

A pastoral letter on the Year for Priests

As the church throughout the world transitioned from the Year of St. Paul into the Year for Priests this past June, I found it interesting to note that in the course of his 13 letters, St. Paul refers only once to priesthood, in his letter to the Romans: “I have written to you rather boldly in some respects to remind you, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in performing the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering up of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast in what pertains to God.”¹

Paul’s words here are few but powerful. Mining their depths can help us celebrate and observe well the Year for Priests.

Paul writes to “remind” the Romans, i.e., to make something present to them. In so many ways, priesthood is about presence. On the one hand, there is the mysterious and profound grace by which the priest makes Christ present — really present — at the church’s Eucharist. On the other hand, the value of the ordinary day-today presence of the priest cannot be overestimated.

In his memoirs, Henry E. Adams, great-grandson of Founding Father John Adams and grandson of John Quincy Adams, wrote that “a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”² How much more true is this for the parish priest! Just as small children get their first ideas about what God is like from their parents, so too can parishioners’ images of God be influenced by encounters with their priests. A priest who is welcoming, who is available, who is dependable, who is trustworthy, who is joyful — a priest who knows he is loved by God and who radiates that love in his presence and demeanor — such a priest can bring the light of Christ and the consolation of the Holy Spirit into the darkest corners of human suffering through his gentle and steady presence. When a priest visits someone’s home or hospital room, when he drops in on parish social events or religious education or school classrooms, when he lets his people know how much he enjoys being among them - that priest by his presence serves as a sacrament of Christ, an encounter with the living God.

God created men and women to be His co-workers; human labor is a participation in God’s own life, and all are invited to participate. The work of the priest — his participation in the Divine life — is intimately tied to ministry, that is, to service for the good of the Body of Christ. Because of this, the priestly vocation presents an interesting paradox: while he serves “in persona Christi capitis” — in the person of Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body — the priest is ever reminded of the Lord’s mandate: “whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.”³ The priest doesn’t “wish” to be first; rather, he experiences Christ’s call to follow Him in this unique way, and in answering that call he is called to live, to work, to stand — to be present — in the person of Christ. He doesn’t “stand in” for Christ; by his presence, he makes Christ present. Far from giving him a “lofty” self image, this “priestly service of the gospel of God” requires selflessness, humility and an ever-increasing intimacy with Christ.

Through sound formation and the example of other good priests, a priest learns to recognize the joy that comes from self-giving love in imitation of Christ, who came not “to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for the many.”⁴ Again, we’re in the realm of paradox: the more the priest empties himself in loving service to God’s people, the more he experiences the joy of the risen Christ.

As a young man, I had the good fortune to be exposed to many hardworking and dedicated priests, men who gave tirelessly of themselves for the good of the flock. The example of my uncle, Bishop Austin Murphy,⁵ made a strong impression on me early on. The priests who were his friends were men very much like him, and seeing them in action inspired me in my own vocation discernment. I continue to be inspired — as I know many of you are — by the heroic witness given by so many priests who day in and day out devote themselves “to the service of their brothers and sisters.”⁶

St. Paul rightly understood that the purpose of his mission — his writings, his preaching, his apostolic journeys, even his sufferings — was to lead people to holiness, to a restored relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ, to sanctification. “The important mission of sanctification entrusted to priests cannot be called into question. They can exercise this mission above all in the ministry of worship and the sacraments. Doubtless it is a work carried out primarily by Christ ... In the present economy of salvation, however, Christ makes use of the presbyters’ ministry to sanctify believers.”⁷

The priest’s ministry of sanctification takes place most clearly in the celebration of the sacraments: human beings made in the image and likeness of God are adopted as sons and daughters of that same God in Baptism; sins are forgiven and grace restored in Reconciliation; God’s family is fed at the tables of Word and Sacrament at Eucharist; women and men become one and vow to love each other as Christ loves the church in holy Matrimony; the sick and suffering find healing and strength in the Anointing of the Sick. God bestows blessing after blessing upon His people, and the priest has the privilege of being the conduit through which those blessings flow. This privilege, though, brings with it a challenge: while the efficacy of the sacraments — their ability to sanctify the faithful — does not depend on the holiness of the priest,⁸ the priest like all the baptized participates in the “universal call to holiness” recognized and articulated at the Second Vatican Council.⁹ In addition, at his ordination the priest publicly states his resolution to “consecrate [his] life to God for the salvation of his people and to unite [himself] more closely every day to Christ the High Priest.”¹⁰ This is quite a resolution! When we consecrate something, we devote it irrevocably to God. When a priest consecrates his life to God, he is promising much more than to keep the Commandments and Precepts of the church, to grow in virtue and to avoid sin: he is promising to dedicate all of his energy, his efforts, his skills and his resources “to God for the salvation of his people.”¹¹

