

HOMILY, GIVEN BY BISHOP PETER COLLINS, FOR THE ORDINATION TO THE SACRED PRIESTHOOD OF THE REVEREND ANTHONY ASOMUGHA. ST JOHN THE BAPTIST CATHEDRAL, NORWICH, SATURDAY, 18TH MAY, 2024.

My own theological education began in earnest in 1976 and it was French influences that first fashioned my thinking. I had read some strands of early twentieth century French personalism and I remember well my first encounter with the writings of the great French dominican theologian Yves Congar. I was first intrigued by his name and by the fact that we shared the same birthday, 13th may, though he was born in 1904 and I in 1958. In 1978 I began my seminary formation and it was in the following year that Yves Congar published his last great work, the three volumes of 'I believe in the Holy Spirit'.

Come, o creator Spirit blest, and in our souls take up thy rest. o great paraclete, to thee we cry who in thy sevenfold gifts art known.

In the introduction to his work on the theology of the third person of the most blessed trinity, Congar said this: "I have no carefully preconceived and detailed plan, but rather a project and an intention." It can be tempting for a candidate for ordination to envisage his future priesthood in terms of a "carefully preconceived and detailed plan", however, after 40 years of priesthood, I would encourage you Anthony to engage with your future priesthood more in terms of "project and intention".

Understand clearly, from the outset, that the project and the intention that you are called to embrace is not that which is fashioned by yourself but rather that which is fashioned by Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. A priest is called to offer himself, to sacrifice himself, in communion with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the midst of his fellow disciples, in the midst of all his brothers and sisters, the priest is called to empty himself to the point where he has nothing to offer up other than Christ himself. In allegiance to the teaching of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which presents the earliest account of the institution of the Holy Eucharist, the priest must serve the "project and intention" of Christ himself and proclaim: *this is what I received from the lord, and in turn pass on to you – this is my body, which is for you – this cup is the new covenant in my blood.*

The lord's own "project and intention" was and is *to come into our midst*. Though the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were gathered, Jesus came and stood among them. Anthony, as a priest called to serve in a predominantly secular contemporary environment, you will encounter many closed doors. The priest must be acutely attuned to the first duty of every disciple, that is, to respond to the promptings of baptismal grace and to open the closed doors of our own soul. The priest must first receive, accept and embrace what he is called to give. The wonderful greeting of the risen lord is – peace be with you. The priest must know well the place where peace reigns supreme, the place where his sins are forgiven, the priest must know well the pathways of reconciliation. At the Pentecost assembly, whether as envisaged by the gospels or as envisaged by the acts of the

apostles, in a real sense the Lord addresses all the baptised when he says: *as the father sent me, so am I sending you*. However, there is a particularity addressed to the apostles and their successors in their receipt of the Holy Spirit - *for those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained*. Those called by their bishop to ordination as a priest share in the priesthood of Christ according to proper degree. The priesthood of Christ has the integrity of being whole and unblemished. the integrity of the individual priest must be built upon his personal integration with the 'mystery of Christ' made repeatedly manifest and accessible through the sacraments of reconciliation and Holy Eucharist.

Anthony, my son, through my apostolic ministry the spirit of the lord will soon anoint you with the oil of gladness for you are being called to offer the great thanksgiving sacrifice, called to raise up the cup of salvation. Anthony, on this day of your ordination, and on every subsequent day of your life, you must cry out: "your servant lord, your servant am I."

On this eve of Pentecost, the feast that can rightly be termed the 'birthday of the Church', in accordance with the father's providential will, we rejoice to proclaim that in divine communion with Christ, the Holy Spirit is the "co-instituting principle of the Church". The Holy Spirit is the principle of communion, making the Church one; the Holy Spirit is the principle of catholicity and the principle of holiness in the Church, keeping her truly and forever apostolic. Anthony, through your share in the priesthood of Christ you must forever be animated by the Holy Spirit.

Let me briefly address 'the theologians' present in our midst by once again quoting from the voluminous works of Yves Congar who so eloquently describes the divine trinitarian communion, and most especially the co-working of the divine word and the Holy Spirit. Anthony, Congar helps us priests understand well what we undertake in celebrating the holy sacrifice of the Mass. The anaphora – the eucharistic prayer- holds no false division between the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit, Christ's words of eucharistic institution and the great anamnesis of thanksgiving. Congar tells us: "the true perspective of the concept of '*in persona Christi*' is sacramental. The priest who celebrates the Church's act of worship is himself a sacramental reality. Congar goes on to say that the priests acts '*in persona Christi*' and '*in persona ecclesiae*'. Anthony, in order to understand that as a priest you are both '*sacerdos*' and '*pastor*', you must always remember that you must first become a sacrificial servant. Amen. Alleluia.