

# Love: The root of the priestly vocation

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As I began to prepare this presentation, my initial inclinations led me to some historical perspectives regarding the sacrament of Holy Orders. I found some interesting notions and data, but upon a re-reading of Pope Benedict's proclamation, I decided to go with a different perspective.

The Pope makes reference to Pope John XXIII and his encyclical on the occasion of the first centenary of the death of St. John Vianney, the Curé of Ars. Pope John XXIII pointed out that the asceticism and spirituality of the Curé of Ars could easily be seen in light of the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, and obedience) even though St. John Vianney was not a professed member of a religious congregation.

As John XXIII points out: "Even though priests are not bound to embrace these evangelical counsels by virtue of the clerical state, these counsels nonetheless offer them, as they do all the faithful, the surest road to the desired goal of Christian perfection." I remember hearing a few years ago of a certain parallelism between the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Poverty was paired with hope, chastity with love, and obedience with faith.

I understand that today is part of a two-part reflection during this Year for Priests. I would like to divide my observations with today's focus on the virtue of love. The other half, presumably in April, will deal with the remaining virtues of faith and hope in the life of the priest.

## **Created by love, to love**

Why begin with love? In terms of these virtues, St. Paul points out: "Faith, hope and love remain; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). Secondly, love is a necessary element of our human identity. We are created in love, to be loved and to love.

A clear expression of this reality is pointed out to us by St. Theresa of the Child Jesus in her autobiography. She states: "Love appeared to me to be the hinge for my vocation ... I knew that the Church had a heart and that such a heart appeared to be aflame with love. I knew that one love drove the members of the Church to action, that if this love were extinguished, the apostles would have proclaimed the Gospel no longer, the martyrs would have shed their blood no more. I saw and realized that love sets off the bounds of all vocations, that love is everything."

The Little Flower continues: "Then, nearly ecstatic with the supreme joy in my soul, I proclaimed: O Jesus, my love, at last I have found my calling: my calling is love.

Certainly I have found my proper place in the Church ... In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love.”

Furthermore, we begin by looking at love since this Year for Priests was inaugurated on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, a day to remember and celebrate the tremendous love of God poured forth from His loving heart for the salvation of all and, in a special way, for the sanctification of the clergy. The Curé of Ars was wont to say: “The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.”

During my years as novice director and formator, I often stressed the importance of keeping in touch with the roots of one’s vocation. I am convinced that in these roots we see God’s loving initiative. It is God’s love that reaches out to us and invites us to respond. Just as God called Patriarchs and Prophets — and even the people of Israel — in the Old Testament, the call continues in the New Testament through Peter, Paul, the Apostles — the new people of Israel, the Church — and down to present-day saints and sinners. The more we see God’s love for us in our history — both collectively and personally — the more we are able to respond in love. Furthermore, I believe that same love will also be our strength in moments of weakness.

### **Love at the heart of the call**

Love is at the root of our vocation. It is God’s gratuitous initiative and it has nothing to do with human merit, excellence, talents, etc. As St. John points out, God is “the first to love” (1 Jn 4:19). The first — and necessary — step in true discipleship is our recognition and gratefulness for God’s love of us.

As an aside, there is a lady from this parish whose son was a classmate of my brother at North East (the former Redemptorist minor seminary in Pennsylvania). To this day, that lady still repeats what I have heard her say so many times before: “I always thought your brother would be the priest. I never did think you would make it. You were always so shy and quiet.”

Why me? God’s loving initiative. There go I but for the grace of God. As priests we must be keenly aware of God’s love for us and receive that love with grateful humility. Our lived response to that love should be so passionate, intense, and focused that sparks of that love are ignited among the people of God entrusted to us.

Every call includes a mission. God makes clear to the chosen one that he is destined for a particular task in the plan of salvation and in the destiny of God’s people. We are to accomplish the will of God. On the part of the receiver, or the one called, there is a personal challenge to one’s sense of moral responsibility. God is calling and God wants a response. It may mean a re-arranging of one’s entire existence: change of plans, ideas, hopes for the future, etc. As the response is made, the God who calls out of love also strengthens out of love. Here it is important to remember that one’s failings do not annul God’s decision to call.

