

Called by God to Serve as Christ's Personal Representative



Many years ago, I met a young couple who shared their journey of faith with me. The man mentioned that he had been in the seminary. When I asked him why he had entered, he replied, “I had come to love Jesus Christ, and considered this perhaps the most noble way in which I could serve Him.” He wanted to imitate what he had witnessed and experienced in the lives of priests, who serve as Christ’s representatives helping others encounter Jesus in His Church through their preaching of God’s Word and celebrating the sacraments.

My next question was, “Why did you leave your seminary studies and pursue marriage?” He explained how he came to realize, with the help of spiritual directors, that God has a specific call on each person’s life and has equipped them with the gifts appropriate to their calling. Over time, in sincerely seeking to know God’s unique plan for his life, he came to understand that God was not calling him to the vocation of holy orders but rather to matrimony. He related that only a man who is called by God

to the priesthood, and who responds to this call, will be able to serve others in this important role throughout his life, while finding peace, joy and the deepest fulfillment.

With this in mind, it is essential to recognize the incredible significance of the priesthood as established by Jesus Christ Himself. Out of His great love for us, Our Lord wanted to remain with us always. At the Last Supper, Jesus gathered with the Apostles and instituted the holy Eucharist, giving them His body and blood and said, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” (Lk 22:25) As His representatives and “acting in the Person of Christ” (*in persona Christi*), Jesus ordained the Apostles as the first priests of the New Covenant, to celebrate the holy Eucharist so that we may receive Jesus Himself in holy Communion every Sunday, and more often if desired. Priests also celebrate four of the other six sacraments—all ordered to forgive our sins and to strengthen us to live the Christian life by filling us with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Only a bishop celebrates the sacrament of holy orders and, in most cases, confirmation.

The power passed on from Jesus through the men He ordained as Apostles is essential to the transmission of priestly authority and power. Catholic bishops are successors of the Apostles, as every Catholic bishop has been consecrated by a validly ordained bishop, in an unbroken line of succession tracing all the way back to the Apostles. A religious organization is only capable of transmitting the divine power of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection through contact with Jesus Himself and under the conditions Christ laid down. Divine life received in the sac-



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raments, dispensed through the instrumentality of the ordained priest acting in the Person of Christ Himself, comes through the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that Jesus established.

To better understand the importance of the priesthood, it is helpful to compare the role of a father of the family with the role of a priest as spiritual father of the parish family:

▶ Everything begins with life. A father (along with the mother) gives natural life to their children. A priest gives new life—spiritual life that unites the person with God—in the sacrament of baptism.

▶ A father provides education for his sons and daughters so they can mature and take their place in the world. A priest—the bishop—anooints young people, calling down the powerful grace of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of confirmation, so they are strengthened to go out and bear witness to Christ in the world.

▶ A father feeds his family, often referred to as putting “bread on the table,” to strengthen the members of the family in their physical life. A priest “feeds” his family with the sacrament of the holy Eucharist—the Bread of Life that is Jesus Himself—which is a supernatural, sustaining food that empowers each member of his parish family to be committed in their spiritual life.

▶ A father readily forgives his children when they sin against him. A priest “stands in” for the Person of Jesus in the sacrament of reconciliation, absolving the members of his church family from their sins, through the power of Christ invested in Him, and by the power of the grace received, they are strengthened to break sinful habits.

▶ A father cares for his wife, children and elderly parents as they suffer from illness, which may even lead to death. A priest ministers to the family members of his parish community who are sick and dying, strengthening them during their time of suffering. The sacrament of the anointing of the sick confers a special grace on the person experiencing the difficulties inherent in the condition of serious illness or old age. The anointing from the sacrament provides the dying person with the strength, peace and courage for passing over to eternal life.

The gift of celibacy allows for the fruitfulness of a priest’s spiritual fatherhood. He is free to give completely of himself to his parish family, at all hours of the day or night, with the focus on our salvation. He knows and believes, with all his heart, that the souls of his Church family are worth any sacrifice he has to make for them. The priest is not relying on his own powers

to bring forth divine life in souls, but he is relying upon God’s grace in every aspect of his ministry.

Another important aspect of a priest’s life is the proper understanding of his relationship with Jesus. The Lord has revealed to us in sacred Scripture that He is the Head of the Church—the Bridegroom; and we are the Body of Christ—the bride. This spousal character of Christ with His Church refers to the fact that God created each one of us to be spiritually united with Him in a relationship of love. Therefore, we—the body of Christ—are to be receptive to His pure and unconditional love, with Mary as our model. We want to imitate our Blessed Mother’s total receptivity to God’s Word and His grace.

A priest is first and foremost a baptized Christian and a member of the Body of Christ. An ordained priest has to be able

to receive these very gifts from God—His Word and His grace—before he can act in the Person of Christ and give these gifts to others. This is made possible through his cooperation with the power of the Holy Spirit received in the sacrament of holy orders.

We need to remember that a priest is also a fellow human being with weaknesses who experiences conversion and routinely receives the sacrament of confession. We need to respect the treasure of a man’s priesthood, but we need to recognize that every priest lives out the mystery of his priesthood in an “earthen vessel.” He has a fallen human nature just like you and me. Therefore, let us pray for priests, especially through the intercession of Mary, who is the mother of priests. We can pray for a specific priest, that we will

see him as God sees him, to respect (to want the best for him) and love him even if we don’t particularly “like” him—just as we don’t “like” certain personalities in our own family. We can pray in thanksgiving that he responded to God’s call on his life, he is being faithful to God, he will be strengthened in his vocation and we will accept him in his weaknesses, just as God loves and accepts us in our weaknesses. Let us be grateful to Jesus for every priest’s beautiful and challenging role of acting in the Person of Christ, to help and strengthen us on our journey to heaven.

God is still calling men to the priesthood. Let us also pray for those young men whom God has specifically chosen, that they will recognize His call to the priesthood and respond with a generous heart. †

“The priest continues the work of redemption on earth. If we really understood the priest on earth, we would die not of fright but of love. The priesthood is the love of the Heart of Christ.”

(St. John Vianney, as quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1589)