I am really happy to be here today. Archbishop Aymond asked me to do this three years ago, but like everything else over the last couple of years, COVID-19 altered our plans. I remember answering his letter a couple of years ago by saying, “I would be thrilled to do this - but I’m hoping that Jesus comes before then, so I don’t have to give it and we will be in heaven.” He wrote back and said, “Me too, Bill. But in case he doesn’t come by then, would you still do it?” So here I am!

I have been a priest and religious for over 28 years, and a bishop for five now. I like to tell people that I love being a priest; I like being a bishop. I never planned on it or even hoped for this calling. It came completely out of the blue. Even my own mother was surprised. She said, “You?” (I think she was secretly hoping that it would be my younger brother, who is the favorite and who is also a priest!) During that time when it was announced, I was shocked and was anxious and even a little sad. I received phone calls and emails and texts from a lot of people who congratulated me (and some who spoke words of consolation). One of these was Archbishop Aymond. At my press conference I quoted him and he called to congratulate me and thank me for remembering what he had said. (When I was assigned as pastor in Austin, Archbishop Aymond was the bishop there, so he sent me a letter along with my faculties. On the back of the letter he wrote, “I respectfully ask you not to make any major changes for the first 10 months at the parish. You are joining a vibrant and established community, and you would do well to be there a while before you make any changes.”)

In the course of our conversation, I said to the archbishop "But Archbishop, you know me - a little anyway. I’m nobody. Why did this happen?” He said, “Well look at you: you’re not an intellectual.” Then there was a long pause and I cleared my throat as if to say “I’m still here you know!” Then he continued, “You are a good pastor who has worked with the poor and the imprisoned, you’re religious from a large family and you speak Spanish. This is what pope Francis is looking for, and this is what we need in the church."

Although I still have my doubts about my qualifications or my readiness for this location, I know he was right.

We – the church – need:
Priests with the heart of the shepherd,
Priests who are in love with God and his people,
Priests who are very human, yet strive to be God-like,
Priests who wish to serve rather than to be served,
Priests of Jesus Christ who wish to lay down their lives for the Gospel.

It has never been easy to be a follower of Christ, much less a priest. At times it has been much more difficult, but today brings its own challenges.
And yet the statistics and surveys bear out this one fact: priests are for the most part happy in their vocation, and the vast majority of us would do it all over again if we had the choice.

Gatherings like these are so important. We have to come together to pray and talk and laugh together. Jesus invited his disciples to “Come away by yourselves for a while”. Being around like-minded people or people who know what we are going through is incredibly refreshing. We need to be reminded of who we are and why we are priests. With all the stressors in my life, I tell our priests that if I know they are behind me, I am confident that we can overcome anything that comes our way. I especially like it when I am in the midst of a gathering of priests – at a convocation, a retreat, in a gathering in a deanery, or in a meeting of the Presbyterian Council. When I am in the midst of my brothers, I am not afraid of anything; I can take on the world.

So in this presentation, “A Sacred Calling, A Vibrant Ministry for God’s Flock”, I want to encourage you and assure you that God – and his people – need you and want you.

I will also add some thoughts about how we can grow in this awesome vocation as individuals, as well as together, within our presbyterates.

I went through formation at a time when the priesthood seemed to be struggling with an identity crisis. We were still trying to correct the false notion that priests and religious were somehow on a higher plane than everyone else. The priests around me didn’t wear their clerical garb very often, and they insisted that people call them by their first names only. Outside of Mass, there was no way to tell that they were ordained.

One of my nieces went to a “Come and See” retreat for a religious order around that time. During the question-and-answer period, she asked one of the sisters why they don’t wear a habit. The sister answered rather brusquely: “I knew someone would ask that. Why is that important? We are no different than you or anyone else.” Well, my niece didn’t want to be like everyone else; that’s why she was discerning a religious vocation.

