

Comments on the priesthood, on the occasion of the ordination of Fr. Nicholas Park.

Prayer, and blood

By Priest Seraphim Holland, Nov 3/16, 2018

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This Sunday (**Nov 5/18, 2018**), Deacon Nicholas will be ordained to the priesthood. This is an important event in our parish, and my great desire is that everyone who comes to our parish even occasionally will come for this important milestone. The important particulars you should keep in mind are that **you should be at the church by 9:25 Sunday morning** at the latest in order to be present when we greet Archbishop Peter. The liturgy will begin at 10 o'clock, but any Orthodox Christian should follow the very useful business dictum, "when you're on time you are already 15 minutes too late". If people in business can be dedicated to being on time and consistent, much more so should we who are true Christians be consistent and on time.

You should also come to the Vigil service. It will begin at **5:00 PM on Saturday night**. Of course, Archbishop Peter will preside at portions of the vigil service, and read the matins Gospel.

If it were not for the vigil service, any priest would suffer greatly and their ministry would be very weak. We derive great consolation, comfort and strength from the vigil service. Those who come regularly to the service will understand. The Saturday service is all about the resurrection. We speak about it in "100" different ways, with beautiful poetry and music. We read one of the Gospels of the resurrection, and we recite the matins canon in which almost every sticheron is a unique way of looking at the resurrection, and if you listen carefully, you can hear how to apply it to your life. Anyone who wants to prepare for communion should feel obligated in their heart – not because the priest says so – to attend the Vigil service and to try to pray with as much attention as they are capable of.

I want to tell you a few things about ordination, basically personal things. I hope that they will edify you.

Years ago, I told Father Nicholas, probably not too long after he was ordained a deacon, that he had better be prepared because he was going to become a priest. He did not like it much when I said that, but I was emphatic. The fact is that there are very few men that are even remotely qualified for the priesthood. Most people are too lazy or too enmeshed in their passions or barely read or barely pray. We need priests, and good ones. Father Nicholas prays and has always struggled to live the Christian life. He also has other skills such as an excellent knowledge of theology, and talent in teaching and preaching. Therefore, I was quite sure that he would eventually become a priest.

It is interesting that although I was emphatic that he would become a priest, I had never spoken to Archbishop Peter about this. I'm not sure why; it was not any reticence on my part, but mostly that I have trouble with keeping all the details straight in my life. Archbishop Peter spoke with Father Nicholas on his own, without speaking to me, and told him that he would be ordained a priest. I'm sure that he knew that I would highly recommend Fr. Nicholas as a candidate. I was thrilled the Fr. Nicholas would be ordained, because it will be very good for our parish. There was only one small part of me that was unhappy, and I will explain this later.

Our parish will benefit greatly by having two priests. For a small parish, we are very active, and I have always been very active. A deacon is extremely important for the serving of the Divine liturgy and all the services in the church, but he is obviously limited in what he can do. A priest can do everything. We will prosper more as a parish having two priests, as opposed to one priest and deacon. Of course, Fr. Nicholas is of such a high spiritual caliber, that he has been in a leadership position in our parish for a long time, more so than most deacons that I have known. He's gifted as a pedagogue, knows the services very well, is able to preach and serve in Russian.

I want to tell you a few things about the priesthood, from my heart. First, I want to tell you that a priest often feels very lonely, even in a room full of people. A priest is always a priest, 24 hours a day. It is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me and also the most terrible. Father Nicholas will learn this soon. We are sinful men, doing things that the angels dare not try to do. Saint Kosmas Aetilos spoke about the priesthood, and said: "if you chance to come upon a priest and a king, you should give preference to the priest. If you chance upon a priest and an angel, prefer the priest, because the priest is higher than even the angels."

The priest is certainly a man with sins, but he is also something more than a man. He does the work that even angels cannot do. We can think of him as in a way between an angel and a man. Since an angel is a messenger of God, the priest is even more so a messenger of God, because through his ministrations, God chooses to come down and visit His people, especially with the Holy Eucharist. God can do anything He wants, but He chooses to never give the body and blood of His Son to His people unless a priest requests it. This alone is a powerful ministry of the priest.

God also chooses to preferentially hear the prayers of the priest, who intercede for God's people. This may seem strange to many people, especially those who are raised to believe in the Bible but not the church. God is always inclined to mercy, and He has made it clear that He expects some of his servants to be ceaselessly asking mercy for His people. It is unfortunately true that there are those that do not pray for themselves or anyone else. All of us should consider ourselves required to pray for those people and everyone else, but for the priest this is an absolute command. We have many stories in our history where the prayers of the priest have helped someone, and even saved them. This is not because of the holiness of the priest, but because of the holiness of the priesthood.

Many of you have heard some of my little aphorisms about the priesthood. My definition of the priesthood is that it is: "**a sinful man helping others not to sin**". Any good priest, and in my personal experience, even a bad one, is very much aware of his limitations, his sins, and the mistakes he makes in judgment. He is well aware that he falls far short of the ideal of having continuous prayer for his flock and struggling against all of his passions, so that he is image of Christ to his flock. Nevertheless, the priest attempts to be always praying for his flock, and in my experience, over time, he increases this prayer.

Another one of my aphorisms about the priesthood is one that I guess I will not need say as often now, because when I travel Fr. Nicholas will be serving the liturgy, and we will no longer have reader services. This aphorism is that: "**A priest prays for the people and with the people but never instead of the people**". This is unfortunately not literally true. In any flock, there are those that pray and those who pray very little. No matter what, the priest must pray; it is his primary ministry. It is the beginning, and the middle, and the end of every priestly labor. He must pray for his flock incessantly. This prayer is not only his commemorations before the liturgy, but in his daily prayers also. You should be aware that all Fr. Nicholas and I pray for everyone in our flock, every day. I look at my prayers when I am in my closet as inarticulate and very poor, but nonetheless I am obligated *by love* to say them. The prayers of the priest before the altar however, are heard by God in a unique way. I have full confidence in those prayers, not because of any personal worth, because God chooses to hear the prayers of His priests.

