Be What You See!

Homily for the Ordination of Deacons Dan and Peter Steele as Priests for the Diocese of Yakima: Friday, May 27th 2016 at St. Paul Cathedral

Numbers 11:11-12, 14-17, 24-25; Acts 20:17-18a, 28-32, 36; Luke 22:14-20, 24-30

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! The beauty of our scriptures for Dan and Peter Steele’s ordination as priests point to the way the Eucharist forms our daily lives as Christians. St. Augustine had a particular way of summarizing this with one of his instructional sayings:

Estote quod videtis, et accipite quod estis.

When I sent Dan and Peter an e-mail telling them that this little fourth century saying of St. Augustine was rolling around in my head, Peter responded that I should know that, even though I fought for them to pass the Latin exam at Mundelein seminary, they didn’t learn enough to translate the quote! *Estote quod videtis, et accipit quod estis* roughly translates as “Be what you see, and receive what you are.”

What did Augustine mean by the succinct saying? Patristic scholar Fr. William Harmless, S.J. suggests that St. Augustine had a deep fascination with the connection St. Paul made between the Body of Christ received in the Eucharist and the Body of Christ gathered at worship. At worship, we not only receive the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in all of his humanity and all of his divinity but we also receive, as brothers and sisters, all those with whom we worship and pray.

No wonder that our own Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraph 1396 specifically quotes St. Augustine: “If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord: it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond ‘Amen’ (‘Yes, it is true!’) and by responding to it you assent to it.” This paragraph of the catechism concludes: “Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your *Amen* may be true.”

How does this fourth century insight of St. Augustine get lived in our daily life as Christians? Well, look around this Cathedral. We stand here as one Body of Christ. For one hour everyone is equally fed by the Body of Christ in hopes that when we leave everyone might be equally fed – spiritually and physically – by us as the Body of Christ. For one hour we all uplift our shared desire – as St. Paul puts it – to an ultimate “citizenship in heaven.” We do so with the hope that this heavenly order brought to us by Christ in the Eucharist might become leaven in our earthly order where all have dignity even as we struggle with questions of language and race and culture and legal status. For one hour we live as a single common family of faith
even as we struggle to strengthen the bonds of love with our own earthly families. Dan and Peter Steele commit themselves as priest today so that we may translate the Eucharist into our daily lives. “Be what you see and receive what you are!”

What St. Augustine highlighted for faithful Church membership, the Church demands of her priests. Unique to this Mass, as bishop I will receive the bread and wine during the offertory procession and then hand them to Dan and Peter saying: “Receive the oblation of the holy people to be offered to God. Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s Cross.”

In receiving the bread and wine from me with these words, they are receiving you. At a very young age they are committing their lives to the Eucharist – the Body of Christ and to you –  the Body of Christ. As men of North American English-speaking heritage they are the surest sign that the Church’s love and pastoral care for you knows no boundary, excludes no race, embraces all cultures and can be translated across any language. These men are about to lie flat on the floor as a sign of their dying to self and their willingness to live and die and rise for you.

As bishop I am keenly and painfully aware of the very steep social, cultural and political challenges currently faced by the Spanish-speaking side of our Church. Yet our scriptures for this Ordination Mass remind us that such challenges came to the Church of every age. Our opening reading from the book of Numbers eloquently celebrates the naming of elders to assist Moses in leadership. Yet this naming of leaders came precisely at the time the People of God grumbled and complained about their bland diet of manna as well as what seemed to be endless circling in the desert without any sighting of any kind of promised land. Likewise, our second reading from the Acts of the Apostles comes on the heels of St. Paul leaving Miletus where he warned against disciples who would betray the Gospel. Even more, our Gospel from St. Luke, with its beautiful “Last Supper” account where Jesus shares of his very Body and Blood, ends with a sharp dispute among the disciples about who would be the greatest.

But even more importantly, in this same Gospel passage, Jesus himself teaches us how to overcome discrimination, betrayal and hardship when he tells his followers, “I am among you as one who serves.” He focuses them – not on themselves – but on the mission – a mission of service.

Friends, this is the same mission to which Dan and Peter Steele have committed their lives and this is the mission that will allow our Church to be God’s leaven of love in our own world today.

As we watch Dan and Peter Steele concelebrate the Eucharist today may we be mindful of the rich meaning in St. Augustine’s succinct teaching for believers of every age: “Be what you see and receive what you are.” Peace be with you!