The phrase “Priests or like everyone else” was like a mantra. Even in regards to the liturgy, the importance of the priest was downplayed. Everyone was the celebrant, while the priest was simply the presider. We celebrated Masses while everyone stood around the altar, and in smaller groups we sat with the priest on the floor around a small portable table.

Now I’m not dismissing my formation experiences or the prevailing attitude most people had a couple of decades ago. It is what it is. The Holy Spirit was fully in charge then as now. Besides, those experiences made me into the man – and priest – that I am today.

If the goal was to bring priests and the priesthood down to earth, we succeeded big-time. And, of course, the clergy abuse scandal – and successive efforts to cover it up or minimize it – hastened the fall from grace. In recent years, with the rise of social media and various blogs, priests and bishops have received more criticism and consternation, most often from those who label themselves “faithful Catholics”.
We’ve gotten to the point where people no longer wonder if we are really human; rather they wonder if we are anything special at all.

Hang in there brothers. It’s going to get better!

There are two things I’d like to say right now:
1) What we are experiencing now is nothing new;
2) Ours is an exalted vocation; truly a “higher calling”.

One really good thing about facing unfair criticism is knowing that this is exactly what happened to Jesus, St. Paul, and all of the Saints. It helps us to identify with them in a very personal and profound way. Also, Jesus told us that this would happen: “If the world hates you, know that it hated me first.” And, “Blessed are you when you were persecuted… Yours is the kingdom of God.”

Only recently have I begun seriously to meditate on what Jesus must have felt when he was among us in the flesh. No one understood him, even his own friends talked about him and schemed behind his back, and some were trying to trap him and were planning his own demise. I don’t care who you are; that has got to be excruciating. And Jesus had no peers, no one he could really confide in. Talk about loneliness!

I used to think that St. Paul was exaggerating when you talked about being fools for the sake of the Gospel, or being “the scum of the earth”. But now I see that he was serious. The same is true with some of the Psalms that we pray in the Office, as well as the books of Job and Lamentations. You and I can quite easily identify with the sentiments in those books, and the expressions of angst, suffering, and loneliness that our spiritual ancestors wrote about.

But if we identify with these, we must also remember the rest of the story. Jesus said, “Your reward in heaven will be great.” St. Paul wrote “We have a treasure stored up for us in heaven.” Jesus: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” “Your father is pleased to give you the kingdom.” “Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest.” “Do not be afraid or distressed, for your Father loves you more than you can know.”

Now, let’s talk about the dignity of the priesthood.

Let us not forget who we are brothers! By the grace and action of our Triune God, you are “A royal priesthood,” “a people set apart”. You are alteri Christi – other Christ’s. You are called and chosen, blessed and anointed. The church and the world need you. And although you may not hear it very often, we love you.

I hear this all the time from parishioners in the diocese. Yes, of course, we get a few letters and emails from people who are critical or upset about something that a priest or I have done, but they’re really not that many. More often, I get comments and emails or when I visited a parish in person along the lines of, “We love Fr. Emmanuel!” “I hope you haven’t come to take Fr. Paul away; we love him.” (Why do they always think that we are going to take you away? We’re just coming by for a Confirmation or some other gathering!)
Listen to what is written as part of a suggested homily for the ordination of a priest:

“In being configured to the eternal high priest and joined to the priesthood of the bishops, they will be consecrated as true priests of the New Testament…

… Remember, dear sons, that you are taken from among men and appointed on their behalf for those things that pertain to God. Therefore, carry out the ministry of Christ the priest with constant joy and genuine love, attending not to your own concerns but to those of Jesus Christ.”

We are called. This is not about us. There is something mysterious going on here. (Archbishop Aymond said in his homily yesterday, speaking about the call of Peter, who fell at the feet of Jesus and said, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man,” Jesus basically said to him, “This is not about your sins, it’s about your service.” St. John wrote, “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you…” (I added this line to my Final Vows formula. After saying, “I stand before God and you my Provincial to profess my vows”, I looked up as though to heaven and I said, “It was not I who chose you, Father, but you who chose me.”) Brothers, let me tell you: I felt the presence of God then like never before!