How does this play out in the day-to-day lives of priests? Everyday priests celebrate the sacraments regularly and with devotion. They take the state of their own souls — as well as those of their people — very seriously. They are faithful to the Liturgy of the Hours and to the practice of personal prayer, especially prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. They make time for devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. They nourish their minds with spiritual reading and avoid reading and other media that takes their minds away from the things of the Lord. They protect their promise of celibacy like the precious jewel that it is. They engage in good spiritual direction and seek out wise confessors and counselors. They nourish their people, shelter them, protect them: they know their sheep’s names and their sheep recognize their voices. All of these are essential elements of priestly holiness. I realize that the bar seems high. It is high. How else could it be if the priest is truly to live and to act in the person of Jesus Christ? At the same time, as I get to know the priests of our Diocese and the religious priests who work alongside them, I become more and more convinced that this ideal is being lived out with God’s grace, and I am grateful for the witness and example they give me.

Frequently when people boast, they’re acting out of a disordered sense of pride. There is, though, an appropriate kind of boasting: a boasting that draws attention not to ourselves

but to our God. That's what St. Paul is doing here. It's perfectly appropriate to "boast in what pertains to God." When our words and actions reveal God's goodness, we give Him glory. Jesus tells his followers that their light "must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."¹² Because our good works are responses to God's grace, when people see those works they are made aware of the grace that they cannot see - and also of the One who gives that grace. In that same spirit, it is good for us to celebrate priesthood in this Year for Priests. In doing so, we celebrate the priesthood of Christ, the Eternal High Priest, as well as the gift of the ministerial priesthood which Christ has given as a treasure to the church. Our celebration shows our gratitude on the one hand for Christ's perfect sacrifice to the Father, by which we are saved, and on the other hand for the ministry of priests, through whom the effects of Christ's sacrifice are made present in our day-to-day lives primarily by means of the sacraments but in so many other ways too. All Catholics should rejoice both in the priesthood and with our priests.

To my brother priests I say: rejoice in your priesthood! True, God expects much from you; true, His people expect much from you; true, the increase in our Catholic population coupled with the decline in our numbers has placed unprecedented demands on each of us. But it is equally true to say that God is never outdone in generosity and always provides the graces we need to live out this precious vocation. Turning once again to the witness of St. Paul, be consoled by what Scripture promises and experience proves: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."¹³ Through that grace, God confers upon us priests an honor to which we could never aspire on our own: He allows us to bring people into His family and to walk with them through their joys and sorrows, their growth and their setbacks, all the way to the moment when we lead them home to God Himself. Any "conforming" that we have to do —and all of us are asked to decrease so that He can increase ¹⁴— is nothing compared to this great gift as we experience it in this world and as we will experience it in eternal life.

Now when a generous person receives a great gift, he not only takes good care of it; he naturally wishes to share that gift with others. Each of us, when we recognize the priesthood for the treasure that it is, is called to do both: to nurture it and to share it. This is true for all God's people. Priests nurture their priesthood by making personal prayer, retreat time, spiritual reading, continuing formation, fidelity to ministry and priestly fraternity real priorities. The faithful nurture the priesthood by supporting their priests in prayer, by loving them with a holy affection, by walking with them in their times of difficulty, by rejoicing with them in their successes and by encouraging them to grow more and more in the likeness of Christ. Sharing — and spreading — the gift of priesthood also requires conscious effort on the part of all the baptized. If the priesthood truly is so great a gift, then each of us must do what we can to promote priestly vocations.

