
REDISCOVERING THE WONDERFUL MISSION OF THE PRIEST (2)



Throughout the 225 years of Church history in our part of the country, priests have been both missionaries and colonisers, pastors or curates, chaplains or educators. At the present moment there are thirty-nine priests living and working in our diocesan Church. Fifteen are “moderators” of parish pastoral teams, five serve as chaplains in hospitals, convents, senior citizens’ homes, and the correctional services. The others serve in regular or part-time ministry. A very few, because of illness or old age, have had to give up ministry altogether. The more we experience a shortage of priests, the more we feel the effect of the “progressive disappearance” of those who touched us personally and shaped our milieu and our community life. It is important for us to rediscover the priest’s wonderful mission both at home and abroad.

A RESPONSE TO NEEDS

Far from being a vague sentimental feeling, the priestly vocation is first and foremost a call and a response to the needs of the Church. Time and again these calls have been issued by parents and educators, priests and religious, but it is the bishop’s call that ratifies God’s choice of a particular individual to respond to the many needs of the Church. “We rely on the help of the Lord God our Saviour Jesus Christ, and we choose this man, our brother, for priesthood in the presbyteral order,”¹ the bishop announces at the beginning of the ordination service. From the moment of my coming to serve you, I have never ceased repeating this pressing and necessary call.

LOVING WITNESSES

The Church is always in need of pastors according to the heart of Jesus. Our people have a deep desire to have such men in their midst, and they know how to respond to the call of these caring shepherds who are concerned for their welfare. Jesus the Good Shepherd sets one condition only for those, young or not so young, who, as priests for life, would shepherd his flock, and that condition is love. As he asked Peter so long ago, Jesus asks every priest, at every stage of that priest’s life, and even each day of his life: “George, Ivan, Roger, Pierre, François, do you love me?... Feed my sheep!” Three times Jesus asked Peter whether he truly loved him... He can also ask the same question to every priest more than once. It may happen that fatigue, failures, and isolation dull one’s loving response. When this happens, the priests must react and strive to reach beyond the intensity of his first love, like the couple in love who will not be satisfied with half measures. It is to the extent that the priest is a passionate lover of Christ that he shall be a good shepherd, whether he be 30, 60, or 80 years old! More than a title or function – pastor, moderator, or collaborator – the pastor is the bearer of a love which cannot diminish with passing years. The baptised must learn to appreciate, respect and love their priests sent by the Lord. They are called to witness totally to God’s love manifested in His Son, Jesus. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, priests are configured to Christ the Good Shepherd and Head of his Church.

DEMANDING COMMITMENTS

In order to better discover the greatness of the priest’s mission, I invite you to consider the commitments they freely make at ordination, answering yes to the bishop’s questions: “Are you resolved, with the help of the Holy

Spirit, to discharge without fail the office of the priesthood in the presbyteral order as a conscientious fellow worker with the bishops in caring for the Lord's flock? Are you resolved to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and, preaching the Gospel and explaining the Catholic faith? Are you resolved to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously as the Church has handed them down to us for the glory of God and the sanctification of Christ's people? 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? Do you promise to live in communion with your bishop, in respect and obedience?"² These commitments are a priest's major points of reference for a life totally dedicated to prayer and the Word of God, whether he be in parish or hospital ministry, active or retired, healthy or sick. Before even performing a liturgical or sacramental action, the priest's life itself is ministerial, his entire life is prayer and Word; through Holy Orders he becomes a "sacrament" of Jesus Christ, a sign of his presence and love.

ORIGIN OF VIVIFYING LOVE

If it is essential for the priest to be a witness profoundly in love with Christ, this love must be unceasingly enlivened by his love of neighbour, and especially for his bishop and brother priests. This is one of the signs of the genuineness of his love and mission. The measure of this genuineness is verified in these words of Saint John: "One who has no love for the brother he sees, cannot love the God he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). This applies to every disciple of Jesus, but especially to the priest. If perchance a priest spoke ill of a brother-priest or even – God forbid! – of his bishop, he would destroy himself and his own ministry. His communion with his bishop is a life-giving bond for all priestly ministry, it is a source of fruitfulness in ministry and a sign of hope.

LOVE YOUR PRIESTS!

At the Chrism Mass when the priests renew their commitment, the bishop addresses the people in this way: "My brothers and sisters, pray for your priests. Ask the Lord to bless them with the fullness of his love, to help them be faithful ministers of Christ the High Priest, so that they will be able to lead you to him, the fountain of your salvation. Pray also for me that despite my own unworthiness I may faithfully fulfill the office of apostle which Jesus Christ has entrusted me. Pray that I may become more like our High Priest and Good Shepherd, the teacher and servant of all, and so be a genuine sign of Christ's loving presence among you."³

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1. *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, II (=Rites), New York, Pueblo, [1980], p.61.

2. *Rites*, p.64.

3. *Sunday Mass Book for Canada*, Ottawa, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1976, p. 380.