With the prophets we can say, “The Lord called me from birth,” and, “I appointed you to be a light for the nations.”

From the Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross (Chapter I):

1. “Come, Follow me.” It was the Lord Jesus calling us.

2. We were already His, for we bore the name of Christians. We had already been initiated into His church. We had been washed in baptism and confirmed in our belief and given the eucharistic nourishment in memory of Him. But there seemed to come a time when the Lord was calling us to take some further step.

3. We heard a summons to give over our lives in a more explicit way. It was a call to serve all people, believers and unbelievers alike. We would serve them out of our own faith that the Lord had loved us and died for us and risen for us and that He offers us a share in His life, a life more powerful and enduring than any sin or death.

4. It was a call that came to us from without, but also one that arose up within us, as from His Spirit.

5. We asked how we might follow, and we found many footprints on the road. A great band of men had passed this way, men who had made and lived by their vows, men who had walked side by side in their following of the Lord. They beckoned us to fall in step with them. We wanted to be part of the family they formed in order to share in their life and work.

“We heard a summons.” Like Peter, James, John, Andrew, Matthew, Zacchaeus, and many others, we were called by name. This was no doubt in the forefront of our minds as seminarians. How else to explain how we got there? We all probably talked about our “calling” many times when telling our vocation story.
It’s not just any calling; this comes from on high. God calls and invites us, and our time and experience in the seminary helps to form us. The people of God have their opportunity in the Rite of Ordination. Through their applause and their fervent prayers, God’s call is affirmed in us.

Think back to your own ordination. Specifically, when we prostrated ourselves before the altar. Remember? I was thinking to myself, “Is this really happening?” Someone recently said to me that this was the peoples’ *epiclesis* over us. The faithful on earth and the saints in heaven were praying over us and strengthening us before our consecration. Think about that often, especially in times of challenge and difficulty.

It is true: priests are not “above” others simply because they are ordained. In fact, if we are true priests of Jesus Christ, we must make ourselves as the servants of all, as he himself did.

But let’s stop watering this down and listen to what the church and our parishioners believe: ours is a unique and special vocation.

St. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, writes that “God calls some to be apostles…” We are those apostles, teachers, administrators, and pastors. No doubt we have preached on that passage many times – perhaps assuring the people that they are called by God to build up His church equally. But how often do we take this to prayer and give thanks to God for choosing us for such an awesome vocation?

The second part of this talk is called, “A Vibrant Ministry”

Brothers, no one can say that our life is boring! It is incredible, thrilling, heartbreaking, exhausting, difficult, rewarding, awesome – and absolutely necessary.

How wonderful to be “another Christ”, especially when we celebrate the sacraments of the church. I’m sure that each one of us could share some very emotional experiences that we have had while baptizing or hearing confessions or anointing someone or celebrating the Eucharist. After one of us shares a story about some incredible moment (usually involving a tremendous conversion or something that happened to someone at the point of their death), any one of you would jump up and say, “Well, wait until you hear about my story!” Some nights I find myself looking in the mirror and saying, “No one would believe what I was able to experience today.”

If we stop and think about what we do in the midst of these situations, we may get choked up. It really is daunting and amazing. Another line from the Constitutions of Holy Cross reads:

119. *Resurrection for us is a daily event. We have stood watch with persons dying in peace; we have witnessed wonderful reconciliations; we have known the forgiveness of those who misuse their neighbor; we have seen heartbreak and defeat lead to a transformed life; we have heard the conscience of an entire church stir; we have marveled at the insurrection of justice. We know that we walk by Easter’s first light, and it makes us long for its fullness.*

To be sure, ours is a vibrant, dynamic, thrilling mystery. We may not be worthy of it, but God ordains it to be thus.
For the last part of this talk, I want to share with you some things about who we are together. We are not just called individually, we form one priesthood, especially in our own local church. Thus we must build up our fraternity. As well, we have to be attentive to our duties as priests and our prayer lives as well – individually and together.

