

**Homily by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez for the
Ordination to the Priesthood of Deacons Blair Gaynes and Brian Ray
Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine
December 22, 2012**

1 Sam 1:24-28; Lk 1:46-56

Today the Word of God calls our attention to two great women of faith, Hannah and our Lady, Our most Blessed Virgin Mary. They were, above all, listeners of God's Word, and therefore persons of deep *prayer*, of continual *thanksgiving* and of selfless *service*, each in her own way according to her specific vocation. And so, Blair and Brian, as you are about to accept this great ministry as priests of the Church, I would like to propose to you Hannah and Our Lady as the icons that the Word of God is holding out to you today for you to embody in your own lives.

You remember that Hannah had lived for a long time in great shame, because "the Lord had closed her womb" and she was childless. Because of this sterility she was the object of scorn by her husband's other wife, Peninnah. Hannah's longing to be fruitful was prompted not only by social pressures, but also by human desire to find meaning in one's life by giving something precious to the world. Hannah's desire to be fruitful was so intense a passion that her prayer for a child broke religious customs. The text says, "...in her bitterness she prayed to the LORD, weeping freely." This loud moaning, with lips moving, but no words coming out, was overheard in the temple by the priest, Eli, who concluded Hannah must be drunk! But, Hannah explained, "My prayer has been prompted by my deep sorrow and misery of help." It seems to me that Hannah truly believed that God would work the impossible for her and that he cared enough to do so. But the fulfillment came after many years of making the pilgrimage to Shiloh and repeating the same prayer.

The other extraordinary thing about Hannah is that a passion that normally makes human beings very self-centered instead produced in her complete self-sacrifice. After weaning him, Hannah brings baby Samuel to the temple in Shiloh to offer him to the Lord, not only symbolically, but actually; she now leaves the baby in Shiloh for the priest, Eli, to raise. And she says to the priest as she hands him over, "I prayed for this child and the LORD granted my request. Now I, in turn, give him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he shall be dedicated to the LORD." Today we would say it is a true stewardship prayer. Extreme personal need and shame led Hannah, not to despair as happens in so many cases, but first of all (1) to total *trust* in God, then (2) to bold and constant *prayer*, and, when God finally granted her request, (3) to a life of constant *service* and *thanksgiving*, symbolized in her giving back to God joyfully and selflessly the very thing she had most wanted.

I suggest that in Hannah's total consecration of Samuel to God, in her turning over her beloved, only child to the priest in the temple for a lifetime of service to God as prophet, you should see what the Lord expects from you also today, Blair and Brian, as he accepts your ordination as priests of his Church. And I would add that the story of Eli the priest and his dealings with Samuel as teenage prophet-in-the-making you also have a wonderful parable of the watchfulness

and care you are to invest as you seek to make disciples of Christ out of the young people to whom you minister with such personal dedication.

Now, the story of Hannah is obviously offered to us by the Liturgy today as prefiguration of the story of Mary. Here, all the promises to Israel reach ultimate fulfillment. We cannot even begin to explore now the treasures of our Lady's interior prayer as glimpsed in the Magnificat. But I will say this: Mary's purity of heart, her total dedication and offering, not only of her Son, but of herself to God, goes so far that, unlike Hannah, she expresses not even a single desire of her own. She has made her own human will so much one with the divine will that all she can speak about is God and everything he has done and will do for herself, for Israel and for human beings of all times and places.

The praise and thanksgiving that overflow from Mary's heart have a universal bearing. She excludes no one from the tremendous benefits of salvation and grace she has already received, chief among these the very presence of the Incarnate Word in her being. Mary knows that God, in making her the Mother of his Son, "has done such great things: for her precisely because she looks completely away from herself and to him as the source of all good. She sees herself only as the *representative* of all those who are humble of heart, hunger for righteousness and fear God. As a result, Mary conceives of herself at the deepest core of her being as nothing but a *handmaid*, that is to say, a *servant*.

And let us not forget the context in which our Lady proclaims the Magnificat. She is not locked away in her room praying, nor is she in the temple before the priest. She is at the house of Zachary and Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea, to which she has made a difficult climb on foot and where she has gone in haste to assist her cousin during her pregnancy. In other words, what does Mary do when she realizes the greatness of the Lord revealed to her so intimately and when she feels exultation of her spirit in God's presence within her? She does not go to the temple or perform any cultic act; rather, again, unlike Hannah, *she submerges her joy in her ordinary life and makes it fruitful in deeds of service to others!*

When Mary realizes that God's "mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him," she immediately translates that realization into concrete deeds of mercy of her own for those around her, those that divine Providence has put in her life. She dedicates the first three months of a momentous pregnancy that changed humankind's history to performing the humblest household tasks in a tiny village hidden in the mountains of Judea. This is Christian life according to the heart of Christ! Mary worships God and gives praise and thanksgiving to God, not only in formal prayer, but by embodying the very manner of being and acting she has discerned in the God she carries in her womb. In Mary, believing and praising God become completely one with living and doing according to God's will. This is why, in this year above all, we call her the Mother of Faith.

I do not think, dear Blair and dear Brian, that you could have better models as priests than what is offered to you so dramatically and movingly today in the towering figures of Hannah and Mary, women of intense faith, prayer and service, all at once. May the Mother of God, under the diocesan invocation of Our Lady of La Leche, help you bring to full term, the divine Word you have conceived in your hearts, who is none other than the *King of all peoples* we invoke today in

the Liturgy of the Hours: the “King of peoples and cornerstone of the Church.” And may you in this way, like Mary, become a source of light, grace and hope to all you encounter as you share the fire of the Word entrusted to you by the Father. A Word who becomes flesh and therefore, thanks to the gift of priesthood, it is made Eucharist for the whole Church which St. Augustine pointed out as the sacraments of sacraments for the unity of the whole Church and for the love of Christ to reach out to all. This entire assembly joins me wishing that these two new, most talented priests become a joyful magnificent in the future of hope.