

Mass of Chrism, St Barnabas Cathedral, 2019

My dear brothers in the priesthood, may I take you back in your minds to the day of your ordination, back to the time when you first made the solemn promises we are shortly to renew before God and his people in this Mass. We no doubt all thought then that the years of formation were thankfully at an end, and that we had finally arrived – we were a priest! But today, looking back on that day of our ordination, I think we would all agree that none of us is any longer simply the priest we each were that day. So many circumstances have all contributed to shaping and reshaping the priest each of us is today: sharing in the highs and lows in the lives of our parishioners, or others we have served, events both joyous and sad in our own lives, and in those of our families and close friends, the various parish moves we have had to make, the good support of a deacon, other diocesan responsibilities we have shouldered, difficult decisions we have had to make, the ups and downs of our health; and of course the people in our parishes, chaplaincies and the other roles we may have each had, who through their prayers and encouragement for us, the events in their lives that we have shared, and their own personal examples of holiness and zeal for the Lord, have played a significant part in shaping the priests we are today. My dear people, on behalf of us all, I take this opportunity to thank you for your prayers for your priests and for me, and the encouragement that you give us by your zeal for God. We very much need and deeply appreciate this.

My dear brothers, looking back on the day of your ordination, whether it is only a few months ago, or fifty/sixty-odd years, I'm sure you would agree that the image of God, as the Potter, does take on, with the passing of years, a greater and greater significance in the living out of our priestly ministry. We each become more and more aware of how we are but weak and sinful instruments of the Lord, but whom he has, nevertheless, personally called to his service. He accepts each of us as we are, far from being the finished article, and then looks to us to open our hearts to him in prayer each day, placing our ministry in his hands with trust and hope in him, so that he can constantly shape and reshape each of us into the priests he wants us to become. St Paul, who knew a thing or two about having his life, his heart, and his way of thinking, completely refashioned by Christ, uses the very helpful image of earthenware jars. He says, 'we are only the earthenware jars that hold this treasure to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us' (2Cor 4:7). In the grace of our ordination and the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit in our anointing, we were indeed given an 'overwhelming power', but yet, as well we know, we remain forever 'earthenware jars', which are easily chipped, cracked or broken; a most striking image of our human weakness and fragility as Christ's priests.

The oil of Chrism, the outward sign of the 'overwhelming power' received at ordination does not, as we know from our own experience of priesthood, remove this human frailty; and that fact should not discourage any of us who continue to struggle with our weaknesses, and it should not discourage any young men who may be trying to discern whether God is calling them to priesthood, and yet are anxious about their weaknesses. As St Paul reminds us, it is always the treasure within us that matters, not the weak or broken vessel that strives to be at God's service. God never withdraws that treasure, that grace of ordination, even when the earthenware jar may at times in our lives, be chipped or cracked; but rather He, the Master Potter, patiently waits for us to place ourselves once more in his hands, so that he can

reshape, restore, and make us fit once more to serve his purpose. It is only when we can recognise, and even rejoice, in our human limitations, spend time in Adoration and receive often the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and so admit our total dependency upon our Master, that God's grace can complete what is lacking in us.

This is why it's so important that we are never tempted to despair about our weaknesses, but rather that we gladly acknowledge the truth that God frequently makes use of our weaknesses. None us, my brother priests, has been chosen to serve as Christ's priests because we are better than anyone else, or because we are more spiritually advanced; we are not, we are sinners like everyone else. But equally, let us never forget that we are his priests, because he has chosen us to be so, and he has given us this ministry of service for the good of the whole church. His grace can and does shine out through our weaknesses. I know this in my own life, and so do each of you. It's in that spirit of humility that we prepare now to renew our ordination promises, relying utterly on the love and mercy of God, the inspiring help of the Holy Spirit, brotherly support, the generous prayers of the people of this diocese, and with genuine thanksgiving for the grace-filled ways in which the Lord has worked through us this past year.

But, before we do, I want to thank you, my brother priests, for witnessing so generously, as Christ's disciples, to what God can do in all our lives; thank you also for your friendship and support to each other, and to me, which keeps me going, especially in challenging times; and thank you for the ways in which you minister God's love, joy, care, healing and forgiveness to those in your priestly care. I ask you to pray particularly for Deacons Liam Carpenter and John Owens who this summer, please God, will be ordained priests, and for Limnyuy Gamsi who will be ordained a Deacon, and for those who continue to discern whether God is calling them to serve him as his priests.