Co-workers and Brothers

(This is the last reference to the Constitutions. I promise I’m not trying to turn you into Holy Cross religious; I just love these Constitutions and I think they speak to all of us.)

33. Our calling is to serve the Lord Jesus in mission not as independent individuals but in a brotherhood. Our community life refreshes the faith that makes our work a ministry and not just an employment; it fortifies us by the example and encouragement of our confreres; and it protects us from being overwhelmed or discouraged by our work.

37. A community must reach out in purposeful and sensitive ways to members who are sick or sorrowful or often absent. When members retire or encounter a breakdown of health, we must have communities to receive and provide for them. We gather as a community to anoint any brother threatened by serious sickness or injury or disabled by age, and appeal in prayer for the recovery of his body and the generous perseverence of his spirit. And when we come to die, we need to know that especially then our confreres stand by us, for we are sustained and remembered all the more in their prayers.

41. As men who share their lives in community, we come to know one another closely. Faults and shortcomings will make us each a trial to others from time to time. Differences of opinion, misunderstanding and resentment can and occasionally will unravel the peace in our community. Thus it is part of our lives to extend brotherly correction and apology to one another and in frank yet discreet ways to reconcile. Our very failures can then be transformed by God’s grace into closer comradeship.

42. It is essential to our mission that we strive to abide so attentively together that people will observe: “See how they love one another.” We will then be a sign in an alienated world: men who have, for love of their Lord, become closest neighbors, trustworthy friends, brothers.

You may say that this is relevant only for those who have committed themselves to living in a religious community. To be sure, some of it is tailored to the expectations of our life in Holy Cross. I didn’t read the parts that talk about living in a local community and reaching out to those who live on their own. The reality for our vocation, brothers, is that many of us live alone – and we’re okay with that.

When I arrived for my introduction to the diocese, the consultors of the diocese took me around to my new office, the cathedral and some other churches, the cemetery (“Here’s where you will be buried!”), and the house. When I saw the house – a modest house in a quiet neighborhood – I said, “Oh no. I can’t live by myself in this house. Pope Francis wouldn’t like that. I will take a
room in the cathedral or the basilica downtown.” They were really disappointed and said, “But this is our house. All the bishops have lived here.” “Well, I’ll just do it for a month or so, and we’ll see.” Well, after living on my own for a few months I came to the conclusion: “Screw community! This is great!” (I actually enjoy living alone – for the first time in my life – as it helps me to recharge after a long day of work and liturgies and meetings.)

Nonetheless, we who are diocesan priests and religious priests form a single presbyterate, and we have committed ourselves to serving this local church together as brothers and co-workers.

A presbyterate is not just a collection of presbyters; it is a unique body, which along with the bishop care for, guide, and sanctify God’s people. For those who serve right down the road from here and for those at the furthest parish away from the Chancery – as well as for those who are serving outside of the diocese right now – we are sustained by the prayers and support of our brother priests.


No room for competition and jealousy. Instead, build each other up!

Pray for one another
Help each other
Gather together. Chrism Mass, ordinations, funerals.
Reach out to one another.
Forgive one another. Many of us will be together in our community or diocese for decades. We know each other well. Too well! Some of my classmates and contemporaries know more about some parts of my life than my own siblings. One of the things that we have to do, then, is to let go of past hurts and be willing to give a brother a second, or third, or 30th, chance.

