

The Priesthood and the Choice



Vatican Ordination

I heard an excellent homily last week, delivered by a young priest who spoke with passion and energy. It was clearly his own take on how the Gospel reading for this daily Mass spoke to him. He crafted it to offer lessons to us. It was beautiful, but that wasn't what struck me. What moved me most this day was the very existence of this man and his vocation. I had a sudden and overwhelming sense of gratitude.

I'll try to explain why.

There were only about ten of us in attendance. He crafted that homily for us. It required that he read ahead of time and think hard. He had clearly done some additional reading on the topic. He probably spent some time in prayer. Then he delivered it and could only hope that people would listen and learn from what he said. He does this every single day. And he will do this the whole of his life.

I have some sense that people take this skill for granted. For my part, I marvel at it. If someone asked me to stand up and say something intelligent about the day's readings, I would sweat it out and probably flop. Most people would. And yet we somehow assume that the talent to do this is built into the genetic code of a priest—and if he ever fails, he will certainly hear about it.

Not only that, everyone in the parish assumes that the priest should be there at every instant to serve us in every conceivable way—on our terms. Maybe we will be faithful or maybe not. Maybe we will lean on the priest only in hard times, or in big ceremonial occasions like weddings and baptisms but otherwise pay no attention whatsoever.

We are happy to lose interest in the Catholic faith for months, years, or decades. This is a luxury afforded to the laity. But we believe that when we are ready, the priest will be there with all the answers, with a forgiving heart, and welcoming arms. He will hear our confession, happily, and rejoice in our return. He will baptize our children, marry them later, and be there when our lives have fallen apart. We can lose the faith at will; he, on the other hand, must never waver, else we will be scandalized and cry hypocrisy.

He is a servant to a much greater extent than other callings. He is called upon to understand—and fully explain and even solve—our troubles, issues, difficulties, struggles, failings, sins, and to comprehend and care about the endless details of our lives, to the precise extent to which we share them and call upon his intervention. In the confessional, he is (contrary to myth) not a judge but a dispenser of the grace of God's forgiveness and comforting love.

Meanwhile, no one really ever asks us to understand his failings. Far from it: we imagine ourselves in the position of being his judge, never dispensing forgiveness but more commonly suspicion, detraction, and calumny. Catholics themselves are severe enough in this respect, but the rest of the world is ever more disapproving of the priesthood itself. His very existence is a provocation to debate every issue from the existence of God to the meaning of life. He is a lightning rod and yet must act nonchalant about this fact, going about his business as if to ignore the suspicions and doubts all around him.

A quick anecdote along these lines: I was in Rome a few months ago and met some high Church officials, and was pleased to take photographs with them. I posted them publicly and was happy and honored to do so. But of course I braced myself for the fallout from here and yon.

Sure enough, I was bombarded with commentary that ranged from skepticism to outrage, and some of it is truly unprintable. I don't blame people who speak so bluntly about their feelings about the Catholic Church and its leaders; their feelings are authentic, however misinformed and unbalanced. What strikes me is: what other vocation in life calls forth such fundamentally violent opposition? And yet the calling to the priesthood, in the end, is about serving even those who hate the faith.

This is a cross every priest must bear. Of course if the priest were only a social worker, the antagonism would be far less pronounced. What's controversial is that he serves in the person of Christ himself to confect and distribute the very means of grace, that is, to participate in his very personhood in Christ's own sacrifice for the salvation of the world. This is an awe-inspiring choice, one that serves as a constant witness to a faithless world of the truth of the faith.

Consider the decision to become a priest in light of the current cultural moment. It is a startling and radical decision, one that results from an internal calling. It has to. I once prayed for that calling myself as a young man. It never came. I remember a feeling of disappointment that I would never become a member of the priesthood but it was for the best. My life as a professional editor and writer has its own rewards of a different sort.

Still, I think about the life of the priest and how remarkably and blessedly detached it is from the material and professional machinery that drives so much of the rest of the secular world.

