

**Homily for the Ordination of Paul Lkuchungan Lesupati and
Zachary David Samples
to the Sacred Order of the Priesthood
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

May 28, 2022

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brother priests and deacons, beloved consecrated women and men religious, family members and friends of our *ordinandi*, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is *good* to be with you and with Our Lord on this magnificent day to witness and celebrate the ordination of Deacons Paul Lkuchungan Lesupati and Zachary David Samples to Christ's priesthood, a glorious occasion for all of us, and indeed for the entire Church.

I extend a special greeting to those unable to be here in person, but who are watching and participating by livestream video. Hello to the family members and friends of Deacon Paul Lesupati in Kenya! It is my understanding that it is 6:00 PM in Kenya right now, so you get to view this in prime time! For those of you who do not know Deacon Paul or Deacon Zach very well, I offer some background information to help you get better acquainted with our soon-to-be newest priests of our diocese!

Paul Lkuchungan Lesupati is the youngest child of the late Jacob and Cecilia Lesupati. He grew up with his six siblings in Kenya and attended St. Paul Secondary School in the Marsabit Diocese. He studied social work and community development in Nairobi, where he earned his diploma in social work.

His connection with our diocese came through Father Jeff Grant, the Pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Springfield, who took a six-month sabbatical with the Jesuit Refugee Services in Kakuma, Kenya, from September 2016 to March 2017. In November 2016, Father Grant sent an email from Kenya to our Vocation Director, Father Brian Alford, saying that he had met a supervisor with Jesuit Refugee Services by the name of Paul Lesupati. His role was to visit people in the camp and verify information given him by the community contact or counselor. Father Grant wrote, "The first time I went out in the camp with Paul, I noticed how professional but compassionate he was in dealing with people. Off the cuff, I told him he would make a good priest. ... Paul wondered if there was any chance our diocese might consider him for priesthood." Obviously, the answer to that question was yes!

Note to our priests: Father Grant has set a wonderful example for all of you to follow: if you ever go on sabbatical, you will be expected to bring back at least one prospective seminarian with you!

In June, Father Lesupati will travel to Kenya to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving with his family members and parishioners at his home parish. Father Grant and Father Dean Probst will accompany him to Kenya, and their task will be to make sure to bring him back to Springfield. Since Father Lesupati has been assigned as Parochial Vicar here at our Cathedral, you can be sure that I will be waiting with open arms as your spiritual father to welcome the return of my hopefully not-too-prodigious son!

Zachary David Samples was born on October 18, 1991, and was baptized by Father Dan Bergbower on December 15, 1991, at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Decatur. He is the son of David and the late Lori Samples, and he has one sister, Meghan. He attended Mt. Zion High School and Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in History and his MS degree in College Student Affairs. Zach says it was at the Newman Center at EIU where the Chaplain, Father John Titus, first planted the seeds of priestly discernment.

In answer to the question of what he is most looking forward to as a newly ordained priest, Zach answers in these words:

I often joke that it is “company policy” for a future priest to say that he is most excited to celebrate the Mass. This is obviously not just a joke – it’s a reality. Without question, I am most excited to celebrate Mass, to confect the Eucharist, and to bring Christ to His people in a very real way. I’m also excited to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, to meet people in the midst of their struggles and pain, and to bring Christ’s light into that darkness. Finally, I am just ready to be fully invested in Parish life at St. Peter in Quincy, and to put into action all that I have learned during my years of Seminary formation.

Both Deacon Zach and Deacon Paul attended Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology in Indiana, and we are all very grateful for the fine seminary education and formation for the priesthood that they received there.

Our Ordination Mass today comes as we approach the Solemnities of Ascension tomorrow and Pentecost next Sunday. A few weeks before Jesus was arrested, before Peter’s denial, before Our Lord’s death, before His resurrection, before His Ascension, before the descent of the Holy Spirit, Jesus had stood near the Gate called Beautiful going up to the Temple. From there He cleansed the Temple, criticized the hypocrisy of the scribes, foretold

the Temple's Destruction, and exhorted His followers to watch: watch and pray that you may have the strength to stand before the Son of Man.

But what if you don't have the strength to stand before the Son of Man? What if you don't have the strength to stand before any man? What then? Then, the scripture illustrates, then God sends his anointed ones to strengthen and to raise you up. That's the context of our second reading.

