

“Vessels of Clay”
May 28, 2006
by Fr. Michael Dibble

Many years ago there was a book written, entitled “Vessels of Clay.... Vessels of Clay” It was about priests. Now, this weekend we, in this parish, are celebrating Father Timoney’s fifty years as a priest, celebrating this weekend his first Mass, his ordination. And I wasn’t there for Father’s ordination, but I do want to talk about an ordination that I was at. And since they were very similar, I am sure, he won’t mind. The ordination I want to talk about was forty-six years ago today, in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. And it was many years after that that I realized what a good title “Vessels of Clay” is about priests. A vessel is something that carries something, something usually precious. And you know what clay is. It’s not very strong. It’s not granite or brick. It’s kind of weak and malleable, but weak. Vessels of Clay. OK, here it is....

Forty-six years ago today, in a ceremony very similar to what Father had, but this one I was at. And none of us slept that night. There were twenty-seven of us, and I don’t think any of us slept. We weren’t supposed to talk, but everyone talked, everyone who was going to be a priest the next day. What could they do to you? I remember one guy sat in his windowsill and he strummed a guitar all night. Others walked up and down. Others were in the chapel. I was gazing out a window. And then at six o’clock in the morning (This was Yonkers, New York.) we all streamed down the main staircase of the seminary. Some of us had been studying to be priests since the age of fourteen. Others, saner, entered after high school or college. But there were twenty-seven of us. We barreled down the staircase and got on the bus to go down to St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Manhattan, a fifty minute ride in those days. It was the first time we’d all been together in a bus and nobody, nobody, nobody talked! Dead silence. Some lost in reverie, some meditation, some in shock, and when we got there, they wouldn’t allow us to enter the main door of St. Patrick’s Cathedral. We were carefully steered to the side door and down to the tunnel of the cathedral. And they had a long table there, in the tunnel, very long. And half of us had our vestments arrayed on this side and the others, who we could face over here, their vestments were arrayed over on that side. We began slowly to put on this, just this, the alb. The other vestments that Father is wearing now, over the shoulder, because they were going to be put on gradually in the ceremony itself.

There was a man there, a master of ceremonies. He was ubiquitous. You couldn’t escape him. He had this little clicker and everytime he clicked you had to do something. I remember we were putting on the albs and I looked across at the other half of this twenty-seven bunch. I looked at that one and that one, that one..... My God! He’s going to be a priest! Then I realized that a few of them were gazing speculatively at me. You picked up a candle and the clicker went click and

you turned this way. And we walked that way, up the side staircase. And we came out, all twenty-seven of us, this way. The Cathedral was packed! It was about seven o'clock on a Saturday morning, gorgeous May morning like today, St. Patrick's Cathedral on a Saturday and we came out this way.

