

## The Twenty-seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4
<i>Response</i>	If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[B]ut the word of the Lord abides forever. That word is the good news which was preached to you.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 17:5-10

The 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C takes us into Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, the second of the three pastoral epistles. And here, we begin at the opening chapter of this letter with a beautiful and revealing account of Paul's description of Timothy's ordination. It's one of the few accounts of ordination that we have in the New Testament and very significant for the history of the priesthood. So listen to what Paul says here in 2 Timothy 1:6-8 and 13-14, Paul writes:

Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; or God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God...

And then that lectionary skips down to verse 13:

Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so this is a rather short, it's a rather brief selection from 2 Timothy 1, but it's extremely important in the history of the Church. Let me highlight a couple

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

elements here. First, when Paul speaks about rekindling the gift of God that is within Timothy, the Greek word for gift there is *charisma*, so we get the word charismatic from this. And we'll see Paul used this same term elsewhere to describe particular spiritual gifts that are given by God to individual members of the body of Christ. Now, in this context, the *charisma*, the gift that is given to Timothy has been given through an earthly mediator, so to speak, through Paul himself, through the laying on of his hands.

Now, Paul doesn't tell us the exact context or content, the subjective content or the theological content, I should say, of the significance of him laying hands on Timothy. He doesn't describe exactly what this means, but if we go back and we look at Jewish scripture and what the laying on of hands meant in the Old Testament, we can gather some information, we can infer some things about the context in which Timothy would've had hands laid on him. So if you go back to the Old Testament, you'll see that there are several different contexts in which one person could lay hands on the head of another person in order to communicate some type of spiritual gift or spiritual blessing or some kind of commission. So for example, number one, the first context in which people would have hands laid on them was in the context of a blessing. So for example, in Genesis 48, whenever Israel lays hands on Ephraim and Manasseh to bless them, he's communicating a paternal blessing. So fathers, in other words, could lay hands on their children in order to just give them a general blessing, to ask the goodness of God to come down upon them.

A second context in which hands will be laid on someone was in the context of consecration or ordination. They don't use that language exactly of ordination, but when the Levites, which were one tribe out of the 12, are set apart, they're consecrated for sacrificial worship, for liturgical service, it actually says that the people of Israel, the rest of the tribes laid their hands on the Levites in order to set them apart for this particular task to which God had called them. We also see laying on of hands as a symbol of sacrifice. So, the Levites themselves in that very same context in the book of Numbers 8, once they've had hands laid on them, they in turn lay hands on the heads of the animals that are going to be killed and offered in sacrifice on the altar. So you see, the act of laying on of hands can be a blessing as in a family context, but it can also be a kind of sacrificial consecration. The Levites are set apart or consecrated for worship. The animals are set apart or consecrated for sacrifice to be offered up to God.

Then there are contexts in which the laying on of hands describes a kind of commission, an imparting of spiritual authority or spiritual power from one leader

to another so that that person can take up the mission of leadership that his predecessor had. The most famous example of this is from Numbers 27 when Moses lays hands on Joshua in order to consecrate him or set him apart or commission him as his successor, as the leader of the 12 tribes of Israel. So you have all these different symbolisms associated with the expression laying on of hands.

By the time you get to the early Jewish period, late Second Temple period, and then in the Early Rabbinic Literature, the 2nd, 3rd centuries AD, the rabbis used the phrase, laying on of hands, *semikhah*, to actually describe consecration or ordination to the Rabbinate, to becoming a rabbi, to being an authoritative teacher of the Jewish people. So in context then, if we go back to our 2 Timothy 1, it seems quite clear here that Paul is not just blessing Timothy, right? He is setting Timothy apart to be a minister. He has ordained Timothy to be a leader in the early Church. And in fact, if we look at a parallel passage in the First Letter to Timothy, we can see the exact context of this. So, although 2 Timothy doesn't give us a lot of details as to exactly what Paul's referring to here, if you go back to 1 Timothy 4, Paul refers to the same event with these words, listen to what he says here: Actually, I'll back up to verse 13 because this is cool in context. 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul writes to Timothy in his first epistle:

Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you.

