have been there yesterday, without your support, your encouragement, and your love. *You* were the one who told him it was time to get back on the ordination track. *You* were the one who told him you saw that he needed to be, and should be, a priest. You

have made possible his journey thus far, and you will be critical to him as he proceeds. I will be the first to say that the loving understanding and partnership of a spouse makes an enormous difference to the quality and stability of an ordained ministry. All of us, and Jeff most of all, owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude. Thank you, and God bless you.

And Ardani, you too are a partner, of a slightly different sort. I have described Jeff as “a priest from the cradle.” I think Ardani has been a crucifer from the cradle, and I have no doubt, Ardani, that you will find new and creative and loving ways to help your Dad in his ministry.

As Jeff and I have discussed many times, because I’m not a bishop I don’t have the chance to preach an ordination sermon. This is as close as I can come; that’s why *I’m* preaching today, and Jeff is not.

So now, Jeff, to you. I have a few things to say.

First, *never stop crying in church*. What better place is there to make your feelings plain? People come to church for consolation. Your vulnerability will give others permission to be vulnerable, as well. Keep on crying.

*Never stop laughing in church*. God must need a sense of humor when surveying all of God’s creation; indeed, God must have had a sense of humor to create us all in the first place. And God knows, in this business of parish ministry we need humor as well. And we need lightness. We need not to take ourselves too seriously, because, of course, we are *not* God. Keep on laughing.

*Never stop doubting and questioning in church*. Most people who walk through the doors of Episcopal churches these days bring plenty of doubts and questions with them. They wonder about everything from which altar candle to light first to why there is evil in the world. If they see that you are unafraid to ask questions and express your doubts, if they see that you aren’t threatened by their challenges or dismissive of their ambivalence, they will feel more free to confide and more welcome in the house of God.

*Never stop acting in church*. I don’t mean, be a hypocrite, be a phony. But you have the tools and talents of an actor: creativity, charisma, a flair for the dramatic, an eye for what is beautiful. You know how to engage a crowd and draw us in. You have a gift for making liturgy come alive. Keep on doing all that for the greater glory of God.

*Never stop leading in church*. I know you’ve heard me say this many times; I say it to everyone considering a call to the priesthood. Our Church’s model for the priesthood is the model of parish ministry; priests, for the most part, are called to lead communities

of faith. Our willingness to assume the responsibilities of ordained leadership, and our fitness for doing so, set us apart.

And as you know, sacrifices are involved. Real leaders have to sacrifice being universally popular. *The more one pleases everyone, the less one pleases profoundly*, wise Monsieur Stendahl said. When you doubt that, just remember Jesus.

You won't always be liked by everyone. But that's okay. Be true to yourself, be true to your vision of the Gospel. That trumps popularity.

*Never lose your awe of the sacramental mysteries.* As you have also heard me say many times, at the center of our call to the priesthood is the celebration of the Eucharist: the function that, again, sets us apart from those with other ministries.

I have been reading biographies recently: one of Elizabeth the First of England and Mary Queen of Scots, and now one of John Donne the 17<sup>th</sup> Century poet and priest. The English Reformation and its bloody consequences are of course major themes in English Renaissance history. In the Donne biography I read this description of a raid on student quarters in the London Inns of Court. "There was found the altar prepared, the chalice and their bread god; and in the house, as I hear, a great number of Englishmen hid, as ready to hear masse." The rebel Catholics were captured and, perhaps, executed for their faith.

Now this is perhaps a timely reminder that fierce divisions among people of faith are not new. But what haunts me about this account is that phrase, *the chalice and their bread god*. We may not subscribe to that precise theology, but it does express the power and the enduring grace of the meal ordained to us by Jesus. Never take the Eucharist for granted.

*And never stop loving in church.* You bring to ordained ministry your intense caring for others, your passion for human and divine justice, your big heart. You said in your sermon last week that that heart had been broken open here at St. John's. Well, this vocation will break your heart open, and will break it, again and again. But without that breaking, you will never be whole.

And finally, Jeff, I want to say to you publicly my very personal thanks. I have spoken often from this pulpit about the extraordinary guidance I was blessed to receive from my rector Dick Martin, on my own path toward ordination. He was a soul friend who never, as I once read, *allowed me to stray from the path of righteousness without rebuking me and encouraging me at the same time*. He was my beloved teacher, my

priest, my good shepherd.

More and more I see as central to my own vocation the attempt to give to others some of what Dick so unstintingly and faithfully gave to me: in the words of the Prayer Book, *the will to do these things and the grace and power to perform them*.

My dear friend, deacon and priest-to-be, thank you for helping me to do what I believe God and the Church are calling me do to. Thank you for allowing me to accompany you on this journey so far. Thank you for your gracious presence in my life, for all you have taught me, and for all you have allowed me to give.

And on behalf of all of us, your community, past, present, and to come, thank you for all *you* have given, and will give, to all of us, for the love of God.

Alleluia! Amen.