As priests, the mission has taken us to places we probably would have never even imagined. Our apostolates have taken us from great cities to remote countrysides. We have shared in the lives of thousands upon thousands of people over the years. We have shared the joys of many as we administered the sacraments to God's people. How many houses in how many parts of the world have photographs of us baptizing their children, giving them their First Holy Communion, or presiding at marriage ceremonies? How many folks see us as instruments of God in their lives having gone to confession and experienced through us the mercy of God? We have witnessed the suffering of a poverty that has no welfare system, no safety nets. We have anointed the ill and prayed with their families. We have seen people die of illnesses that, had they been born elsewhere or had the resources, they could have been treated or even cured. These experiences and many others at the service of God's people — as well as helping us to grow and mature both spiritually and humanly speaking — are all consequences of God's loving initiative and our response.

### **At the service of love**

The whole reason for ministry in the Church is to be of service to the community. The very goal and meaning of the ordained priesthood is precisely to help the priestly people of God exercise their priesthood — which consists in life lived as a spiritual sacrifice to God. In other words, the Church needs holy priests.

As John Paul II states in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “The priest must be a man of God, the one who belongs to God and makes people think of God ... Christians expect to find in the priest ... a man who will help them turn to God ... and so the priest must have a deep intimacy with the Lord.” Here, it is noteworthy to add that we cannot give what we do not have. All our best intentions and desires are no substitute for a lack of substantial content in our lives.

Pope Paul VI, in his *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, says it also: “Before we evangelize, we must be evangelized.” The Old Testament model of priest is the mediator who offers the prayers and sacrifices of the people to God and in turn is distributor of God's blessings and favors for God's people. In the New Testament, Jesus is the High Priest of His own sacrifice. He willingly gives His life for us.

Once again, the words of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “Christ's gift of himself to his Church, the fruit of his love, is described in terms of that unique gift of self made by the Bridegroom to the Bride ... The priest is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, the Spouse of the Church ... In virtue of his configuration to Christ, the head and shepherd, the priest stands in this spousal relationship with regard to the community ... In his spiritual life, therefore, he is called to live out Christ's spousal love toward the Church, His Bride. Therefore, the priest's life ought to radiate this spousal character which demands that he be a witness to Christ's spousal love.” St. Paul invites us as followers of Jesus to continue to share in His priesthood, to deepen our configuration with Jesus. He says: “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice holy, agreeable to God: this is the spiritual worship you have to offer” (Rm. 12:1).

## **Good stewards of God's love**

In love, we have received much; in love, we are invited to be good stewards of all that we have received. The Curé of Ars reminds us: "It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth ... he is the steward of the good Lord; the administrator of his goods." At this point, I would like to propose seven practical suggestions for being good stewards of God's love for us.

First of all, **daily prayer** is essential. This implies a personal relationship with Jesus that goes beyond but does not exclude the Liturgy of the Hours and the requirements of daily community exercises. We talk to Jesus, we listen to Jesus, we are present to Jesus. Pope John Paul II once raised the question: "Are we committed to all the activities of God or to the God of all activity?" We have to make time for God. Hopefully, prayer will become so much a part of us that the day we fail to pray we will feel as if we missed a meal. St. Alphonsus reminds us: "He who loves God loves prayer; and he who does not love prayer will find it morally impossible to overcome his passions." His often repeated words to the folks in the Neapolitan countryside — and to us today — are: "Pray, pray, pray, and you will surely be saved."

Secondly, as a progression of the previous point, we come to **the Eucharist**. The *Catechism*, quoting Vatican II in its document on the Sacred Liturgy, tells us that the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." Three articles later we are told: "the Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith." And in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* the Council teaches that the Eucharist is "the center and root of the whole priestly life."

There is no greater prayer than the Eucharist. On the day of our ordination, we were presented with the chalice and paten together with the words: "Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to be offered to him. Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate." On the occasion of his golden jubilee of priesthood, Pope John Paul II shared these words: "In the span of fifty years of priesthood, what is still the most important and the most sacred moment for me is the celebration of the Eucharist. My awareness of celebrating *in persona Christi* at the altar prevails. Holy Mass is the absolute center of my life and of every day of my life."

Furthermore, Archbishop Dolan relates the story of Dominic Tang, the courageous Chinese archbishop who was imprisoned for twenty-one years for nothing more than his loyalty to Christ and his one, true Church. After five years of solitary confinement, in a windowless, damp cell, his jailer came to tell him he could leave it for a few hours, to do whatever he wanted. Five years of solitary confinement and he had a couple of hours to do whatever he wanted! What would it be? A hot shower? A change of clothes? Certainly a long walk outside? A chance to call or write his family? "What will it be?" asked the jailer. "I would like to say Mass," replied Archbishop Tang.