At the beginning of the third chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and John are going up to the Temple at three in the afternoon to pray. This is, of course, the hour of mercy, the hour when Jesus had died just a few weeks previously. At the Gate called Beautiful, they encounter a man, lame from birth, who asks them for alms. Peter responds, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Acts 3:6).

Peter takes the man by the hand and raises him up. The man stands on his own two feet, miraculously healed, but he clings to Peter and won't let go, as people from everywhere run to see what has happened. Peter, standing there with this miraculously-healed man still grappling him, preaches his second sermon: that it is faith in Christ Jesus, the crucified Messiah, that brings such healing.

He tells them these things are not unexpected: the prophets preached a coming time of restoration for the people of Israel, and that time is now. So repent! Peter and John stand there, in that place where Jesus once stood, fulfilling what the prophets had foretold: healing and preaching in His name, raising up the lowly and returning the people to God through the power and good news of Jesus Christ.

Deacons Paul and Zach, as priests you will do what Jesus did. You will stand where He stood in solidarity with the ones with whom he stood. You will preach the Risen Christ, strengthen those in need, and provide encouragement, example, and restore the weak and fallen to God.

Blessed Columba Marmion, an Irish Benedictine monk who served as Abbot in Belgium in the early Twentieth Century, calls this, “the splendid prerogative of the priesthood of Christ and His priests,” to be the mediator of creation for the creator, “to ensure the return of creation in its entirety to the Master of all things...This is our sublime destiny.”¹

To be chosen by God to live the life of a priest is a thrilling prospect! He has called you to a life of service and spiritual adventure; but I can tell you from experience, it is also a call to enormous responsibility. You will soon be entrusted with the exercise of a sacred power, conferred by the Holy

Spirit, which can come only from Christ himself, for it is a share in his own priesthood.²

Christ is the only true priest; you will exercise His ministry, acting in his person. “You will have the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself.”³ You, like Peter and John, will stand where Jesus stands, and do what he does. Or perhaps more precisely, He will be doing those things now through you.

The priestly vocation is a mystery, wherein a wondrous exchange takes place. A man offers his humanity to Christ, so that Christ may use him as an instrument of salvation, making him as it were into another Christ – an *alter Christus*. Unless we reflect upon the mystery of this “exchange,” we will not grasp why men such as yourselves would sacrifice everything for Christ to stand in his place and what Christ will do through you to gather his people to Himself.

In his book on Priesthood, *From the Depths of Our Hearts*, His Eminence Robert Cardinal Sarah elaborates on what this means for those who have accepted this call to priestly ordination: “We [priests] continue His presence on earth. Like Him, we must watch, pray, and be steadfast in the faith. He was willing to have need of us priests.” Indeed, the Cardinal continues,

Christ has need of you – of all of you. You will be consecrated to Christ, and so every part of you belongs to Him and will be employed by Christ to further His Kingdom.”

“Our hands” explains Sarah, “consecrated by the sacred chrism, are no longer ours. They are His in order to bless, forgive, and console. They are reserved to Him. If sometimes celibacy seems to be too burdensome, let us look at the hands of the Crucified. Our hands, like His, must be pierced so as to keep and hold nothing greedily. Our heart, like His, must be open so that everyone finds welcome and refuge there.”⁴

Notice too, St. Peter’s strength, confidence, and even edginess in making his proclamation. There is nothing weak, vacillating, or unsure about it. Peter, and John, too, have been transformed by the power of the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Before the Paschal Mystery, these men concerned themselves with who is the greatest, as we just heard in the Gospel.

After encountering the risen Lord and receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we hear of their boldness, their miraculous works, and their rousing preaching. Peter, who had once spoken the cowardly, “I do not

know the man” (Mt. 26:72), now cannot stop telling the crowds about the resurrected Jesus he knows, loves, serves, and worships.

Here lies the power and fundamental requisite of the priest: that he be a radically converted disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. All of us priests encounter the Lord Jesus and hear God speak to us those words He spoke so long ago to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I dedicated you ...” (Jeremiah 1:5).

We know ourselves to be loved and chosen to be His own. We come to recognize in ever greater degree our dependence on God, so we spend time with Him in prayer, meditate on His words, and live a life of Christian charity, that we ourselves may be strengthened, encouraged, and emboldened to live as His disciple. As a result, Jesus continues to abide with us, and to invite us into an ever-deepening communion with Him.