How do the faithful best promote priestly vocations? It begins in the family. Parents quite naturally want what is best for their children. If a Catholic parent has found tremendous joy in his or her vocation as mother or father, it's easy for that parent to assume that marriage and family life would be the most fulfilling vocation for his or her son. God calls each of us uniquely, however, and parents do their children an unparalleled service by helping them learn how to listen to the many ways God might be calling them. Teaching our children to pray, to savor quiet time, to reflect, to listen: these are keys to helping them become aware of and to fulfill their lives' true purpose. What parents would not want their children to achieve the purpose for which they were created? And so, dear parents, rejoice if your son discovers a priestly vocation! Encourage him, support him, strengthen him with your love. The vocation to married life is the basic calling by which God adds increase to His holy people, but it is through the vocation to priestly life that this people continues to be fed and sanctified. Because of this, it is the duty of

every young Catholic man at least to ask the Lord in prayer “what do You want me to do with my life?” It is the duty of every young Catholic man to consider whether God might be calling him to priesthood. In a similar manner it is the duty of all the faithful to be attentive to our young people and to ask, when appropriate, “have you ever thought that God might be calling you to be a priest?” Sometimes a young man does hear that call but shies away from it, worrying that it might be too hard or in some other way not fulfilling. To the young men of our Diocese, let me say clearly: If God is calling you, He will provide the grace you need to find joy in priesthood; if He is calling you, you will find in this vocation fulfillment beyond your wildest dreams. Priesthood is not without its challenges — but what worthy adventure is without challenges?

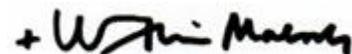
Priests play a primary role in vocations promotion. I mentioned earlier the influence of my uncle and his priest friends upon me. When priests are faithful to the demands of their vocation and joyful in its execution, their lives become attractive in a way that few other paths can. In this way, they passively become “vocation magnets.” But there’s also an active aspect to this magnetism: year after year, newly ordained priests give witness to the fact that they began to consider this vocation precisely because a priest whom they knew suggested that they might be called to it. A priest who knows a healthy young man who has the qualities needed in priesthood today gives God tremendous glory by speaking — perhaps even prophetically — the words of Jesus himself: “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”¹⁵ My brother priests, let us not miss these opportunities!

Evidence from all over the world also shows that parishes that host regular exposition and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament have seen increases in “homegrown” priestly vocations. When people grow up in environments where it is possible regularly to visit with the Lord in this “physical” way, pouring out their hearts to Him and listening for His voice, it makes perfect sense that they become sensitive to His promptings and more aware of His personal call, wherever it is that He is leading them. This shouldn’t surprise us. But it should motivate us; it reminds us of Christ’s real presence in the Bread of Life and of His real desire to call people to the fullness of life — some of them through service as priests. And so I encourage all our pastors to make adoration of the Blessed Sacrament as available in our parishes as reasonably possible.

The goal of this Year for Priests is ultimately the spiritual renewal of all who serve in the ministerial priesthood. To that end, I invite you to join me in prayer, using words taken from our Sacramentary:

“Father, in your plan for our salvation you provide shepherds for your people. Fill your church with the spirit of courage and love. Raise up worthy ministers for your altars and ardent but gentle servants of the Gospel.¹⁶ Guide those chosen to be ministers of word and sacrament and help them to be faithful in fulfilling the ministry they have received.¹⁷ May their priestly service always be pleasing to you and bring lasting good to your church. We ask this through Christ our Lord.”¹⁸

May God bless you, now and always, and may He bless our Diocese and the entire church with an abundance of holy, dedicated, faithful and compassionate priests.



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- 1 Romans 15:15-17
- 2 The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography, privately printed 1906, published 1918 by the Riverside Press for the Massachusetts Historical Society.
- 3 Matthew 20:26-27
- 4 Matthew 20: 28
- 5 Most Rev. T. Austin Murphy (1911-1991) served as Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore from 1962 to 1984.
- 6 Prayer after Communion, Mass for Priestly Vocations (Sacramentary, Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions, #9)
- 7 Pope John Paul II, General Audience of Wednesday, 5 May 1993
- 8 Council of Trent (1545 - 63), Seventh Session, Canons VIII and XII
- 9 Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Lumen Gentium, Chapter V: The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church
- 10 Rite of Ordination of a Priest, #15
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Matthew 5:16
- 13 2 Corinthians 12:9
- 14 cf. John 3:30
- 15 Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17
- 16 Opening Prayer, Mass for Priestly Vocations
- 17 Opening Prayer, Mass for Priests
- 18 Prayer over the Gifts, Mass for Priests