Now, there is some debate in Greek, or should I say, there's some debate about how to interpret the Greek text here because the elders referred to here is called the presbyterion. Some people interpret it as meaning when Timothy was ordained to be a presbyter, others interpret it as when he was ordained by the council of presbyters or the council of elders, or you could actually take it as both. He has hands laid on him by the council of elders so that he too might be commissioned, consecrated and, as we would say, ordained an elder in the church. I think the latter interpretation makes the best sense. If you look at all the uses of laying on of hands in the Old Testament, if you look at the parallels in the rabbis for describing it as the way a person is consecrated to become a authoritative teacher among the rabbis, and if you look at the context of Paul's description in 1 Timothy 4:13-14, it seems really clear that what's happening here is that Timothy is having hands laid on him by other elders, and Paul among them, in order for him to be consecrated and ordained to be an elder himself in the church, a *presbyter* in Greek, who has the authority to do what? To publicly read scripture, to preach the scriptures and to

teach others. So he is being given teaching authority as a presbyter in the early church. So even though Paul himself doesn't use the language of ordination, this is in effect the reality, what we would describe as Timothy's ordination to the Sacrament of Holy Orders. He's being inducted into the order of the presbyterate, or to use our language today, he's being ordained a priest.

Now, this is a fascinating window into the early church because we don't get a lot of insight into exactly how leaders were appointed, consecrated or ordained in the early church apart from these pastoral epistles. And in the early stages, especially while the apostles were still alive, the various offices in the early Church are still developing. You can actually see this really clearly in the book of Acts when the Apostles are preaching and teaching and they're being just inundated with all of these duties of serving at tables. You have conflict between the widows of the Hebrews and the Hellenists, and who's getting enough charitable gifts of food and clothing that they might need in order to sustain them. And so the Apostles choose these seven men in order to serve those acts of charity as basically the first deacons, so that they can focus on preaching the word of God, which is their principle apostolic commission. So you see the development of these early offices, and in Paul's letters, again, while apostles are still alive, we see the first glimpses of the development of the presbyterate, of a group of elders who are ordained in this case, he's ordained by the Apostle Paul, as well as other elders, and consecrated to serve in the same way that Paul himself serves, publicly to read scripture, to preach the gospel, and to teach the people. That's who Timothy is. That's why these letters are called the Pastoral Epistles. You could call them the Presbyteral Epistles in a certain sense because Timothy and Titus appear to be young presbyters, young elders in the early Church.

And real quick, by the way, as a side note, this category, presbyter, eventually that's going to be the Greek word that leads to development of the English word, priest. However, it is important to note that we usually translate a different Greek word as priest in the New Testament. The normal Greek word translated as priest is *hiereus*. It means somebody who's set apart. It's not the exact same as holy, but it's one who's been consecrated to do holy things or consecrated to holy activities. The *hiereus* is the priest. So presbyter is a little bit closer to the word used for an old man or an elder, a leader in the church. And to this day, although we customarily refer to priests with the word priest, the actual Latin word that gets used to describe the second tier of the Catholic Sacrament of Holy Orders is, in fact, presbyters, or you're ordained to the presbyterate. So, that biblical language that's applied to Timothy here, and used by Paul, is still used to this day in official Latin documents to describe the priesthood of the Catholic Church.

Now, with all that in mind then, let's go back. So, we see here that Timothy has been ordained by Paul into the presbyterate, into the council of elders, into the order of presbyters, and so because of that, Paul's writing the Second letter to encourage him and remind him, hey, rekindle the gift that was given to you when I laid my hands on you. When I laid my hands on you, you weren't just publicly designated a minister or an elder, you received a *charisma*, a gift of the Holy Spirit, a supernatural power to empower you so that you don't have a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self control. Therefore, don't be ashamed of testifying to our Lord. Don't be ashamed of me, Paul, who is a prisoner. So here, he's writing again in prison, but I love these lines, although they're scary. He says to Timothy, "Take your share of suffering for the gospel."