I want to tell you something else I learned about the priesthood from the sermon given long ago by Metropolitan Vitaly. It was the most formative thing that ever happened to me regarding the priesthood. He was speaking to a group of only priests. He told us that in every service we serve, no matter what it is big or small, but especially the liturgy, we should be praying in our heart at all times -with our blood - that everyone in the congregation would be receiving the grace of God as they need it, and that no one would walk away empty. This is very intimate and secret prayer. One could say it is invisible, and that we are addressing the invisible Holy Spirit to help the invisible and even unknown problems of everyone. Anyone can pray these prayers during the liturgy, and they should. However, the Holy Spirit fills the "infirm vessel" in ordination, and equips a priest to especially pray in this way. Any priest that that ignores this mandate does so at his own peril and the peril of his flock.

A priest is also obligated to pray - with his blood - when he hears a confession. It is quite easy to be praying and listening at the same time, and it is certain that when a priest prays during the confession the Holy Spirit makes Himself evident to both. This is true for anything we do, no matter what our station in life. If we unite our task with prayer, God visits us and helps us.

God has always interacted with his people by His priests. The Christian priesthood is a fulfillment of the Jewish priesthood, just as the God-man Jesus Christ fulfilled the law (He was quite careful to tell us that He did not abolish it, but He fulfilled it). It is the same way with the Jewish priesthood. It is not been abolished because it is God's way, but the priesthood is

fulfilled in the church. The Jewish priesthood was mainly about obtaining forgiveness for people because of their sins, but had very little to do with healing. The Christian priesthood is about obtaining forgiveness also, but this is not the primary focus. The primary focus is healing. This healing occurs by God's grace visiting his people because of the prayers of his priests, and their ministrations, hearing confessions, and the tears the priest sheds for his people.

This ministry is not well understood by those outside of the Orthodox Church and even unfortunately by some within it. We live in an age where people are very individualistic. The priesthood is not at all individualistic. We are saved together, and God gives his grace to us as He pleases by the means by which He pleases. He gives His grace in the context of us living a Christian life in the church. The priest's task with guiding people to live that Christian life.

This is an extremely difficult task for a sinful man. Everyone should pray for their priests. This way we are corporately loving one another. You are aware that we pray for you, and that we labor for you, and we are aware that you pray for us and labor for us. In this way, we work out our salvation together.

There is one thing that I will very much miss after Father Nicholas becomes a priest. It is always meant very much to me and has been a great source of strength and consolation. After the Great Entrance, there is a dialogue between the deacon and the priest. The priest is about to enter the most sacred part of the liturgy when he, a man with clay feet and hands of straw, while internally trembling, asks nonetheless with confidence that God would send down fire (the Holy Spirit) upon the Holy Gifts, for the feeding of His people. This is also a time when the priest is much more obligated to pray internally – with his blood – for all the people. This is a task that is impossible without the help of God even for a righteous man. Imagine how difficult it would be for a sinful man!

Before these holy moments occur, the priest turns to the deacon and asks him (I think he actually pleads with him): **"Remember me, brother and con-celebrant."**

The Deacon answers: **"May the Lord God remember thy priesthood in His Kingdom."**

The priest, in this moment when he feels his infirmities greatly, is not fully satisfied with the deacon's answer, and he says to him: **"Pray for me!"**

The deacon comforts the priest with these words: **"The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee."**

The priest is very relieved, and answers: **"The same Spirit shall minister with us all the days of our life."**

Then the deacon in turn asks the priest: **"Remember me, holy Master".**

And the Priest is happy to answer: **"May the Lord God remember thee in his kingdom, always, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages."**

Only those who pray these prayers have experienced the incredible intimate bond that occurs because of them. I will miss those prayers, but they are being replaced by the prayers of a priest for me. Nonetheless, I will be very relieved when God sends our parish another deacon.

All tell you a few practical things now. On a typical weekend, either Fr. Nicholas or myself will serve the vigil service. We will generally not serve it together. Although this theoretically gives the non-serving priest an opportunity to hear confessions, we are not going to do that in our church. I have never heard confessions during the vigil service, because the vigil service is a time for all of us to pray. The priest needs to pray as much as you do, and actually more. I understand that it is a custom in some places for confessions to be heard during vigil, but then this time is basically a time for confession not a time for prayer. I would like to encourage more of you come to vigil more often and stay for a longer portion of the vigil. This change in your life will be one of the most beneficial that you can do.

There is a long service before the Divine liturgy begins which the priest serves alone. It is called "Proskimidie", and it is a time when he commemorates many hundreds of names. In my experience, when I serve alone, I am late if I do not begin it

before 8:00 AM. The reason why is because invariably there are other duties a priest is asked to perform before the liturgy begins. Someone comes for confession, or someone needs to talk about something or something else takes the priest attention. This will not be difficult anymore, because we have two priests. We will institute a set time for hearing confessions before Sunday liturgy, for the first time in our parish history. This will not happen all at once, but it will happen soon enough. I want more people to come to confession, more people to prepare themselves for the holy mysteries and more to commune. It is really a tragedy that even in our small parish, we may have 20 or 30 people that are not receiving communion on a given day. All of you should be living a life such that you would be ready to commune every Sunday.

Please, rejoice with me that Fr. Nicholas is being ordained to the Holy Priesthood and in your joy, join your prayers to his and to mine. May we all find paradise together.