Can be a very lonely life. Huge lesson for me. When I was on my first bishops’ retreat with our region, I was walking by myself on the grounds and feeling a bit sorry for myself. I had been a bishop for only a few months at that point, and it was a bit overwhelming. I heard a voice behind me say, “Hey! Wait up!” I saw that it was Cardinal Weurl, who was hustling to catch up with me. He said, “You’re the new guy, huh? How is it going?” I said, “Well, it’s pretty rough. I miss my parish, I miss being a pastor, and I miss Holy Cross.” He said, “No offense to Holy Cross – they are a wonderful congregation – but you have to remember that we are your brothers now.” Even though I don’t think I was ready to hear it then, I have come to appreciate and love my brother bishops and priests.

We are each other’s brother. We understand what each other is going through for the most part – better than lay people, better than our parishioners, even better than some of our family members. Of course, it is not appropriate to share some things (i.e., Confessions, confidential matters). But many things, yes. Can we listen to each other and be there for one another?
Gather together in your deaneries and in small groups. Share with one another what you are experiencing – the good things and the challenging things. Show up at convocations and retreats. Vacation together.

Especially in groups like the Presbyteral Council, discern together with your bishop. Yes, he is responsible ultimately for governance of the diocese, but he needs your input and partnership. (Another thing I am trying to get used to is being the one to make the final decision. I like collaboration and a lot of input, and yet after receiving all of that, everyone says, “But you’re the bishop, so you need to make this decision.” Still, we need your help and advice.)

Retired and infirmed guys. Talk about being lonely. Many of our brothers who have retired from active ministry no longer receive the support and affirmation that we get in our parishes and ministries. They feel very cut off, even forgotten. We must remember them and invite them to join us and visit them. Also, they make wonderful confessors!

(Story of visiting two retired guys in the nursing home. One was delighted, and greeted me with “My bishop! You have come to see me!”, while the other growled, “Get me out of here!”, and “That damned bishop!”)

Young priests. Can feel overwhelmed and alone. Disillusioned perhaps. “This is not what I signed up for.” Mentor them. Befriend them. I think it’s really important to help them to gain perspective. We’re in for the long haul here. Share ‘best practices’, and be open to hearing from them and fielding their questions and concerns. (I would also say to new and younger priests: listen to your older brothers! They have a lot of wisdom and experience. You are not alone; you don’t have to do this alone.)

Simple things: Birthday calendar. Meals together. Phone call, especially when your brother has to do something difficult or when he is recognized for an achievement or milestone.

Talk about priests (in a good way!) to parishioners or in homilies. People love to hear that we are friends. Gives them some relief and joy. They want to know that we are supported and even that we have fun.

Finally, brothers, be attentive to prayer. God ordains and uses us to do great things – much of which is done through prayer.

Recommit yourselves to praying the Liturgy of the Hours faithfully. Meditation, Adoration, Contemplation. Spiritual reading, especially the Scriptures. Pray while celebrating Eucharist and liturgies. (Really! Don’t just preside; enter into the mystery. Be contrite, listen and be instructed, be in awe at the transfiguration taking place, humble yourself, receive your Lord, go in peace.)
I also urge you to pray for each other and for your people. This is huge. Jesus gives us the perfect example: “I pray not only for them, but for those who will believe in me through their message.”

(Share lesson I learned from my dad). Shared a hotel room with him and mom when we went to Alaska. Pop got out of bed and knelt down and prayed in silence for a few moments. Then he got back into bed and fell asleep. The next morning, I asked my mom if he did that because I was in the room. She said, “Get over yourself, Bill, it’s not always about you, you know.” She told me that Pop had been doing that every night since they were married. He prayed for the patients he saw or talked to that day, as well as for each one of us children by name.” Wow! I had no idea. I now do the same thing – and have for 20 years now – every night. As pastor and bishop I pray for each priest in the diocese, as well as our parishes and schools and ministries, and for all of the parishioners who are in need.

I hope this has been helpful. Be encouraged. Lift up your heads. Be proud of who you are.

Your heavenly Father is pleased with you. The Holy Spirit is your fortress and shield. Jesus Christ is your companion and your Lord. Thank you for your service.

We need you, and we love you.

May Almighty God bless you…”