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Ordination of David O'Connell as Coadjutor Bishop of Trenton

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Distinctly Catholic

This morning I shall be driving up to Trenton for the episcopal ordination of Father David O'Connell, CM. Regular readers will know of my personal esteem and affection for the Bishop-elect but this morning, I want to write about the ceremony itself, and why it is so profoundly counter-cultural.

In a culture as noisy as ours, the most solemn moment of the ordination rite, the laying on of hands, is performed in silence. First the principal consecrator, Bishop John Smith, followed by the co-consecrators, will lay their hands on O'Connell's head, passing on the apostolic succession, a succession that has been handed on from Jesus himself to the apostles. This central act in the sacrament will be done in total silence.

At a time when the Church seems at times consumed by the sins of its own, the laying on of hands will be immediately preceded by the litany of the saints, reminding all gathered of the heroic and holy men and women who are the true strength of the Church. Every instance of sin is an instance of the absence of holiness. How appropriate that the ordinand and the congregation call on the holy men and women before performing this most solemn act.

In a culture that values the new above all else, where products that are advertised as 'great' do not sell so well as those advertised as 'new' the ordination rite celebrated within the celebration of Mass, the one moment in the life of a Christian when the eternal is made real. The apostolic succession is rooted in history, in the commission of the apostles. There was a time before the apostles. But, there is no time before the love of Christ. No time untouched by the love of Christ. And while all of us can, in moments of grace, experience Christ's presence in prayer or in an act of kindness, the Eucharist is the definitive act of Christ that transcends all time. It is the one event that is always new and which needs no advertising

beyond its own intrinsic grace.

In a culture that reduces us to our jobs, to our tasks, to our individual cog in the great machine of the economy, an ordination sets the ordinand apart in a different way. Yes, in past years, as President of the Catholic University, Father O'Connell has undertaken administrative tasks to which he brought his many and varied gifts, and in the years ahead much of his efforts will be expended on similar administrative tasks. But, the authority of an apostle is different in kind, not in degree, from that of an enormously gifted person. One of my favorite essays is Soren Kierkegaard's "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle" in which he writes, "If [the apostle] Paul is to be regarded as a genius, then it looks bad for him; only pastoral ignorance can hit upon the idea of praising him aesthetically, because pastoral ignorance has no criterion but thinks like this: If only one says something good about Paul, then it is alright". Such thoughtless eloquence could equally well hit upon the idea of praising Paul as a stylist and an artist with words or, even better, since it is well known that Paul also carried on a trade, claim that his work as tent maker must have been such perfect masterwork that no tapestry maker, either before or later, has been able to make anything so perfect". Then comes the earnestness, the earnestness that Paul is an apostle. Paul was a tentmaker. David was a university president. But, what will happen this afternoon is not task-oriented.

Later today, we will post Bishop-elect O'Connell's remarks and Monday I shall write about the ceremony. This morning, my heart is filled with prayer and thanksgiving that the Church will, through the power of the Spirit, be creating another apostle. There is, strictly speaking, nothing mundane about that.

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