A third point of how we can be good stewards of God's love has to do with our fidelity to the **sacrament of reconciliation**. Here I refer to our role not as confessors but as penitents. I have heard it said that one is only a good confessor because he is first of all a good penitent. Sure it can be a humbling experience, but it is also a reality check for us to

keep things in their proper perspective. A good confessor is a valuable find — a real treasure. However, any confessor suffices as we remember that it is God who forgives. As a general rule of thumb it has been suggested that priests and religious avail themselves of God's grace in this sacrament once a month. Of course, a complimentary aspect of this sacrament would include a daily examination of conscience. Thanking God for blessings received each day as well as admitting our shortcomings and asking for God's grace can only enhance the moment when we do receive the sacrament.

A fourth consideration would be **spiritual direction**. It is often seen as an integral element of our initial formation process, as rightly it should be. There are even checks and balances built into the system to assure that the seminarian avails himself of this time-treasured means of growth.

Full-time ministry, on the other hand, is a very different reality. The checks and balances, together with the seminary structure, are no longer in place. Personal responsibility will now be the deciding factor in terms of if or not, what amount of frequency, with whom. A major part of our spiritual stewardship is human development in qualities such as responsibility, courtesy, punctuality, the ability to foster healthy friendships, active participation in ongoing formation. Coupled with these aspects, we are consistently confronted with issues of good and evil, as we struggle with our own weaknesses and process of continual conversion.

Besides our progress in human qualities, we must also grow in the development of spiritual virtues. As Redemptorists, we may even want to hearken back to the twelve monthly virtues as aids in this process. An honest, trusting, consistent relationship with one's spiritual director allows for integration and a sense of stability in one's life and ministry. Often we may face the challenge of a new assignment, the transfer of a spiritual director or even his no longer being available due to sickness or death. In any case, the value of the practice of spiritual direction is not diminished and we must begin a new search.

Point number five has to do with **daily spiritual reading**. Whether it be Sacred Scripture, Church documents, lives of the saints, or some other spiritual reading to foster our interior life, we have to make time for it. At North East, there were times when Fr. Bill "Scooter" Smith would teach as a substitute. I honestly do not remember whether it was English or Latin class that particular day, but I do recall him stressing the importance of spiritual reading. He said that at least fifteen minutes a day should be dedicated to this practice. It did not matter whether we read an entire section of a book or not, a whole chapter or just a part; the main objective was to get in the habit: at least fifteen minutes a day.

Our sixth consideration regards our **devotion to Mary**, our Blessed Mother. From my first days at North East and later at Esopus (the former Redemptorist seminary, Mount St. Alphonsus, in Esopus, NY), I was especially struck by the worn marble indentations at her altar. How many young men, before going to bed each night — as well as in other moments — opened their hearts to this Mother in the absence of their human mothers!

I am not sure whether it's due to three nightly Hail Marys or the Hail, Holy Queen or the Memorare, but I am convinced that at least ninety-nine percent of our perseverance is due to Mary, our Mother of Perpetual Help. As further evidence of God's love for us, I am sure that this Mother intercedes for us even when we fail to have recourse to her. A healthy and substantial devotion to Mary has to be an essential element of our spiritual regimen.

Our seventh consideration as stewards of God's love brings us back to the beginning. We have to be **convinced of God's love for us** and that, because of that love, we have been called not just to a job, a ministry, or a profession, but to a new and different life.

We must be familiar with the details of our calling as best we can. What were the instruments — human or otherwise — that God used to attract us, to catch our attention? When were we first aware of the call? How did that awareness deepen and become clearer as time went on? Which people and/or experiences were supportive and positive and which seemed to be obstacles? The more we are in touch with our vocational history, the stronger will our vocation be.

As we see the loving hand of God in our lives and are able to tell our story, we appreciate our priesthood even more. These roots of God's love will continue to grow and bear fruit in our lives. Being in touch with them will sustain us in moments of difficulty or doubt. In our heart of hearts we will know that we are of God and that God is love. Finally, I close with the sentiments of Alphonsus: "As long as God is God, he loves us."