

ORDINATION AND BLESSING

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I grew up in an anti-Catholic world. The first thing I remember hearing about Catholics in the small town in which I was raised was not just negative, it was extremely so. Everyone I knew was distrustful, suspicious, or hateful toward Catholics. When I joined the LDS Church at age ten, I heard more anti-Catholic sentiment, including the branding of the Catholic Church as “the Whore of Babylon,” and “the great and abominable church” or “church of the devil,” based on a biased reading of the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 13:6, 14:9). The first edition of Apostle Bruce R. McConkie’s controversial *Mormon Doctrine* published in 1958 instructed readers to “see Church of the Devil” under the heading of “Catholicism,” and there it described the Church as “singled out, set apart, described, and designated as being ‘most abominable above all other churches.’”¹ As a missionary laboring in a densely Catholic part of Illinois, I heard even more vicious slurs against the Catholics, some of it from fellow-missionaries.²

Anti-Catholic sentiment continues at least to some degree among Saints today as is evident in a comment by Elder Russell M. Ballard at a 2014 fireside in Buenos Aires, where he said, “Most people don’t know where they came from. They don’t know why they’re here, and they don’t know where they’re going. And if they have a Catholic background,

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1st ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 108.

2. For more on Catholic-Mormon relations, see Matthew J. Grow, “The Whore of Babylon and the Abomination of Abominations: Nineteenth-Century Catholic and Mormon Mutual Perceptions and Religious Identity,” *Church History* 73, no. 1 (Mar. 2004): 139–67.

they don't know who God is. They don't know who the Savior is; nor do they know who the Holy Ghost is."³ On her blog at the Religion News Service, Jana Riess called Elder Ballard's comments "a regrettable step backwards in Mormon attitudes toward other faiths."⁴

Like most childhood prejudices, it took a concerted effort for me to shed negative attitudes toward Catholicism. Four things helped: 1) my personal friendship with a number of Catholics; 2) my involvement in interfaith work that has included not only friendship and fellowship, but opportunities to work closely with Catholic believers; 3) my study of the important role Catholicism has played in the unfolding of Christianity; and, especially, 4) my deeper understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the commandment to love others as myself. Also helpful has been the privilege I have had for the past five years of teaching Mormonism to graduate students of many faiths, including Catholic (Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits, as well as lay members) at Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, California, where I have had the opportunity to interact with students of the world's major (and some minor) religions. Quite often I learn as much as they do, as they patiently correct my sometimes-embarrassing misconceptions and expand my understanding. For example, a Catholic student once informed me that, while a Catholic can be excommunicated for serious sins, he or she does not cease being a Catholic and does not require rebaptism upon returning to the faith.⁵

3. "Devocional para JAS Elder M. Russell Ballard Elder Ronald A Rasband," Feb. 20, 2014, YouTube, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7c7Yz3Xkeg>. Elder Ballard's comments about Catholics can be found at the 59.00 mark in the recording.

4. Jana Riess, "Mormon Apostle Criticized for Anti-Catholic Remarks," Religion News Service (Oct. 23, 2015), retrieved from <http://janariess.religionnews.com/2015/10/23/mormon-apostle-criticized-for-anti-catholic-remarks/>.

5. I discuss my experiences at GTU in my recently published essay, "Teaching Mormon Studies at a School of Theology and a Public University," *Mormon Studies Review* 2 (2015): 33–41.

Another advantage of teaching students of different religious traditions is that they bring a fresh perspective to LDS theology and culture. They also bring rich, unique backgrounds to the reading of Latter-day Saint sacred texts that help me see and appreciate those texts in new ways. For example, one of my students, a Jesuit named Glen Butterworth, wrote an insightful paper on King Benjamin's address, which he concluded with these words:

Interpreting Benjamin as a champion of equality helps to illumine the king's character with regard to relationships among the people. . . . By establishing the measure of righteousness as located in the care the people have for one another, Benjamin heralds the future teaching of Jesus Christ concerning the greatest of the commandments. And in living within a covenantal relationship with the divine, Benjamin models morality and highlights the intergenerational nature of Mormon worship and service of God.⁶

Seeing this text through the eyes of a bright, thoughtful Catholic gave me new understanding and increased my appreciation for this great Book of Mormon prophet.

Since I require my GTU students to attend a Latter-day Saint worship service and watch at least one session of general conference, I remain open to their invitations to attend services in their traditions. I find these worship experiences both enjoyable and enlightening. In fact, I have found my love of God and my reverence for Jesus broadened and deepened by the faith and devotion of other believers. Occasionally, I have had students invite me to attend their ordination ceremonies once they graduate. Such an invitation came from Glen Butterworth, the student whose paper gave me new insights about King Benjamin. I traveled from Northern California to attend Glen's Mass of Ordination at the Blessed Sacrament Church in Hollywood on June 8, 2013.

6. Glenn Butterworth, S. J., "The Character of King Benjamin," seminar paper presented in "Sacred Texts of the Latter-day Saints," GTU, Spring 2011; copy in my possession.