So we can probably infer from this that Timothy is having some kind of difficulty, he's going through some kind of suffering, maybe he's facing persecution or opposition, so that he's tempted to give into fear, to give into timidity, which is of course definitely one of the principle challenges of being a leader. It's always tempting to try to avoid the difficulties, take the easy path and avoid conflict out of fear, out of cowardice. Paul says, don't do that. You've got what it takes to be a courageous leader, just rekindle the gift that you received when I laid my hands on you and be willing to suffer for the gospel. Take your share. Each person has a share. Everybody has to suffer, especially those who are consecrated to the ministry of Christ. They're going to imitate Christ in a special way, in a unique way. And so in this following verses when Paul says, "Follow the pattern of the sound words you've heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us."

So, notice Paul's theology there of the presbyterate. The presbyterate isn't just a council of good teachers or elders who've been chosen for their virtues and to lead the others. They are supernaturally animated by the Holy Spirit to preach, to teach the scriptures, and to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to suffer for the sake of the gospel as part of their configuration to Christ, the Good Shepherd, Christ, the True Pastor, Christ, the Leader of the Church. So, this is a very powerful and beautiful passage. It really does highlight not just Paul the pastor, in the sense of Paul's apostolic and pastoral identity as one who teaches and preaches the gospel, but Paul as his personal pastoring of Timothy, as a young elder who's facing difficulties in the church, but who needs to draw on the graces of his ordination in order to be filled with the spirit, the *charisma*, the spirit of power and love, self control and willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

In closing, just a couple of points from the tradition about this passage. Already in the 4th, 5th century, there was a commentary, used to be believed to be written by Ambrose. Modern scholars have suggested that it's not written by Ambrose, and so they call it Ambrosiaster, a creative renaming of the text. But in his commentary on 2 Timothy, already in the early Church, Ambrosiaster bears witness to the recognition that this passage refers to what we would call a priestly ordination, that that's what Paul's talking about. For example, Ambrosiaster writes:

Paul urges Timothy to nurture his spirit with eagerness of mind, rejoicing in his faith, just as he once rejoiced in the newness of his ordination.<sup>2</sup>

So we see the language of ordination being used there to describe the laying on of hands in 2 Timothy 1. I think it's interesting there that in Ambrosiaster's comments, you see a universal, pastoral piece of advice to the young ordinants. Namely, on that day of your ordination, remember that joy you had, keep that alive as you continue to struggle in the difficulties and challenges that ministry, that pastoral ministry presents. Go back to that day and draw always on the source of your power to be a minister of Christ, which doesn't come from you but comes from the Holy Spirit who was given to you in your ordination. A second key moment in the history of the Church is absolutely crucial, and it's the interpretation of 2 Timothy 1 at the Ecumenical Council of Trent in the 16th century. So as you may recall, we've only had 21 Ecumenical Councils and Trent was one of the most significant of them in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. And one of the things that some of the Protestant reformers were attacking was the idea of Holy Orders as being an actual sacrament, of they're being a sacramental priesthood, a sacramental presbyterate that is set apart from the laity and has special powers, especially the power to consecrate the Eucharist and the power to forgive or retain sins in sacramental confession. And so when the council fathers at Trent define the church's doctrinal teaching on the sacrament of Holy Orders, guess what passage it quoted? It quoted 2 Timothy 1, the reading for today. So listen to these words from the Council of Trent about how the Church has definitively interpreted this passage that Paul gives us in this second letter. The council of Trent states:

Since from the testimony of Scripture, apostolic tradition, and the unanimous agreement of the Fathers it is clear that grace is conferred by sacred ordination..., no one ought to doubt that orders is truly and properly one of the seven sacraments of the Holy Church. For the apostle says: "I

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<sup>2</sup> Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on the Second Letter to Timothy*; trans. P. Gorday.

remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands..." [2 Tim 1:6]."<sup>3</sup>

So you see there, this is a good example of the Church giving us a definitive interpretation of a particular passage of scripture. So some people might say, well, is this really about ordination or is it about Paul just blessing Timothy? The Council of Trent said, no, this is about the ordination of Timothy and it is the scriptural foundation for the Church's doctrinal teaching that Holy Orders is one of the seven Sacraments, because in the sacrament of Holy Orders, grace is conferred by sacred ordination. So, this passage from 2 Timothy 1, for the reading for today, although it's short, is a very consequential passage in the history of the Church, and in particular, in the theology of the priesthood.

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<sup>3</sup> Council of Trent, Session 23, Chapter 3; trans. R. Fastiggi and A. E. Nash.