

The Charism of the Diocesan Priesthood

Rev. Raymond P. Carey

Not very long ago it would have been an exercise in theological science fiction to imagine spending an entire convention addressing the topic of the charism of diocesan priesthood. What charism? Religious have charisms, not diocesans, according to unexamined common wisdom. Franciscans have the charism of unity; Benedictines, work and prayer; Dominicans, preaching; Trappists, stable contemplation.

For religious, charisms have long served the function of icons: clear representations of a simple truth, representations which not only reveal something important, but invite a response as well. A Jesuit no longer steeped in the mercy of Christ, no longer intimately familiar with the mercy of Christ, has had a spiritual heart attack, because the icon mercy is at the heart of the Jesuit charism and enterprise in the Church. Likewise, a Divine Word missionary prizes the icon of mobility while a Benedictine monk prizes the icon of stability.

Until very recently, however, diocesan presbyters, at best, inherited pseudo monastic icons as well as cultural functions which served as unexamined and unreflected blueprints for what being a diocesan presbyter was all about. The icon of monastic holiness imposed on diocesan presbyters the expectations of prayers more suited to choir and the predictable rhythm of the monastery, with appropriate accompanying spiritual exercises. Added, of course, was the ideal expectation that presbyters would share a common community living arrangement with the pastor as a kind of abbot or prior.

In regard to function of diocesan presbyters, a number of other icons took on the mantle of assumed truth. The icon of priest as judge, for example, placed upon the presbyter the role of being authentic interpreter of truth, interpreter of sinfulness, decider of who would receive sacraments and who would not, keeper of the common purse and overall “boss of his parish.” Further, the icon of presbyter as “available” (like the Statue of Liberty: bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses) dictated that he live in a rectory, dress in a certain way, conduct a ministry to door and phone, receive a pseudo monastic poverty-like salary, and remain celibate because “availability” had an inevitable link with celibacy.

Regardless of the relative merits of such a view of presbyter for days gone by, those icons, in my view, deserve a timely death. They do not serve us well for today’s and tomorrow’s Church. There are, I suggest, other icons which speak to the heart of the enterprise for diocesan presbyters, icons which help identify the unique charism of diocesan presbyters.

In the brief time available to me this evening, I would like to identify eight icons I consider to be at the center of the charism of diocesan priesthood. My purpose is twofold. First, I want to invite you to think in terms of icons/charism: and, second, I would like to whet your appetite for the delightful work of the convention we begin

tonight.

Eight Icons Central to the Charism of the Diocesan Priesthood.

ICON: Believer in the Lordship of Jesus-

Of all that could be said about the centrality of this icon for the charism of diocesan presbyters, I offer three simple points.

First, one's relationship with Jesus must reflect that one is at the same time a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus and a proclaimer of Jesus. None of those three features alone will ever be sufficient.

Second, as PHEME PERKINS has suggested, one's commitment to the Jesus affair must reflect the four essential components of the earliest disciples. First, the decision to follow Jesus must be the most radical decision of one's life; second, there must be a personal relationship with the Risen One; third, there must be an openness to include all persons, especially women; and fourth, one must accept Jesus' challenge to show mercy without measure and love without limit.

Third, believing in Jesus is inexorably and inevitably linked to the assembly, to the Church, to the gathering of believers. No private practitioners here!

ICON: Proclaimer of the Word

At ordination, the bishop says, "Receive the Word of God: Believe what you read; teach what you believe; practice what you preach."

Succinctly, preaching is at the very heart of the ministry and charism of diocesan priesthood. Preaching serves the central purpose of linking the presbyter with the experience of the Assembly, and the fundamental task of making one's own home in the Word of God reflected in the context of the Assembly.

Parenthetically, I think it is the centrality of the icon of preaching that accounts for a rather interesting phenomenon I have noticed, anecdotally, in my work as a therapist for resigned presbyters. Overwhelmingly and consistently the one thing resigned presbyters seem to miss most is preaching.

ICON: Loving Service

At the core of the charism of diocesan priesthood is the praxis of loving service. Rooted in a deep respect and reverence for persons, loving service guides our prayer, informs our loving, and our relationships, and helps us muster the energy of the believing community to be ministers of loving service as well. The spirituality of the diocesan presbyter begins with and is filtered through the loving service in the assembly. It is not an enterprise of spiritual exercises.

ICON: Theological Reflection

The charism of diocesan priesthood requires the critical, essential need for theological reflection, for study, for ongoing integration of increasing and changing theological understandings. Helpful theological reflection invites the diocesan presbyter to rather ongoing questions, such as “How am I helpful to these folks? What needs to happen here? What core ethics guide my decisions here?”

Theological reflection also allows one to make decisions about what is helpful and what is not. My research, both data based and anecdotal, suggests that not only do diocesan presbyters on the whole not have spiritual directors, they also don't care that they don't.

ICON: Receiver of Ministries

A significant component of the charism of diocesan presbyters is the ability to be shaped and changed by the folks whom we serve. A key measure of that phenomenon relates to whether we can receive the ministry of others as Jesus did: with respect and with gratitude. I am speaking here of presbyters' needs for the ministries of lector and greeter and catechist and musician. I am not speaking of taking perks such as condos in Hawaii or money pressed in the palm of the hand.

ICON: The Prayer of the Assembly

Bishop Ken Untener has a unique and refreshing way of describing this icon of the charism of diocesan presbyter. He contrasts the radically different tasks of a concert pianist and a pianist who leads a sing-a-long. In the case of the concert pianist, the audience gathers to hear the music coming “out of the pianist.” In the case of the sing-a-long, the pianist's task is to identify, respond to and enable the music to come out of the gathering. Similarly, a diocesan presbyter does not invite the assembly to watch him pray. He has a central task of being in and of the assembly to enable the prayer of the assembly to take expression. No wonder language such as “my Mass”, or “private Mass” has all but disappeared, and none too soon.

ICON: Presbyter as a “Means”

The office of presbyter is a wonderful gift which belongs to the people of God. It is not possessed by and does not belong to any one person. It is an honor and a grace to fill that office of presbyter with and for the people. But it is always a means to an end, never a worthy end in itself. “Being a priest is who I am for people; it is not who I am.”

It is the first icon, being a believer in Jesus, that keeps this icon in balance. This icon invites presbyters to freshen their “yes” to service as a presbyter, to see it as a means to “loving God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength; and loving a neighbor as oneself.” It is never an idolatrous end in itself, never a “sentence” handed

down.

ICON: Presbyter as Celibate Lover

Finally, the diocesan presbyter, through celibacy, accepts the challenge to be a lover in service of the whole people of God. Through the development of skills for celibacy and skills for intimacy, a presbyter in his very loving service invites the assembly to celebrate the unselfish heart of Jesus. It requires a commitment to developing a wide range of intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, as well as skills for personal freedom.

Conclusion

Whether you agree with what I have said this evening, or whether you disagree, we are now officially away from the dock and headed out to sea. I hope that the journey of our convention will take us to new horizons and new ports of call as we attempt to identify, discuss, celebrate and strengthen the marvelous gift given for the building up of the people of God, the charism of diocesan priesthood.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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