The Church was packed and, you know, that ceremony took three hours because there were so many of us and, in that entire three hours, I remember thinking nobody is coughing. Packed with relatives and friends. And you come up two by two. And the clicker clicks and you get down prostrate on the sanctuary of St. Patrick's Cathedral. I remember how cold the marble was. You're on the floor and then behind you, this great St. Patrick's Cathedral Choir sang the litany of the saints. There was magic because the great Catholic women and men of 2000 years rolling over us, like waves, these great heroic saints rolling over these twenty-seven characters. And then the clicker clicked and you get up again and half of us went over here in the pews, which faced each other, the other half over there. We were facing each other. And there was the Cardinal who was going to ordain us. One by one, we were called up. Everything was in Latin in those days. Your name was said in Latin and you were to respond "Ad sum." Ad sum, ad sum... That's Latin. It means "I'm here." God help the Church!! "Ad sum.... Ad sum.... Ad sum...." And you went over and, I remember, you walked up and knelt in front of the Cardinal. In those days, it was a very small man, Cardinal Spellman. And, to me, he was just this vague, powerful, political figure. He was a Cardinal of the Catholic Church but, to me, he was so remote. But, when you knelt in front of him, I did look into his eyes. I forced myself to look into his eyes because this was the moment. And, for a man who I thought was merely this vast, powerful, prestigious figure, the eyes were amazingly kind at that moment. They seemed to delve right down to your soul. And he put his hands on your head, at that point, hirsute in my case, and he pressed down. And I forced myself to look into his eyes. They were wonderful, wonderful eyes. And that's it! I mean, that gesture, you know the laying on of hands, after many years of study. And just before that, he has to check with the head of the seminary, in Latin, "Is this man worthy?" and then the head of the seminary answered in those days, in Latin, "... as far as human fallibility can tell." Isn't that great the way the Church covers its bases? And you are ordained! Ad sum, and it is just the imposition of hands, two thousand years.... "You are a priest forever." And you get up and go back to your perch, over here and, one by one, you are ordained. And then (This was a lovely moment.) all the priests whom you had invited, parish priests you had admired or teachers you had liked who helped you, they came behind you, when you were still over there, and they pressed their hands on your head, as if each of them were saying "Welcome. Welcome." Then you go back to the perch and the Mass continues and you say your first Mass that moment. The day you are ordained you say your first Mass with the Cardinal, in a semicircle. We say all the words simultaneously with him, in those days, in Latin. "Hoc est corpus meum, This is my body." And then it is done. You have all your vestments on and the clicker pops up again, and he clicks, and now, two by two, you go down the main aisle. Now, you can face the people. They are not shepherding you off. You go down the main aisle, two by two. And I recall vividly on Fifth Avenue, that Saturday, 1960, May 28th, right across the street from St. Patrick's, there's this statue of Atlas and he is holding the globe with those rippling biceps and muscles that I have always envied. I remember looking at him and thinking, "You got

the lighter load.... You got the lighter load.” at that moment.

We were told many times, ahead of time, “You are to proceed with sedate, decorous steps around the side of the Cathedral, back down those side stairs, back to the tunnel, sedately and decorously.” Nobody did it, sedately or decorously. We tore down, around the corner with people staring, “Oh God! What’s happened to the Catholic Church?” Twenty-seven flapping vestments, down the stairs, back to the long table, flip off the vestments, not very reverently because a few blocks down, down on Lexington Avenue, at a Catholic High School which was empty on Saturday, there were classrooms set aside for each of us to go and meet our families. We checked later that afternoon with each other, back at the seminary for our final lunch together. All twenty-seven got the same reception. It wasn’t prepared or rehearsed but all twenty-seven.... You walk in this classroom. It’s yours for an hour. And all the people whom you love and who’ve known you, they stand up, uncles and parents and siblings. “Could we have your first blessing, Father?” Every life has a moment or two of absolute bliss and that was one. People intimately holier than we saying “Could we have your.....” and kneeling down.

About ten days later, you got your assignment, your first job. Now, most of them were sent to work among the very poor in the South Bronx, lower Manhattan. A couple of us, after a few years as parish priests, were sent into teaching. And the other guys, among the very poor. That was 1960. Now, since then, fourteen have left, within the first decade. It’s a new world! Fourteen had left to marry. Thirteen remained, and eleven of those thirteen have, for the past forty-six years, been working with the poor. I’m not just saying that loosely. I mean the very poor, and they are loved and they live like poor men. I have visited them. They are loved by people and they love back. The thirteen who stayed are good guys! And they love being priests and they love the poor, and vice versa. And, of the twenty-seven of us ordained, seven have died. Vessels of clay.

Now, it’s no surprise to anyone at this Mass that there shall be, it seems, fewer and fewer priests who are vessels of clay. At least, it’s my opinion at the moment, fewer and fewer ordained priests who shall be vessels of clay. So, you’ve got to do it now, as so many of you are already doing it, what we call the laity, already serving the Church, ministering to the Church, helping in so many ways. Maybe it’s the Holy Spirit’s plan, at least for awhile, the laity and the priests working together, as long as we remember that we’re all vessels (carrying something precious, Christ, bringing sacraments), but of clay! Just human. That’s not a bad title for all of us, “vessels of clay.”