**Address at the Ordination to the Priesthood of the Revd Tom O’Brien**

**30th September 2018**

**Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.**

**Canon Professor Jim Lucey**

We congratulate Reverend Thomas O’Brien on the occasion of his ordination to the priesthood and we pray for the success of his ministry…

*‘The harvest is plenty...the laborers are few’(Luke 10:2)*

1. The gospels tell us that although ‘The harvest is plenty...the laborers are few’(Luke 10:2) and so we rejoice today in your ordination and we wish you a long, healthy, happy and holy life as you begin your work in Christ’s vineyard.
2. The comparison between the burdens experienced by the priesthood and those felt by the workers in the field is divine. The occupational challenges of the clergy have much in common with others in the secular workforce. That is why it is reasonable to draw from the psychological literature on workers’ health in order to learn how we can support our religious in their occupation.
3. In 1981 Christina Maslach and her colleagues at UCLA defined the consequences of enduring occupational stress and proposed the first valid and reliable scale for the measurement of the phenomenon we now call ‘Burnout’. Its three distressing features are a) emotional exhaustion b) diminishing personal achievement and c) depersonalization (or the loss of belief in the value of the occupation).1
4. Burnout is common. It has been measured in teachers, nurses and doctors, social workers, firemen and lorry drivers and also in members of the clergy. In short it has been identified in almost every stressful occupation. It is a consequence of enduring work stress in the context of rising expectations and diminishing resources.
5. Burnout is not a disease. It is an occupational injury. Looking after the clergy means considering their health and acknowledging their risks of burnout. It is our duty to seek proper remedy for those who are currently experiencing this disabling problem.
6. Most discussion about the causes and remedy of burnout concentrate on the negative impact of increasing stress and diminishing resources. This ‘load/support’ theory of burnout has much to recommend it. There is a need to reduce the demands we place upon each other and also to better resource our workforce. This includes our priests. You also deserve a realistic prospect of continuity of employment. Considering burnout in this way leads us to demand more resources. It also directs the members of the workforce to do more for themselves by taking responsibility for work-life balance, time management, diet and exercise.
7. Although helpful, these measures will only address a portion of the difficulty. The most dangerous feature of burnout is actually ‘depersonalization’. This unprecedented cynicism causes the burnt out worker to distance themselves from the stressful demands of their job. The burnout social worker or doctor or priest has one thing in common: they no longer ‘care’. Better time management and more hours spent in the gym will not remedy this fundamental break with their vocation.
8. A single answer to this human problem is hard to find but my reading of the literature and my experience have taught me this: the remedy rests in rediscovering the value of relationships.
9. We could start by examining our relationship with ourselves. Guilt and self-reproach have no enduring place in our hearts. We need to forgive and we need to be forgiven. This will be difficult to do. It is a great thing to ask of others that we be forgiven, but it is essential for continuity. Forgiveness cannot happen without due recognition and reparation for the hurt we have caused to others. Justice and mercy go together.
10. Similarly, we all tire. Emotional exhaustion is understandable and it is human. The gospels tell us the Jesus Christ was tired. When he spoke to the Samaritan women at Jacob’s well he sat down ‘because he was tired after the journey’ (John 4:6). Jesus could be worn down by the demands of his flock and so he too needed to withdraw at times in order to recover. There were even times when he did not meet the expectations of his flock and then he had to suffer their rebuke. When he was late for Lazarus funeral he had to explain his absence to Martha the sister of the deceased(John 11:1-44). In his ministry he also experienced the pain of diminished achievement. The gospel tells us that he performed few miracles in his home town of Nazareth ‘because of their lack of faith’(Mathew 13:58). How painful an experience that must have been for him.
11. If Our Lord could be tired and exhausted, if he could be worn down by the demands of his flock, then our priests should not reproach themselves for sharing the same experience. Too many of the clergy find it hard to sooth themselves in this compassionate way. In today’s hostile environment our priests can no longer presume on society for support. Many lament the passing of a time when as one priest I spoke to recently put it ‘the environment was full of external validation’. Today’s vineyard has become a hostile place for its laborers, and so you will need to be supported all the more.
12. The evidence is that worker burnout can be mitigated by teamwork. Compassion (in particular self-compassion) is essential for wellbeing. In the secular workplace mutual support is enhanced by cultural engagement, enlightened leadership and greater teamwork. There are many examples of work place initiatives resulting in restoration of the workforce, undoing depersonalization and reducing staff cynicism.
13. Just as burnout is a risk for the workforce including our religious it is also a hazard for the flock. We might all ask ourselves whether we have become burnt out Christians; exhausted, achieving little and cynical about God’s love for us.
14. The work place answer to this depersonalization and cynicism is ‘team work’ and perhaps it’s the answer for our church too. Supporting our priests is a precept of the church. This is an important role for the laity in today’s church. Doing this with compassion can restore our dialogue with Jesus Christ. Although He was humanly exhausted and disappointed at times his vocation never resulted in cynicism. His compassion never burned out. Even at the end he forgave us ‘for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34).
15. As Christians we share a common baptism and so we have been joined to ‘His team’. He is our leader. He can sustain our vocation. His leadership can undo our ambivalence. If we ‘arise with him’ His culture will maintain our labours in the vineyard.
16. It was Jesus Christ who taught us to pray, that we will have our daily bread(Mathew 6: 9-13) but it is not easy. In the 5th century our patron saint echoed St Paul (Ephesians 6: 10-18) calling on our Lord to be our shield in this daily struggle. We need to pray that Christ will remain with us. May God bless your vocation. We pray that you will take care of yourselves and that you will be taken care of, even as you take care of us. Keep close with the words of St. Patrick, the first Irish priest, when he said…
17. Christ with me,  
    Christ before me,  
    Christ behind me,  
    Christ in me,  
    Christ beneath me,  
    Christ above me,  
    Christ on my right,  
    Christ on my left,  
    Christ when I lie down,  
    Christ when I sit down,  
    Christ when I arise,  
    Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
    Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
    Christ in every eye that sees me,  
    Christ in every ear that hears me.
18. I arise today  
    Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,  
    Through belief in the Threeness,  
    Through confession of the Oneness  
    of the Creator of creation.

References

1. Maslach C, Jackson SE. The measurement of experienced burnout. J Occupational Behaviour 1981;2:99‐113.