

Corpus Christi  
June 14, 2009  
Fr. Tom Elliott

## 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a Priest

Exodus 24:3-8  
Psalm 116  
Hebrews 9:11-15  
Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

This week, I celebrated my 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a priest. It was on June 12, 1999 that I knelt before Bishop Andrew J. McDonald and promised respect and obedience to him and he laid hands on my head and ordained me. This week, I did a couple of special things in preparation for the celebration of my anniversary. First, I used the priest retreat as a time to reflect on the last ten years of priesthood. Secondly, I sat down for the first time and watched the video of my ordination. Both things gave me a lot of laughs and a lot of tears.

While I watched the video of my ordination, I felt great gratitude for the many people who supported me though seminary and who support me in my priesthood. I love the priesthood and I find great joy and meaning in it because of the people who share it with me through their prayers and encouragement. I would not be a priest today without that support and without those prayers. Thank you *so* much!

As many of you know, every year I use the weekend closest to my ordination as an opportunity to preach on where God has been present in my priesthood the past year. As I mentioned earlier, during priest retreat this week, I used the time to reflect on my priesthood beyond just this past year, but over the entire ten years. I specifically recalled the events that had impacted me the greatest and left the most lasting effect on my priesthood. I want to share with you one of those events. In fact, I can honestly say that this one event I am going to tell you about had the single-greatest influence on my priesthood and my life. While a few of you have heard parts of this story, most of you have not.

Shortly after I had been transferred from North Little Rock to Immaculate Conception in Fort Smith, a woman (I'll call her Mary for the sake of anonymity) came to my office and explained that she was being plagued by demons. This was not an uncommon thing; occasionally Catholics and non-Catholics alike tell me similar things. I began working with the woman, trying to discern what the problem was. I worked with her for many months and offered her all the spiritual tools I could think of, including blessing her house and suggesting various prayers. After many months, she was still not having any relief from the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual torment she was undergoing. Having exhausted my own resources, I contacted the exorcist for our Diocese and asked him for some suggestions.

The exorcist and I talked several times over a period of a couple of months. He would make a suggestion and I would pass it on to the woman, yet, nothing seemed to help. Not knowing what to do next, I contacted a friend of mine from seminary who was a member of the Intercessors of the Lamb religious community in Omaha, NE. I knew from my conversations with Fr. John Mark that his community was involved in intercessory prayer, as well as spiritual warfare and inner healing. I asked him for help and he promised to send me a little material on those subjects. A short time later, I received an enormous box filled with a LOT of material!

As I slowly read through the material, I found that most of it was on spiritual formation. While I was primarily hoping to glean from it suggestions on how to help Mary, I found that the material really nourished my own heart and challenged me to be more prayerful, contemplative, and discerning. That box of materials challenged me to be regular in my prayer life and serious about going to spiritual direction. I went from praying on a semi-regular basis, to spending a

non-negotiable hour in prayer every day. My prayer developed from a conversation primarily with myself to a new intimacy with Christ. None of this happened overnight, but the roots of it began with that box of books that was intended to help Mary.

The more I prayed and participated in spiritual formation, the more I realized just how connected our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual lives are—they cannot be easily separated. I found myself studying more on inner healing ministry and spiritual direction. It was during this time that Bishop Sartain asked me if I would like to enroll in a three-year continuing education program on spiritual direction and retreat direction. This seemed to fit very naturally with where the Lord had been leading me.

As all of these things began to make more sense to me, the Lord confirmed what He had been teaching me by showing me the root of Mary's problem. I had been working with her for close to two years without any noticeable change in her situation. During our last meeting, she was explaining to me how the demons were still tormenting her and the Lord gave me an inspiration and a question. I asked her for the first time, "Mary, who tormented you before the demons?" She told me briefly about the emotional abuse she had endured from her late husband, who had died about two and half years earlier. I then asked her who had tormented and abused her before him. She told me about her first husband's physical abuse. I asked her who had abused her before him and she told me about a man she had dated that had physically abused her. I asked her who was before him and she told me how her brother used to frequently rape her while they were growing up and her parents wouldn't do anything about it. Their response to her was, "Boys will be boys."

My experience with Mary, coupled with the spiritual formation that I had received, gave me a new awareness of the healing God desires for us. I became aware that the path to healing **MUST** be a spiritual path and that it is not an easy one. I became aware of how many of the great saints were led by the Lord into inner healing simply through their willingness to become people of contemplative prayer. This is the awesome intimacy that Christ desires to have with us—to not only suffer with us through the many injustices we endure in life, but to be with us in the healing process!

That experience changed my priesthood. It is the reason why so many of my homilies tend to be about spirituality. It's the reason why I offer prayer suggestions every week. There is no greater gift that I can offer through my priesthood than opportunities for people to encounter the Living Christ—the Christ who loves us, heals us, and sends us forth to spread the Good News.

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:**

- ✚ Read and reflect on Hosea 2:16 as God speaking specifically about you and His desire for intimacy with you. What feelings, desires, and hope do these words stir up in your heart?
- ✚ Read and reflect on the story of Jesus healing the crippled man (John 5:1-9). What currently "cripples" you? What needs healing in your life? What happens in your heart when you read about Jesus' love and compassion for the crippled man in John chapter five? How do you express to God your own desire for healing?