But for the serious disciple, and particularly for the priest, that will not be enough. Having found the key that unlocks the book of life, being loved by the One who creates, delivers from sin, and sanctifies, we will not want to go alone. We will desire to invite others to join us and to experience the very same thing. Every priest is a missionary priest, for every place is mission territory.

It is the life of prayer that fuels this life of ministry. For unless a man is a radically converted Christian disciple—one who, in gazing upon the cross, knows himself to be looking at the great truth at the center of human history—he will not be able to bring to the world, through his ministry, the truth that “God so loved the world that He gave His son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

This will be now your primary concern—eternal life—not only for yourselves, but also for your parishioners. You will be a shepherd, entrusted with and concerned about the souls of those in your charge. The Sacrament of Holy Orders will conform you to Christ the Head in such a way as to aid you in this momentous task.

One such way, as a priest, is that you will be a servant to Christ and steward of His sacred mysteries, standing where he stands in the Divine Liturgy—at the place of sacrifice.⁵ Liturgy is primarily the action of Christ who, by His self-sacrifice in the praise and love of His Father in union with the Holy Spirit, raises us into a profound experience of the Trinity. By proclaiming the word and celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, you will place yourself at the service of the priesthood of the faithful, supporting and enabling the laity of offering right worship to God.

You too, like Christ, must offer yourself to the Father. When you repeat Christ's sacred words, "This is my body which will be given up for you..." you must intend it for yourself too, submitting your own body, heart, and spirit to God as Christ the High Priest did. In short, you too must imitate the victimhood of Christ, offering all that you have and are for the transformation and salvation of others. Eagerly desire it, as Christ did, for it is not in material means or sophisticated programs that bring pastoral success. No, it is the holiness of the priest that produces the sanctification of his people.

Your presiding in the person of Christ at the liturgy makes you the shepherd of His flock, for it is the one who leads prayer and worship that receives the authority to govern the parish. Your share in the priesthood of Jesus then, as the Catechism states, "is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church."⁶ There is no room for clericalism, pretentiousness, ambition, jealousy, or the unwillingness to relate to others given into your care.

Instead, we imitate the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. We take interest in those on the journey; they have a story to tell – of

grace and how God has worked in their lives. We would do well to listen in order to better understand the movements of grace and the goodness of God. Visits to Catholic schools, parish religious education, as well as to hospitals, nursing homes, and homes of parishioners unable to travel, will put you in daily contact with the God who rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep. Opportunities for confession, anointing of the sick, providing counsel, and reconciling people and relationships to God and his Church will not be lacking. They will bring fulfillment and meaning to a priest's life, and will be just some of the ways you will preach the Gospel which is our primary responsibility.

Remaining faithful to your priestly promises will also preach a strikingly counter-cultural message to a culture hostile to the Catholic Faith and weighed down with a profound spiritual boredom. You will be a sign of contradiction—living as one set apart from the world for the sake of the world. You will stand where Christ stood, in sincere obedience to the Father with a radical self-gift in celibate love that testifies to the truth: that self-gift, not self-assertion, is the path to joy and challenges today's narcissism and self-absorption. "Lived in integrity, and happily, priestly celibacy is a

powerful sign to the culture...that there are things worth dying for— including things worth dying-to-self for.”⁷

You are, and will be made a more profound and paradoxical reminder to a confused and melancholic world of what is true, good, and beautiful. You will empower Christians to become saints and fulfill their destiny and thereby fulfill your own.

So do not be afraid of opposition. Peter and John encountered it and they continued telling the truth. Jesus encountered it, too, in the mulishness and obliviousness of His disciples who even argued during His first Mass! Determine what the next step is for the people you serve and help them take it as you take the next step in growing closer to God yourself.

He has chosen you to follow Christ, and you will be consecrated to stand where He stood to do what He did in service to His Church: to mediate between God and creation, to preach the Gospel, to raise up those in need, to reconcile, to forgive sins in His name, to encourage, to pray fervently, to offer His sacrifice; in short to be His priest. It is an adventure and a sublime destiny!

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Blessed Columba Marmion, *Christ the Ideal of the Priest*, 21.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1538.

³ Pope Pius XII, *Medator Dei*: AAS, 39.

⁴ Robert Cardinal Sarah, *From the Depths of Our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy, and the Crisis of the Catholic Church*, 139.

⁵ Cf. 1 Cor. 4:1.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1547.

⁷ George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism*, 141.