

“Equipped for Every Good Work: The High Calling of Priestly Service”

Keynote Commencement Address
by Archbishop Demetrios of America

Saint Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary
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Most Reverend Brother Hierarchs, Esteemed Faculty, Beloved Seminarians, especially graduating Seminarians, Valued Staff and Members of this Holy School, Clergy and Laity present at this Commencement,

Christ is Risen!
Christos Anesti!
Christos Voskrése!

In the jubilation of the Paschal season, I greet you with the glorious Good News of the Lord's victory over Death.

The Scriptures tell us (Acts 1:1-8) that in the forty-days from His Resurrection to His Ascension, Christ appeared many times to the disciples, speaking to them of the Kingdom of God, preparing them for the gift of the Holy Spirit giving them directions for their universal apostolic *diakonia*. The Book of Acts demonstrates that the ministry of the Apostles continued and expanded the ministry of Christ Himself: in healing the sick, the blind, and the paralyzed; in preaching repentance and grace; in casting out demons; in feeding the hungry; and even in raising the dead. These wonders and signs fulfilled Christ's promise at the Mystical Supper (John 14:12), that those who believed in Him would do the works that He did, and even *greater works than these*. Today, beloved students, I want to offer some thoughts about you being involved in the

continuity of the apostolic work, of *your* part in the work of the Church, and the high and holy calling of priestly service for which this sacred school has been preparing you.

Priestly service confers on a weak and sinful mortal the greatest honor that can ever be: the honor of carrying on the mission and ministry of the Son of God. It is from the Lord Himself that we take the very title of “priest.” His redeeming work was the ultimate priestly ministry: an intercessory service and a saving service of the highest order. Christ’s high priestly ministry is revealed as having many facets and dimensions; ours must be as well.

Let us, therefore, briefly consider the chief elements of this multidimensional ministry in greater detail, as we imitate the Incarnate, Crucified and Risen Christ our Lord.

1. *The Priest Must be a Man of the Scriptures*

On the day of Resurrection, the disciples who unwittingly walked with Christ on the road to Emmaus said to one another: *Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?* (Luke 24:32). Here in the Gospel of Luke we see that one of the first actions of the Risen Christ as High Priest, having completed the work of sacrifice through the Crucifixion and Resurrection, was to use the Scriptures in order to explain to His disciples what just happened to Him in Jerusalem.

A primary work of a priest, therefore, should be to make the knowledge of the Word of God an absolute priority. A thorough, intimate, and intense knowledge of the Bible is a non-negotiable must. We study the Scriptures first of all, not to teach others, but to be shaped by the word of God ourselves into noble and useful vessels of Him (cf. 2 Tim 2:20-21). Saint Paul tells Timothy (2 Tim. 3:15-16), *All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

Knowledge of the Scriptures begins with the Old Testament. The Orthodox priest should be thoroughly versed at least in:

- The books of Genesis and Exodus, which are the foundation and cornerstone of the covenants and promises of God;
- The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, whose works have been called a fifth Gospel;
- The Psalms, which are masterpieces of devotion and prayer, forming the prayer book *par excellence* of the Orthodox Church and the backbone of all of our services;
- The Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, which appear so often in the lectionary of our Vespers services, especially for the Great Feasts; and
- The Histories of the Old Testament, which provide the backdrop for the works and wonders of Christ. Only recently have scholars begun to recognize how the four Evangelists cast their narratives in the vocabulary and style of the Old Testament histories.

Firmly grounded in the Old Testament, the priest then must master the New Testament in its entirety. The priest should be knowledgeable about any interpretive questions that arise for important passages. For this reason, each of you should acquire and read a set of high-quality commentaries on the books of the New Testament. You should also have knowledge of where to look in the writings of the Fathers to find insights into passages from Scriptures. The Fathers of the Church were native speakers of the language of the Scriptures, able to access every part of them by memory, and your goal should be to imitate the Fathers by acquiring a full knowledge of the Holy Scriptures.

2. *The Priest Must Be an Effective and Inspiring Teacher*

Having a thorough grounding on the entire Scripture, the next skill to acquire is the ability to convey the truths of the Word of God to the people of God. *Feed my sheep* were some of the final instructions of the Risen Christ to the Apostle Peter (John 21:17). That task of feeding the lambs and the sheep is shared by Christ through His bishops and priests.

