

A reflection as the “Year for Priests” concludes

It’s not just celibacy – it’s about imitating Christ

The Church needs priests. That isn’t a claim made by someone afraid for his job; it’s simply true. The Church needs priests, because that is the way Jesus determined His Church should be established. This isn’t a power thing: it is the constitutional essence of His Church.

In the Book of Revelation, the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, an image of the Church, tells us that its foundation stones are inscribed with the names of the Twelve Apostles. What is it that those Twelve men had that made them essential to the Church? Neither political power, nor influence, nor native brilliance, nor personal charm. That which made them essential was that given them by Our Lord: “As the Father sent me, so I send you,” Our Lord told the Twelve—not to all His followers or disciples, but only to the Twelve, to whom He gave the fullness of His revelation about God; His promise to remain with them and guide them; His power to forgive sins; and His power to “do this in memory of me” by offering Christ on the Cross in the sacrifice of the Mass. Jesus gave the Twelve a share in His power as God, not as a personal concession to His twelve closest friends, but as a gift to be shared with each generation of the Church for the salvation of the world.

The priesthood is the means Christ established through which He would continue saving souls in every place and age, even though His saving death was nearly 2,000 years earlier.

The Church needs priests because Jesus is truly present, as is the power of His Cross to destroy sin and death, through the hands and ministry of His priests. If the priesthood were not so important, the world would not have been so shocked and shaken by the



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THE PRIESTHOOD WINDOW IN THE ST. JOHN FISHER SEMINARY CHAPEL IN STAMFORD.

present priests’ scandal.

So, what is the priesthood, and why has the Church’s priesthood failed, as seen in the present crisis?

There are many factors that have led the Church to her present difficulties. The media points to mandatory celibacy as the root of the problem. It is not. There is one reason why the Church is in the midst of this self-inflicted world-wide catastrophe; it is at the heart of the crisis, just as its opposite is at the heart of the priesthood: some Catholic priests refuse to submit their will to that of Christ and His Church. They refuse to hold and teach the faith of the Church, and refuse to live a life in imitation of Christ, as the Church dictates, so they are either not strong enough to be celibate, or are unwilling to be celibate. But first, they are unwilling to submit to Christ and His Church.

It is a matter of the will in most cases, not simply of the libido. At times the priesthood has failed because many priests decided not to do what they said they’d do when they were ordained priests. Let’s look at the solemn, public promises made by those ordained as priests.

Most people think that the promise to remain celibate is at the heart of the priesthood. It is not. In fact, there is no promise of celibacy in the ordination rite of the priesthood. The man being ordained a priest already made that promise when he was ordained a deacon. It is not repeated.

But there is one solemn promise that is repeated: the promise of obedience, the promise to submit one’s personal will to the Church – not as a generalization but, specifically, to one specific bishop and to his successors in one specific diocese. The bishop repeats the same question to the man being ordained a priest that was asked earlier during the man’s ordination to the diaconate: “Do you promise obedience and respect to me and my successors?” The crisis in the Church is a crisis of priests who have

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decided to break that solemn promise of obedience in both lifestyle and in faith.

The other solemn promises regard faithfully celebrating the sacraments and preaching the Catholic faith. The last is, “Are you resolved to consecrate your life to God for the salvation of His people, and to unite yourself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered Himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice?”

For the essence of the priesthood established by Our Lord is a call to imitate Him, to conform oneself perfectly to Him in all aspects of one’s daily life, both public and private, for the salvation of the world. The free will response of someone who wants to be a priest is his willingness to imitate Christ in his life – obedient, celibate, prayerful, and virtuous. That is why the ministry of a priest is exercised *in persona Christi capitis* – priests are to exist, not simply to perform a function or work, but to exist “in the person of Christ the Head of the Church.” That implies a willingness to make daily sacrifices, beginning with the sacrifice of one’s ego and the natural need for human love and family.

Such a daily sacrifice of self to imitate Christ is symbolized in the essential daily action of the priest: the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass.

After the day of ordination, the most important in the life of a priest is the day of his first Mass. The offering of Mass is the quintessential action of a priest: the offering of a sacrifice, and that sacrifice is Christ on the Cross in an unbloody manner: “Do this in memory of me.”

In Graham Green’s 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory*, set during the Mexican government’s persecution of the Church, the last priest has been chased, starved, hobbled by fever, imprisoned, stripped of everything, including his pride, yet continues because of the one thing he alone can offer people: Jesus in the Mass. In one scene, the “whiskey priest” (he is nameless, referred to only by his human weakness) grudgingly acquiesces to the

peasants’ request for Mass. In a hovel, with no vestments or altar, the priest hurriedly offers Mass for the impoverished gaggle of people, waiting for the government troops to uncover their illegal religious observance and execute the last priest. Greene describes the scene and the priest’s thoughts:

“The candles smoked and the people shifted on their knees – an absurd happiness bobbed up in him again before anxiety returned: it was as if he had been permitted to look in from the outside at the population of heaven. Heaven must contain just such scared and dutiful and hunger-lined faces. For a matter of seconds he felt an immense satisfaction that he could talk of suffering to them now without hypocrisy – it is hard for the sleek and well-fed priest to praise poverty. He began the prayer. . .

“The Latin words ran into each other on his hasty tongue; he could feel impatience all round him. He began the Consecration of the Host. . . impatience abruptly died away: everything in time became a routine but this – ‘Who the day before He suffered, took Bread into His holy and venerable hands. . .’ Whoever moved outside on the forest path, there was no movement here – ‘This is My Body.’ He could hear the sigh of breaths released: God was here in the body for the first time in six years. When he raised the Host he could imagine the faces lifted like famished dogs. He began the Consecration of the wine – in a chipped cup.”

There is another promise, written and signed by the candidate for the priesthood prior to his ordination. It is a formal profession of faith. In it, the candidate for ordination solemnly professes the Creed which we recite at Sunday Mass, and adds: “I firmly embrace and accept all and everything which has been either defined by the Church’s solemn deliberations or affirmed and declared by its ordinary Magisterium concerning the doctrine of faith and morals, especially those things dealing with the mystery of the

Holy Church of Christ, its sacraments and the sacrifice of the Mass, and the primacy of the Roman Pontiff.” The candidate must sign this, twice – once before his ordination to the diaconate, and once before his ordination to the priesthood, or he is not ordained.

The crisis of the priesthood and the Church is the result of priests deciding to break these essential promises of obedience and faith. The glory of the priesthood and of the Church is the result of priests deciding to remain faithful.

The essence of the priesthood is to dedicate one’s life to imitate Christ, in order to worthily perfect oneself, and to save souls by actually making present Christ and His sacrifice and by teaching the truths of the Church to others. So important are these tasks that the priest

is asked to participate in the very life of Christ. So important a reality that the betrayal of such a trust brings about the devastating catastrophe we see in the Church today around the globe.

But Our Lord promised that the gates of Hell would not prevail against His Church (Matthew 16:19), no matter how weak some priests may be. He calls even now many to come to renew the Church.

The Church and the world need priests, since that is how Our Lord established His Church to be. Now, more than ever, we need good, healthy, heterosexual men, strong enough to live a celibate life, in love with Christ, eager to submit their wills in obedience to God through His Church, for the salvation of souls.

– Msgr. Stephen DiGiovanni

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