With the sun shining through its beautiful stained-glass windows, the Blessed Sacrament Church was filled to overflowing with a spirit of anticipation in the air. The parish life director welcomed all asking, “What and who is the Society of Jesus?” She responded, “All are called and many respond to the invitation of Jesus to make the world more humane by entering into this solemn litany.” The Introductory Rites began with the entrance of the ordinands: Glen and the four other Jesuit candidates for the priesthood, dressed in simple white albs. They were preceded by forty Jesuit priests dressed in white with gold stoles (symbolizing their ordination). The congregation accompanied their arrival, singing “All Creatures of Our God and King,” with its lovely repeated alleluias. I was particularly struck by one verse:

O ev’ry one of tender heart,
Forgiving others, take your part,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
All you who pain and sorrow bear,
Praise God and cast on God your care.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Following the Kyrie and the Gloria was a reading from Isaiah 55 (“All you who are thirsty, come to the water!”), a Responsorial reading of the twenty-third Psalm and a reading from 2 Corinthians (“Whoever is in Christ is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come”), and finally a “gospel Acclamation” of Alleluias.

Interestingly, the ordaining bishop for this ceremony was John Wester, then bishop of Salt Lake and now the archbishop of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Bishop Wester began the Rite of Ordination with the “Calling of the Candidates,” in which he asked, “Do you know them to be worthy [of the priesthood]?” The ordinands’ respective religious superiors or provincials responded, “We testify that they are worthy.” The bishop then said, “Relying on the help of the Lord God and our Savior Jesus Christ, we choose these, our brothers, for the order of the priesthood.” All responded, “Thanks be to God!”

Bishop Wester then questioned the candidates as to their “willingness to undertake the tasks and obligations of the priesthood,” to which they “express[ed] their resolve to fulfill the office of priest in accord with the mind of Christ and the Church.” I was struck by the beauty and meaning of this part of the ceremony and wished that Latter-day Saint boys and men might have a similar opportunity to reflect on the soberness of such a sacred undertaking and to make such a covenant. Each of the candidates then prostrated himself before the altar.

The ordination of the five candidates was impressive, with each of the ordained Jesuit priests laying his hands on each of the ordinands. The program explained that “the Bishop and the celebrating priests confer on the candidates the gift of the Holy Spirit for service as a priest through the laying on of hands. This ancient sign and prayer of consecration constitute the heart of the ordination rite.”

Following the ordination everyone sang, “Veni Sancte Spiritus” (“Come, Holy Spirit”):

Come, Holy Ghost,
send down those beams,
which sweetly flow in silent streams
from Thy bright throne above.
O come, Thou Father of the poor;
O come, Thou source of all our store,
come, fill our hearts with love.

The ordination ceremony concluded with each newly-ordained priest having his deacon stole replaced by a priest stole and a chasuble (a special “Eucharistic garment” worn during the celebration of the mass). The bishop then anointed each new priest’s hands with “Sacred Chrism” or consecrated oil, “a sign of consecration familiar from biblical times.” This was followed by the Lord’s Prayer, the Sign of Peace, and the *Angus Dei* (“Lamb of God”), the part of the mass that pleads for Christ’s mercy.

What was a particular joy for me was seeing my former student now robed in the garments of his priestly tradition celebrating the Eucharist

for the first time. I was observing all of this and somewhat lost in the reverie of the occasion when I realized it was my turn to rise and go to the front of the church and take the emblems of the sacrament, which I am always comfortable doing because, no matter the denomination, these symbols are deeply meaningful to me. As I opened my hands to take the wafer, I was surprised to see that it was being offered to me by my newly-ordained student, our roles now somewhat reversed, although beautifully so.

When the communion was finished, there was a “solemn blessing of the new priests” by the Bishop and then a procession sung to the hymn, “O God Beyond All Praising.” After the service everyone adjourned to the courtyard for a reception. When I found and congratulated Father Butterworth on his ordination, he surprised me by asking, “Would you like a blessing?” I said I would and was privileged to be the recipient of the first blessing Father Butterworth gave as a Jesuit priest. After placing his hands on my head, he said, “Loving God, we ask that you send forth your Holy Spirit anew upon this son of yours. We ask that your Spirit fills his heart with light and love and drive away all darkness and doubt. May this son of yours experience the grace of your mercy and may he enjoy good health and a long life. Please answer all of his prayers on behalf of his loved ones.” Then speaking directly to me, he concluded, “May Almighty God bless you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Having been ordained as both an elder and a bishop in the LDS Church, I have given hundreds, perhaps thousands, of blessings over a lifetime, including on many occasions to my wife and children. I have undertaken this responsibility seriously and soberly, hoping always to speak words of comfort, encouragement, and, especially, love to those on whose heads I placed my hands. I have also received many blessings from other priesthood holders over the years and at times have felt a palpable goodness and even holiness during such blessings. Those were the sentiments I felt as my student and friend, the newly ordained Father Butterworth, blessed me on his first day of ordination. As I have reflected

on that blessing on that blessed day, I have the assurance that Father Butterworth will bless many people through his words and deeds in his ministry as one of Christ's modern disciples. Knowing the largeness of his heart, based on his work in my class and our many discussions of Mormonism, I also know he will speak of my faith fairly and generously, as I will of his.