Let us be very clear: the teaching ministry is at the *center* of our work as priests. It is a wonderful thing to have a fine voice, to chant well and to handle a censor gracefully. But these abilities are secondary in comparison to the pressing need to feed the flock of Christ with spiritual, rational food. When Saint Paul talks to the Ephesians about the variety of spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:11), he says: *God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers*. Here are four references to teaching functions and one to pastoral. The syntax clearly indicates that the functions of teaching and shepherding are combined into one office. You cannot be a competent and inspiring pastor without being a highly effective teacher!

An effective and inspiring teacher offers more than just ten-minute homilies on a Sunday morning. You must be able to draw from the great reservoir of Patristic wisdom as you feed the flock of Christ: as you answer their questions, comfort their sorrows, and inspire them to lives of greater service. You should develop your skills so that you can offer a lecture, or even a series of lectures, on topics of some depth: the sacraments, or the services of Holy Week, or ethical positions of Orthodoxy. You will be called upon to represent the Orthodox perspective at interfaith gatherings, or to supplement the work of the Sunday School teachers.

Thus, you need to watch and learn from those around you, as you see experienced teachers presenting materials to a wide range of ages and audiences. Whereas a college professor needs to relate effectively only to people in their twenties and thirties, a priest needs to relate to people of all ages, from babes in arms to the elderly in wheelchairs. Saint Paul instructs his spiritual son Timothy (2 Tim. 4:2): *Preach the word, stand ready in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching*. As servants of Christ and as His priests, this command falls to you in the days to come.

3. *The Priest Must Be a Fulfilled Liturgist*

The priest teaches the people by his knowledge of the Scriptures, and by preaching and teaching them effectively... but not only by these things! The Orthodox priest feeds his flock spiritually also by the very manner in which he

comports himself in worship. He molds the people, inspires and instructs them by the way in which he stands in awe before the Holy Altar and by the energy and fervor with which he prays. He is able to give the people courage and comfort by the way he utters the ancient prayers of the Faith with precision, with compunction and with humility. He inspires them to greater carefulness by the way in which he carries out the sacraments with all diligence. In doing these things, the priest imitates Christ our Great High Priest, who is revealed to us in the Epistle to the Hebrews (7:25) as living forever to make intercession for us.

You must, therefore, develop to the fullest your abilities at presiding over worship with a style of leadership that is calm, solemn, thorough, and effective. There is no place in the Holy Altar for lack of preparation or forethought, nor for nervous energy or extraneous movements or unprepared speech. The faithful liturgist considers ahead of time all that is required to offer a spiritual sacrifice of praise that is appropriate and pleasing to God.

In practice, what does this entail? First, you must devote yourselves to your training in chanting and in liturgics. The Church does not ask each one of you to have an operatic voice. However, each of you can master the basics of ecclesiastical chant, of breath support, of good enunciation in the language of worship, whether it be English, Slavonic, Greek, Romanian, Arabic, or another language. At the same time, you must master the structure and the content of the worship services.

Also, a good liturgist cares about how the external factors of the church affect the worshipper. Is the sound system set properly? Is the thermostat adjusted appropriately? Is the choir offering its ministry of music in the most effective way? Are the ushers providing help to those who need it? Is the candle-stand a place of piety, or of idle talk? These factors become noticed only when they are a source of distraction, but they have the potential to render the finest liturgist's or preacher's work ineffective to the faithful.

4. The Priest Must Be a Very Pastoral Administrator

We have, however, to remember that the Church is not only worshipping activities. The life of the Church involves plenty of managerial tasks, too. Serving as priest, therefore, entails acquiring the knowledge and interpersonal skills that are necessary for things to be done, as Saint Paul enjoins us (1 Cor. 14:40), *decently and in good order, εὐσχημόνως καὶ κατὰ τάξιν*.

Managerial ability first requires some basic knowledge. A priest should know the regulations, rules and laws followed by his Diocese. Innumerable problems can be avoided simply by following these rules.

Another needed knowledge is in the rules of parliamentary procedure, which exists in order to allow all sides of a question to be heard fairly. It is imperative that the priest understands the basics of how a meeting should be run, so that he can assist the laity in managing meetings with godliness and good order.

A significant part of managerial skills is the ability to properly read a financial report. The stewardship commitment of your parishioners is directly related to the level of trust they place in their parish leadership. If you cannot address questions of finances with some skill, the confidence of the people will be weakened. They may not wish for the priest to handle the money, but they will always expect the priest to have an eye out for the proper use of parish money, especially when it comes to stewardship information and assistance to needy parishioners.

