

Elements of the Priests' Life and Holiness

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Previously, I spoke about the universal-call to holiness and the shape of an authentic Christian holiness. I suggested that real holiness isn't about overtly pious behaviors, or even about enjoying glorious consolations in prayer. Holiness is about entering into God's life, giving one's life over to God, becoming like God, loving as God loves. And, of course, "becoming like God" and "loving as God loves" means self-giving, self-offering, selfless service of others modeled after the example of Jesus. Christian holiness, then, is always linked with the Cross, the pouring out our lives in love and in service of others. The height of the Christian life, holiness, is the perfection of charity, the perfection of self-giving.

Real holiness is never abstract, "pie-in-the-sky," or angelic. In fact, holiness is never realized separate from "the stuff" of our ordinary daily lives. Holiness can only be found in life as we find it - at this moment, in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, according to the "cards we've been dealt in life." We are- always being called to be patient, generous, attentive, caring, compassionate, forgiving at this moment, with these people whom I see in front of me. Will I give of myself here and now? Will I think of others rather than only of myself at this moment? Holiness is always a matter of the now, and of how we respond to the demands of the present encounter.

Because the path to holiness is always linked to the real circumstances of one's life, we can speak of different forms or ways of seeking holiness. Of course, the basic pattern of the Cross marks every authentic form of Christian holiness. But we can speak of distinctive forms that Christian spirituality can take according to one's age, gender, situation, and state in life. This is necessarily so since the shape of the challenge to give of oneself generously - the distinctive experience of the Cross - is different for a married Christian with children and a celibate Christian living alone in a rectory.

The distinctive form of priestly holiness is to be found precisely in the priest's ministry and not separate from it. Ministry gives shape (and is meant to give shape) to the priest's path of holiness because, by ordination, ministry is an essential part of his identity. Ministry - pastoral activities - are not a distraction from a priest's spiritual life. Rather, ministry is at the heart of the priest's spirituality. A married person finds holiness precisely in the challenge of self-giving in and for the marriage and family. A professed religious finds holiness in the challenge of self-giving in living the charism of his or her religious community. A priest finds holiness in the challenges of self-giving precisely in his ministry as a shepherd after the model of Jesus the Shepherd. The priest's prayer, his loving, his self-giving are shaped around the ministry he undertakes as he represents Christ in his pastoral leadership of the people of God. Certainly, like every other Christian, the priest must be attentive, caring, generous to his friends, his family, and the people he encounters on the street: but it is his ministry that gives distinctive shape to his seeking after holiness as a priest.

Almost as an aside - though really illustrative of my point - I want to reiterate the fact that the priest, like every other Christian, must find his holiness in his life as he finds it. And specifically, as a priest, he must find it in the “whole package” of his ministry. I assume that we would tell married people that their holiness is to be found in the ordinary situations of family life: taking care of sick kids without complaint, going to work every day to insure adequate income to support the family, doing the laundry, taking time for each other. I assume that we would tell married people that their holiness is found precisely in the midst of those ordinary marital and family activities.

But I find that many priests seem to expect to find their holiness in only part of their lives: in personal prayer, in celebrating the sacraments, and in certain forms of personal one-to-one ministry. For many priests, administration meetings, finances are simply a distraction - maybe even a hindrance - to their spirituality. I am not suggesting that administration is an essential part of priestly ministry but, if it is part of his life, he must incorporate it into his path of holiness. Certainly for many priests, the administrative aspects of their lives represent a great form of self-giving. However, it may be that the struggle to be generous, patient, and attentive, even in this work, is part-and-parcel of his self-giving. Perhaps it is well that the priest shares in the common experience of his sisters and brothers whose vocations and work are rarely free of very mundane routines and tasks. (One might even be able to make a case that the later New Testament writings assume that the ministry of the bishop-priest includes the prudent management of the household of God [see 1 Tim. 3:3-4]).

Of course, prayer (openness to God, communion with God) is essential to any authentic form of Christian holiness. This is certainly true of priestly holiness, since his ministry must be nurtured and nourished by prayer. Real, sustained self-giving service in ministry is only possible if the priest's ministry is being fed by prayer. The priest can only effectively and consistently make Christ the Shepherd present to his ministry if he himself knows Christ, has drawn close to him, communes with him.

