

PAULA BAILEY

Vested in Christ

It is not often that a parish has the opportunity to journey alongside a man as he approaches ordination to the priesthood. When the opportunity arises, it should be seized, as it is a time when everyone's vocation can be examined and reaffirmed

We have just celebrated an ordination in our parish. It isn't the first ordination – but it is the first one for about 20 years. Tom has a long history in the parish as a husband, a father, a catechist and, more recently, as a deacon. What is particularly striking about Tom's story is the role that Tom's wife, Carmel, played in his journey towards priesthood. During her final illness, Carmel raised the question of priesthood with Tom; and, after her death, Tom (who was already a deacon) was accepted as a candidate for the priesthood.

An ordination in a parish community is a powerful moment. They are few and far between these days and not many communities experience such a celebration. In fact, many people will never be present at an ordination; and, for those who do attend, the richness of the liturgy may well be overpowering. With this in mind, our parish decided that we needed to spend some time preparing for Tom's ordination, engaging in some liturgical catechesis and reflecting on our understanding of vocation, mission and Church.

Generally speaking, only a few parishioners ever get involved in special events such as this and we wanted to find ways to raise awareness of the ordination with everyone who gathers at our Sunday Masses.

A small team made plans drawing on the resources of the Diocesan Adult Formation Team and the Diocesan Vocations Commission – and developing a whole series of ways to include people. Preparation took place during the Sunday liturgy because that was where most people come together; we organised a parish day of preparation and reflection, which culminated in Mass; and we had a prayer vigil on the eve of Tom's ordination.

During the Sunday liturgies of the four weeks before the ordination, we explored the connections between the liturgy of the Rite of Baptism and the liturgy of the Rite of Ordination to the Priesthood – focusing on the vesting, the litany of saints, the anointing and the laying on of hands. We reflected on our common

baptismal vocation and the distinctive vocation to priesthood that Tom had committed himself to.

On the first Sunday, our parish priest began Mass by vesting publicly and explaining the significance of the vestments. During the Gospel, we heard Jesus calling Matthew to follow him. After the homily – which developed the theme of vocation and described how Tom would be vested – we each came forward to receive a white stole as a reminder of our baptism. There were a few raised eyebrows and a few puzzled looks; but 99 per cent of the parish came forward to receive their stole. It was laid on our shoulders and we were told to put on Christ, to wear his clothes and to show his mercy. We were invited to wear these stoles for the next three Sundays leading up to the ordination – and, wearing our white garment, we were invited to reflect on our common baptism and what it really means to be baptised. This led us to reflect on the commitment that Tom was going to make at his ordination and the distinctive way in which he would live out his vocation.

The following Sunday, we focused on the litany of the saints, on being called out and named. That Sunday, the Gospel was the calling and missioning of the 12 in Matthew's gospel. Having reflected on the saints of our parish and our Church, we named our own "personal saints" – people who had been part of our faith journey. Each member of the parish community was invited to write on one side of a card our own name and on the other side the name of somebody from our parish or family who had been part of our faith development – someone who had gone before us marked with the sign of faith. These cards were made into a banner to decorate the Church for the ordination service.

During the liturgy of the third Sunday, our theme was anointing. In the Gospel, we heard Jesus telling the disciples not to be afraid. We were reminded that Tom's hands would be anointed with the oil of chrism – the same oil that was used at his and our Baptism and Con-

firmation. Each of us was then called forward and anointed with olive oil as we prayed that this would strengthen us and calm our fears.

During those first few weeks, Tom was still in Rome; but the weekend before the ordination, he was back and he joined in with the preparations. We held a parish day of reflection entitled "Saying Yes with Tom". The day began with a Scripture reflection focusing on our own faith journeys – leading us to a parish "life map" which shows how our individual stories touch those of others when we come together as a community. The symbols of Tom's journey were already present on the map and he shared his story with us; then we added our own symbols to the image. In the afternoon, we thought about our communal vocation as a parish; and we considered the image of the body of Christ and which particular part of that body we might regard ourselves to be. Then we asked ourselves how we make Christ present in the wider community. Jesus welcomed people – so how do we welcome people? Jesus healed people – so how do we heal people? Jesus suffered, died and rose again – how are we as a parish suffering and dying and how will we be raised to life? We also considered our relationships with the community – how we saw ourselves as a parish and how others might see us. We concluded with thoughts of hope for the future – what hope we see and the way in which Tom's ordination is a sign of faith and hope for all.

During the liturgies of that final weekend before Tom's ordination, the Feast of St Peter and St Paul, we focused on the laying on of hands. Tom, as deacon, was present at all the Masses. Each of us was invited to come forward to have hands laid on us – and we heard the words "[Name], God continues to call you and is building his Church on you." At the end of Mass, Tom invited everyone to his ordination and asked for prayers during his final week of preparation.

Because of the way we had prepared, Tom's ordination on 5 July was a highly significant moment – not only for Tom, for his son, William, and the rest of the family, but for our parish community and for the diocese.

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TO DO

- Make** everyone in the parish aware that an ordination is taking place
- Involve** everyone in the preparations
- Use** the opportunity to reflect on our baptismal vocation – and how we live it out in different ways