There was perhaps a time in the Middle Ages when to be a priest was culturally and professionally advantageous, a better path toward security and health, a means to break through the barriers of a rigid class structure, a path toward literacy. You would have more options in the priesthood than out.

Today, none of this is true. If anything, the choice of the priesthood represents a radical restraining of one's range of life choices. In every way, you are marked for life, every hour of every day is turned over to a purpose defined by the vocation itself.

It is an ominous choice but one that is liberating for those who are called. What sort of liberation? What are they freed from? The men I know in professional life with me are consumed by anxieties. We struggle constantly to stay valuable as workers and professionals. We fear falling back. We fear failure—and, even more so, fear the judgment of others about our failing.

All of us in the secular professional world are in a constant race. We race against technology that can do what we do better than our limited talents and minds. We look at younger people and see them as smarter and more suited to our jobs than we are. We wonder about our future and whether there really will be any rest for us as we approach our final years.

We feel a burning sense of ambition and strategize on how to make that matter. The time trade offs between work and family, career and leisure, are a pressing concern every day. The goal is always more, whether that means a higher position, a higher value, or more money, and never less. We like to think that our work is all about the desire for true success but in our hearts we know what is really behind it all: the fear of failure. It is fear above all else that consumes men in our time.

And yet to serve in the position of Christ himself is to embrace failure as the world understands that term. The world thought that Christ came to be a ruler, a king of the world. This he did not do. He was killed in defeat on the cross and his followers left him in disappointment and devastation. In resurrection, he then revealed an unexpected victory over death itself.

And so too with priests, who have rejected every definition of success that the world has to offer, and yet find a victory in a path that the culture and social order least expects: the service of Christ, his Church, and others. There are easier ways, more mainstream choices, smoother paths. But these men of courage have embraced the way of the Cross.

Priests have their own struggles and frustrations—and they could be just as intense as those faced by men in secular professions. And yet I look at the choice they have made and see something truly spectacular. They have chosen to reject fear as a motivating force in life. It's as though they looked at fear and stood up to it with courage and uncommon conviction. They saw that a life of pure material ambition and material satiation, one that chases something that is ultimately unattainable in this life, is not a life of true meaning.

What an extraordinary act of courage to become a priest! It means embracing to the fullest extent the very thing that the world today completely rejects: the possibility for holiness to exist in any form. I don't mean just the possibility that a person can become holy. Priests have the same moral struggles as anyone else. There are saints and sinners among them. What I mean is that the priesthood means giving up one's own self to become an instrument for emergence of holy things inside of this world, and allowing one's own self to become a vehicle through which the salvation of souls is made possible.

That act alone is one of incredible faith. It cuts across the grain of everything the world thinks it knows about the meaning of life. In effect, the world today thinks it knows that life has no meaning. We live in practical nihilism. We have come to avoid things like truth claims, but, in so doing, we end up turning our eyes away from anything that even explores the notion of truth. Without any notion of truth, we lose the capacity to recognize evil and vice, as well as their opposite in goodness and virtue. The possibility of sanctity vanishes.

A priest, then, is not just speaking the unspeakable, not just drawing attention to the very subject that everyone else seems to want to avoid; he has dedicated the whole of his life and being to the proposition that we can experience and even attain sanctity. There is such a thing as something holy and set apart. There is a reality outside of time. There is eternal life. There is a means to attain it. These are radical claims that contradict every intellectual trend of the last 200-plus years. And yet the men of faith who dedicate their lives to drawing attention to holiness persist and, in so many ways, sustain our highest aspirations as human beings created in the image and likeness of God who never stops calling us home.

Despite all that has happened over the last ten years in Catholic life—and it has been a difficult decade—all data indicate something completely surprising. Vocations to the priesthood are up. Mass attendance is up. Who could have predicted this? There is something wonderfully implausible about the priesthood, something radical and even revolutionary. God bless the men who follow their calling to lead us all to something higher and more spectacular than the rest of the world can offer.

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