

A Sermon Preached by
The Rev. Brian Beno on the Celebration of a New
Ministry for Fr. Ralph Osborne as Recotr of St.
Thomas, Menasha
April 14, 2010 at St. Thomas Church, Menasha,
Wisconsin

The Welcoming of The Rev. Ralph Everett Osborne

What an honor to be a spokesperson in welcoming Fr. Ralph and Cindy to the Diocese and reflecting on this New Ministry here at St. Thomas!

How well do you remember your Catechism? “*Who are the ministers of the Church?*” (The answer is on page 855 in the Prayer Book.) “*The ministers are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.*”

Since baptism is necessary for ministry in the Church, *this* evening we are celebrating our mutual baptism into the risen Lord. *This* is an Easter celebration! And we are all involved – lay, bishop, priest, [*and deacon*] – as ministers of the church and disciples. None of us are here as spectators; all of us are ministers and participants.

And what we do here this evening is historic. Because you at St. Thomas tend to keep your priests once you Call them, it may be awhile since some of you have been at an Institution / Induction. So, I’d like to reflect a bit on what we’re doing.

In medieval times in England, the feudal lord usually Called the priest to serve his manor parish, *but* the priest swore loyalty and obedience to the diocesan bishop. The tradition crossed the ocean, and in 1799 an “Office of Induction” was prepared by a priest named William Smith, was adopted in New York in 1802, by the General

Convention in 1804, with further changes in 1808 and 1844, and appeared in our American Prayer Books of 1892 and 1928. So what we do here tonight has been done in one way or another for hundreds of years. You and I are participants in and witnesses to Church History.

- Bishop Jacobus began the service by reading of the “Letter of **Institution.**”
- Then the wardens presented Fr. Ralph to the Bishop as “qualified, prayerfully and lawfully elected.”
- Fr. Ralph committed himself to this “new trust and responsibility.”
- And we pledged to “support and uphold” Fr. Ralph as partners in ministry.

The Bishop is key to all of this. Were the congregation alone to Call Fr. Ralph, we’d be a congregational church. But by the Bishop affirming Fr. Ralph’s Call, it places both priest and parish in relation to our Bishop within the Episcopal Church.

I find it interesting that prior to our 1979 Prayer Book, the congregation was permitted to object during the Institution, if anyone could show just cause. Sounds a bit like a wedding, but today’s process makes the question no longer necessary.

Following this Sermon, Fr. Ralph’s **Induction** (or Welcoming) takes place:

- Keys to the parish are presented;
- Water for Baptism;
- Bread and Wine for the Holy Eucharist;
- Oil for Healing;
- National and Diocesan Canons, and the Holy Bible are presented.

These and other symbols are powerful signs of the ministry that is the Bishop’s, Fr. Ralph’s, and ours as the baptized “People of God.”

And then Fr. Ralph kneels to pray the “**Prayer of Self-Dedication**” – a prayer near and dear to the heart of every priest – an original prayer, composed in 1799, centering on the duties of a priest as a minister of word and sacrament, as a teacher, and as a person of prayer.

Then Bishop Jacobus will make his official **Presentation** of Fr. Ralph and Cindy to us, and in the wording of the 1928 Prayer Book: “*The Wardens, Vestry, and others, shall salute and welcome him, bidding him God-speed.*” We, wishing Christ’s peace.

With all of this we warmly and ceremonially welcome Ralph and Cindy this evening! You know, rumor has it that they’re both going to rent themselves out to a research firm to study *stress*:

- First Fr. Ralph and Cindy took a “leap of faith” and discerned your Call to them.
- Then Fr. Ralph left Cindy and the family, moving from New York to Wisconsin.
- He left two of their children temporarily: Jeremy (18) and Caitlin (22); and two possibly permanently: Benjamin (27) and Lucas (23) and his wife Sarah.
- He came to a new church with lots and lots of new people to get to know.
- He has been living alone in a rented house in Oshkosh.
- He – and when Cindy was able to join him – looked at some 40 possible houses.
- They made the commitment to purchase a house (and will sign the closing papers tomorrow).
- And they have a graduating college senior

What *stress*? Yet, he still has a full head of dark hair! But luckily, he won’t have any stress here at St. Thomas – *ever!*

Father’s first official day here was Valentine’s Day, if you believe in good omens!

But I was honored in that the Sunday before he began here – Fr. Ralph attended Eucharist at “*your Cathedral*” . . . Now I and the other clergy present look forward to a long, collegial friendship with Fr. Ralph, while the St. Thomas parish family confidently continues its journey of faith.

I find it interesting that in tonight’s Eucharist, Fr. Ralph has two specific tasks:

- His first act is to initiate the Passing of the Peace, and
- Following this evening’s Postcommunion, Bishop Jacobus will invite Fr. Ralph to pray God’s blessing upon us.

Think about it: **Initiating peace** and **invoking God’s blessing**. What a way to begin a new ministry! What a goal for the first year – for the first ten years: to initiate **peace**, and to *be* a **blessing** himself and to recognize the blessing each of you are. (I also have as a gift for Fr. Ralph, a book once given to me: “*Ten Commandments for Pastors New in a Congregation.*” And chief among the commandments is the commandment to “take care of yourself” – because, Fr. Ralph, this church family is depending on you now.)

So, I hope it was helpful for me to reflect a bit on this evening’s “*doin’s*” – because it’ll probably be years before you do this again! Meanwhile, I said earlier that this is a little bit like a wedding, so:

- Fr. Ralph and Cindy, here are your people: Love them!
- Members of St. Thomas and members of the Diocese, here are Fr. Ralph and Cindy: Love them!

Jesus told us in this evening’s Gospel: “*This is my commandment, that you love one another, and . . . I appoint you to bear fruit, fruit that will last.*”

God-speed. Amen. Alleluia!