

Dying to Self

Priesthood Ordination Homily for Fathers Lalo Chávez and Michael Kelly of the Diocese of Yakima, May 28th, 2021 at Holy Family Catholic Church in Yakima Washington

Jeremiah 1:4-9; 2 Corinthians 5:14-20; John 12:24-26

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima



Peace be with you! Our ordination liturgy for priests is one filled with beautiful gestures. Shortly, Lalo and Michael will lie face down on the floor symbolizing their willingness to die and rise with Jesus Christ as his priests for the Church. Their action echoes the line of our Gospel from St. John where Jesus tells his followers: “Unless a grain of wheat falls onto the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Dying and rising. As many of you know, I was baptized in the Cathedral where I am now bishop. When I first returned to the Yakima Valley, I went on an August bike ride on country roads and alongside our numerous apple orchards. I was shocked to see that there were nearly as many apples thinned away lying on the ground as apples remaining on the tree branches. Had I forgotten this from my childhood memories of the Yakima Valley? Why? The wise orchardist knows that to gain a few high-quality apples on a branch, other fine apples must be thinned away.

The same is true in the spiritual life. You Michael and you Lalo have more gifts and more talents than you can use in a lifetime. Because of this, you could have chosen many pathways. But through your years of seminary formation as well as pastoral activity you thinned away the good fruit of other possibilities for yourselves in life. You do so to bear a particular fruit for our people that is life with Christ.

You will become a part of so many our people’s lives through the celebration of the sacraments. You will become ministers of mercy through the forgiveness of sins. You will help people face sickness and death through the church’s holy anointing. You will help initiate new Christians through baptism and confirmation with the capstone celebration of the Eucharist. You become Christ for others. As you celebrate the Eucharist you will feed all with the love that flows from

Christ in the Eucharist. As celibate priests you will extend this impartiality in your pastoral care, loving all as Christ and allowing no one to have a prior claim on your heart. Your priority is Christ.

How is this possible? The prophet Jeremiah provides the interpretive key. In our opening reading when the Lord calls him, Jeremiah claims he is too young. But God responds: "Do not say I am only a boy for you shall go to all whom I send you and you shall speak whatever I command." The same is true for us too. We do what we do because of the Lord. Because of the Lord, as priests we become more than we ever could, based only on our own skills, gifts, and talents. Because of the Lord we become more the man God intends us to be: a man for others.

Lalo, your crossing the border at the age of 11 with your undocumented family gives you an inside knowledge and a life-acquired empathy for so many here in Central Washington. We cannot solve all the difficulties of immigrant life. We cannot solve the real social tensions our people bring into church from the surrounding culture. But we can bring them Christ. Good people have sharp differences on the public policy question of immigration. But your fluency in English, your lived experience in two countries and two worlds will allow you to be a bridge builder, de-politicizing our community and rehumanizing our Church.

Michael, you know the inside of our Church by growing up and being raised here in the Diocese of Yakima. As a classmate of Lalo's at the Seminario Hispano you immersed yourself in the Spanish language and the Mexican culture like few others have ever done. In your priesthood and in your personhood, you will be able to uplift the unique witness of Christ who brings together in a unity people of different backgrounds and cultures.

For both of you, your youth can be an advantage. Note that scripture scholars indicate that Jeremiah was a prophet for 50 years. He laid down his life. He allowed himself to die like a seed in the earth so that new wheat would rise. Jeremiah's witness echoes St. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians where he notes that "...those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." St. Paul's witness and Jeremiah's prayer must become your prayer as you, like Jeremiah, look to a long stretch of service to the Lord.

But note that you do not place yourselves on the ground prostrate before the Lord alone. Your families are with you. Your friends are with you. Your Church is with you. And as the sung litany reminds us, the saints are with you. As newly ordained priests may you find courage and hope in the words Jesus gives his disciples to imitate him as high priest who dies on a cross: "Unless a grain of wheat falls onto the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Go now and bear fruit! Peace be with you!

Photo: Father Michael Kelly at his diaconate ordination May 2020.