

Ordination of Nicole Benevenia to the Priesthood

December 7, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Meg Stapleton Smith

May I speak to you in the Name of the One, Holy, Undivided, Trinity. Amen.

Please be seated.

Nicole, it is hard for me to believe that we have been friends for almost a decade.

Nicole and I met back during our days at Yale Divinity School – her (then) boyfriend (now) Husband and my (then) girlfriend (now) wife were seminary classmates. Through them, we became quick friends.

And for the past several years, Nicole and I have been spiritually walking with one another through discernment and our journeys to the priesthood.

So I can't say that I was surprised when a few weeks ago, I received a phone call from Nicole that can only best be described as the "Ordination Freak Out Moment."

Most of us have one.

Now.

The "Ordination Freak Out Moment" isn't like cold feet before a wedding, or butterflies in your stomach before an on stage performance.

It's not nervousness.

It's not about questioning your faith.

It's not premised on doubt or even fear.

I think the best way to describe the “Ordination Freak Out Moment...”

Is when at one point in the conversation with Nicole I said, “It sounds to me like you’re feeling the weight of it all.”

And she responded... I believe through some tears, “That’s exactly right. That’s it.”
The “Ordination Freak Out Moment” is really about

Feeling the weight of this call. Recognizing all over again, as if for the first time, the *significance* of these ordination vows. And standing in awe of this holy and sacred – but sometimes terrifying work.

And importantly, I got the sense that this particular “Ordination Freak Out Moment” was also about feeling the magnitude of this vocation in the midst of today’s world.

With this phone call as the background, I *also* can’t say I was surprised when Nicole selected this as the Gospel text for her ordination.

In the beginning of the chapter, we are told that Jesus gets off the boat into his hometown of Nazareth and begins doing what he does best.

He heals the paralyzed man, two blind men, and the hemorrhaging woman.

He teaches, and preaches and he eats with the tax collectors and sinners.....

And then.....

We are met with this powerful description

And as I imagine the scene we just read in my mind.

Jesus has just done all this work, and is likely exhausted.

He is looking out at a mass of people with his disciples by his side. We don't know if it's the twelve, or a larger group.

But we know they are next to him, seeing the hoards of people that he is seeing who are *harassed* and *helpless*.

Though I also like the translation that describes the crowd as *distressed* and *scattered*.

And Jesus has compassion —

meaning from the Latin he literally felt their pain and took on their suffering. Compassion is not pitying someone from a distance.

In all of the passages leading up to this one Jesus is out ministering to the people — entering into their reality and now their sorrows and their joys are his.

I wonder if Jesus was feeling the weight of it all.

Because he then effectively turns to the disciples and says, “I need some help. Now I am sending you out into the mission field.”

And as I picture it knowing the disciples....

I wonder if they felt under qualified and ill-equipped to meet the needs of so many distressed and scattered people.

.... if they worried about what it would mean to preach, teach, and heal while Tiberius was emperor of Rome, while Pilate was prefect.

I wonder if they were overwhelmed by the task of discipleship in the midst of so much suffering and uncertainty.

I don't think they doubted what Jesus was calling them to. I don't think they questioned their faith in him. I don't think they had cold feet or got nervous.

But I bet they were feeling the weight of it all.

Nicole, now I am speaking directly to you.

I hate to be the one to remind you of this.

But feeling the weight of it all is one of your greatest spiritual gifts.

I know too many people who have become numb to suffering and injustice in the world.

And that includes clergy who either for self-preservation, or perhaps just the sheer volume of it all have had to tune out the brokenness of the world, because when coupled with the doubt, despair, and pain of their own parishioners it feels like too much to hold.

And when they tune out and turn off..... pastoral care is routinized. Prayer is passive. Preaching is nothing other than a series of banal platitudes.

But, Nicole — I know you. And like Christ in today's passage you allow yourself to feel the weight of it all. And this is a spiritual gift because you let the weight of suffering break your heart open more deeply to beauty and grace and joy.

You let the reality of the world and of your parishioners *affect* you, **challenge** you, **CHANGE** you.

Theologians have called this by many different names

Belgian theologian Edward Schillebex called it negative contrast experiences when outrage and indignation at human suffering creates within us an openness to an unknown, yet better world.

For Jon Sobrino it's about taking hold of reality, or better yet letting reality take hold of us – and then working to make God's reign a reality in the herenow, not just the hereafter.

For feminist philosopher and theologian Mary Day it is seeing and being through the foreground of patriarchal possession, daring to dream and leap into an Otherworld that we know is possible but have yet to realize.

And of course, I think Thomas Aquinas best describes it when he says that anger at injustice is the necessary precursor for the virtue of courage.

The truth at the core of all of their assertions is that feeling the weight of the languishing world and feeling the weight of the experiences of the distressed and the scattered – perhaps ironically – will lead you closer to God made known in Christ and more deeply into relationship with those who you are called to journey with in Christ’s name.

Nicole, you are attentive to injustice – but you don’t give into cynicism. You have the capacity to bear witness to suffering, but you make hope a discipline.

And in the midst of so much despair and doubt, sorrow and pain — you let yourself feel the weight of it all. And that is a mirror into Christ’s compassion.

Those who know you well know that you will never be Cleopas on the road to Emmaus asking yourself, “Was not my heart burning within me?” Because, Nicole,

your heart stays aflame. And thanks be to God for that.

So when you feel overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of this vocation. When the responsibility of these vows feels like a heavy lift. If you ever feel under prepared or ill equipped.

Remember today’s Gospel passage – and the truth that you are not alone.

And that feeling the weight of it all is one of your greatest spiritual gifts

Boston College theologian Jim Keenan says that mercy is the willingness to enter into the chaos, *the willingness to enter into the chaos*.

And my friend, I know no better description of priesthood.

A lover of souls, who willingly enters the chaos.

And with that compassion of Christ in your heart.
You will stand at that altar.

And tell those whom you love to lift up their hearts.

You will bless the bread and the wine. And you will feed people. You will nourish
Christ's people from the riches of his grace.

And in the midst of the chaos, you will lead people into the abundance of joy that God
has called all of us to.

And joy, Mary Oliver writes, is not meant to be a crumb.

Isn't that why we're having a baptism *AND* an ordination
today??? Joy, indeed, is not meant to be a crumb.

Nicole:

We all believe that you are so called.

Feel the weight of it all.

Amen.