The last and most important aspect of pastoral managerial abilities is to learn how to manage people, how to handle different personalities. Every person in the parish might have a different idea of the mission of the church, and leadership involves motivating each person on the basis of his or her agenda, so that together a common goal can be reached. This is not easy: You need great patience, great humility, great wisdom and great love to take people as they are, but without forgetting that you have to lead them to what God wants them to become. You should be aware of and able to identify the signs of psychological distress, mental illness, character disorders, addiction, post-traumatic stress and

sexual abuse. Few things are more damaging to a troubled soul than to come to Confession and have the priest lay more guilt and shame on the penitent by failing to see the evidence of a soul in great peril. It is tremendously important for priests to distinguish between spiritual problems and medical problems. A priest is not a psychiatrist, and he must never play at amateur psychoanalysis.

And please, do not forget, in dealing with all these matters, to be in constant communication with your hierarch and to ask for his continuous guidance and advice. His love and wisdom will be one of the biggest and truly indispensable assistances in your priestly functions.

5. *The Priest Must Be an Ambassador and Apostle*

Every Orthodox priest—indeed, every seminary graduate—is an ambassador, an Apostle for Orthodoxy in every situation. This is precisely what Christ's great imitator, the Apostle Paul, says to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 5:20): *So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us.* St. Ignatius of Antioch writing at the end of the first century A.D., coined a handsome word applicable to all Christians: *Θεοπρεσβευταί!* *God's Ambassadors!* It is in this spirit that St. Paul declared, *I became all things to all people, so that I might by all means save some* (1 Cor. 9:22).

As workers for the Church, you will have occasions to be ambassadors for Orthodoxy, when interacting with those of other Christian confessions, of other religions, even with agnostics and atheists. You are expected to do so with the highest degree of charity, hospitality, love, but also with adherence to the truth of the Gospel.

It is important, therefore, for you to understand the various procedures in dealing with different situations. Always remember the superb advice of St. Paul to the Ephesians: *speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him Who is the Head, into Christ* (Eph. 4:15). Truth in love and Truth with love, but always in the end Truth focused on Jesus Christ. The ambassadorial or apostolic function is something absolutely fundamental for any and every priest. Think of

the millions of Americans looking for the true religion. Think of the many Orthodox, properly baptized but disconnected from the saving life of the Church. Think of the lost souls, the disoriented, the confused. All these people, have they not the right to know the real Christ?

6. *Conclusion: The Urgency of a Christ-like Priestly Ministry*

We began by speaking of Christ's words and works before His Ascension into heaven. Let us conclude with a thought about His glorious Second Coming to this world. In Luke 18:8 the Lord asks: *Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?* Christ uses a familiar rhetorical device of the Scriptures, asking a question in order to make a negative assertion. With this dramatic question the Lord means to prepare His people for a likely situation and eventuality of a total eclipse of faith in our world at the moment of His Second coming.

We are in the painful position to understand the significance of the Lord's words. We see around us an ever-intensifying process of deterioration throughout the world. It is exactly as Christ foretold in Matthew 24: false Messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, and a universal hatred for Christian teachings and believers in Christ. In sum, we are witnessing a disappearance of basic human values, as wickedness multiplies and the love of many grows cold. The whole world seems poised into a condition of either militant atheism or of outright worship and subjugation to evil as the supreme power of this world.

It is into such a world that Christ, through His Church, sends you out as sheep in the midst of wolves (cf. Matthew 10:16). There is a sense of urgency about your ministry and your message as no other previous generation of Christian clergy and church workers has known. You will be challenged in every fiber of your being, if you strive to stay true to your high and holy calling.

But if you follow in the footsteps of Christ do not be afraid. Just, one, be inseparably connected with the Scriptures, the invincible word of God; two, be

the effective and inspiring teacher under all circumstances; three, be the fulfilled liturgist; four, cultivate your pastoral managerial skills; and five, remember that you are apostles and ambassadors of Christ, that you are the voice of Christ in this changing world of ours. And, please remember the words of the Lord in the Book of Revelation addressed to the Bishop of Philadelphia: *Behold I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut* (Rev. 3:8). By the grace of God the door is open, never shut. Go through it, out. The world is waiting.