

Mass Offered for the Deceased Bishops, Priests and Deacons
of the Archdiocese of Birmingham
St Chad's Cathedral
4th November 2021

Homily – Mgr Timothy Menezes

There is something very special about reflecting on priesthood at two moments: on the day of a priest's Ordination – with all that lies ahead, the zeal and the wish to change the world through being modelled on the Mystery of the Lord's Cross, receiving the Chalice and Paten, almost the tools of his trade, and carrying them to the altar for that privileged first time.

The second moment is when that same chalice and paten stand on top of his coffin at his funeral; and then it is for the many people who have known the action of the Holy Spirit through his ministry – most of whom did not know him at the time of his Ordination – now giving thanks for God's grace in the Sacrament of the Priesthood.

At ordination – looking forward; at a funeral reflecting and commending this man to the loving mercy of God as he has done for so many of the people entrusted to his care.

So the focus becomes the life between those two moments – the beginning and the end of his priestly life.

As we gather this evening, here in the Cathedral and with those joining us from different places on the livestream, to pray for all of the Clergy of our Archdiocese who have died over all the years, we recognise at this Mass, our priests and deacons locally and indeed across the world who have died during the pandemic and whose funeral rites have been - like so many - celebrated in the way that was possible, but which did not afford the many people who had benefitted from their ministry, the chance to pray the Funeral Rites in the customary way.

At this Mass, we also pray for our priests and deacons who have lost family members during this pandemic, whether here in England or abroad and who in some cases have not been able to grieve with their families.

The death of our brother priests touches our lives too: priests who have inspired us, priests with whom we have worked, priests who have ministered to us in different ways, and we to them.

And the brotherhood of deacons, similarly, experiences a loss when one of their number dies, as this year, we pray for the repose of the soul of Deacon Pat Duffy from Stourport and Deacon Michael McGrail from Walsall.

The readings that we have heard this at this Mass do resonate somewhat with the surrender of Jesus, his struggles with human frailty and even the recognition that he identified with those who live with doubt or despair:

Now my soul is troubled. What shall I say: Lord, save me from this hour?

But it is for this very reason that I have come to this hour.

And the Father's voice makes it clear that he is glorified in and through the struggle.

During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty aloud and in silent tears.

Although he was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering.

At ordination, our lives are modelled on the Mystery of the Lord's Cross.

We live that through our own struggles, but more so through carrying so many of the burdens of others.

It is often said that people don't always seek out their priest to tell him how overwhelmingly positive their life is. They look to their priest or deacon for hope, for solidarity, and because they recognise in our ministry that conformity to Christ.

I wonder whether we often lose sight of the fact that our ministry is not so much defined by our achievements in any given parish or chaplaincy – the highs and the lows, the judgements we make and the judgements that people make of us.

Perhaps the true measure of our ministry is when through our recognition of frailty, we are not so much giving to the people but receiving from them; and in those defining moments of illness and ultimately death – the true sharing in the Mystery of the Lord's Cross.

As this evening, we remember especially: Fr Michael Crumpton, retired priest who served the people of Burton for so many years, Fr Ollie Kemp whose priestly life was characterised both by identifying with the wounded Christ and by embracing the gifts of the Holy Spirit especially in his preaching; and Fr Bengt Ove-Jakobsson, a Crusader of the Holy Spirit who served in Wolverhampton, in Carterton in Oxford, and in Dudley and Tipton, and finally among the people of

Coventry, perhaps I can make special mention of Fr Pat Joyce who – for generations in the north of Birmingham achieved legendary status; Fr John Burns who mentored many of us as seminarians, whose love of liturgical music kept him composing psalm tones and other pieces right through his priestly ministry, which can be traced back to the days of many priests working with Bishop Humphrey Bright in Tunstall in Stoke on Trent. And perhaps the death of a brother priest that touched us most deeply this past year, the brief and rapid illness and death of Canon Giles Goward, so recently appointed Rector of St Mary's College, Oscott. Even for us as priests, at such times, we struggle to understand God's ways, and we are grateful to the seminary community and to Canon Giles' priest friends who accompanied him on that last journey.

One of the things that has always amazed me, is that when - at the death of a priest - his name is put on the parish newsletter for prayers, in any place that I have served, almost without fail, somebody will tell me their connection with any given priest, connections that I could never have imagined: he was their school chaplain, or he married them, he was their university chaplain or just a friend of the family. Whatever the connection, the reach of a priest's ministry from the places he has served, and that way of identifying with one Diocese throughout his life, is something that people hold dear and, whether we deserve it or not, the prayers of our people sustain us long after we have left the place where we have served them.

In the ministry of the permanent deacon, it is often his enduring faithfulness to his family's parish that is so often valued by the people of that parish.

Every Bishop, every priest and every deacon who has served the Archdiocese of Birmingham, and who is now with God, has shared in the Mystery of the Lord's Cross and, having passed through the veil, we pray that they may now be consoled and healed by the Word of God which they preached, the fullness of the Mystery which they celebrated in each sacramental moment, and that - even now – as they give thanks to God for his goodness to them, they may pray for those of us still labouring in the vineyard and praying for the rich harvest which will serve the holy people of God for generations to come.