Priestly holiness, then, is formed in this mutually enriching interaction of prayer and ministry. Ministry is to be nourished constantly by prayer, and prayer must be given a particular shape by the priest's identity as a pastor and shepherd of his people, after the model of Jesus. A priest could never hide from pastoral activity by claiming that his prayer must always take priority (like the newly ordained priest who told his pastor that he could only preside at one of several Masses on a Sunday because he needed adequate time for personal prayer before and after Mass). Nor, as is probably more likely in our day, can a priest claim that he “doesn't have time for prayer” because of the demands of his ministry.

The combination of a prayerful ministry and a ministerial prayer form in the priest a special disposition that the Council and especially Pope John Paul II call “pastoral charity.” The priest's life and ministry must be given shape by - and aim toward - an even greater and deeper realization of pastoral charity. That is to say, the priest's life, ministry, and daily activities must be shaped by a pastoral love, the charity of a pastor,

the love of a shepherd for his flock. If the height of the spiritual life as a Christian is in the perfection of charity, then the height of the priest's spiritual life as a priest is in the perfection of pastoral charity - in an ever greater, ever deeper, ever more selfless shepherd's love (PDV 21-23).

The priest is called, gifted, challenged to make present Christ the Shepherd and therefore he is called, gifted and challenged to model - to make present - the love that Christ the Shepherd has for his flock. And, as we know, the love of Jesus for his flock meant a lot more than that he had warm feelings for the people he encountered, or that he was nice to people, or that he merely treated them fairly, or that he smiled at them. The love of Jesus the Shepherd for his flock shaped his life as one who came to serve and not to be served. The love of our Divine Shepherd led him ultimately to lay down his life for his sheep.

The pastoral charity of the priest, then, lived out in his daily ministry is essentially his genuine self-giving in ministry. The priest must be willing to give his gifts, his time, his energy, his very life to the service of God and of God's people (most especially those entrusted to his pastoral care). One theologian has spoken of the priest's "asceticism of selfless availability" (Schwartz, 39; cf. PO 14). In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the Pope teaches:

"The internal principle, the force which animates and guides the spiritual life of the priest inasmuch as he is configured to Christ the Head and Shepherd, is pastoral charity, as a participation in Jesus Christ's own pastoral charity.. The essential content of this pastoral charity is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church, following the example of Christ. Pastoral charity is the virtue by which we imitate Christ in his self-giving and service. It is not just what we do, but our gift of self, which manifests Christ's love for his flock. Pastoral charity determines our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people. (PDV 23 [emphasis in the original text])"

At the Chrism Mass, during Holy Week, the bishop asks his priests to renew their commitment to priestly service. He asks them:

"At your ordination, you accepted the responsibilities of the priesthood - out of love for the Lord Jesus and his Church. Are you resolved to unite yourselves more closely to Christ and to try to become more like him by joyfully sacrificing your own pleasure and ambition to bring his peace and love to your brothers and sisters?"

And then:

"Are you resolved to imitate Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd of the Church, by teaching the Christian faith without thinking of your own profit, solely for the well-being of the people you were sent to serve?"

Clearly, the priesthood can never be a "job" - nine to five, five days a week. From the moment of his ordination as a priest, ministry is part of who he is. A pastoral love

is his duty - 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year (even when he is not actively involved in ministerial tasks).

Immediately, of course, I must repeat-that nothing that I say is meant to deny the necessity of taking time for oneself, of taking care of oneself, taking a day off, getting a good night's sleep, etc. A priest's gift of self in ministry isn't nearly as effective if he is unhealthy, tired, worn out, or burnt out. In fact, his self-giving in ministry requires that he take care of himself so that his pastoral love can be real and vibrant and even joyful.

At the same time, I think we ought to feel a certain tension - live in a certain tension - between taking care of ourselves (which is not only legitimate but essential) and, at the very same time, of giving ourselves ever more generously (as pastoral charity requires of us). Clearly, many priests are workaholics - they seem to give and give and give until they become unhealthy. These workaholic priests are to be encouraged to slow down, to take care of themselves, and to remember that they don't have to save the world because Someone already did, when he died and rose 2,000 years ago.

But, on the other hand, there are other priests who seem to have made "taking care of myself the eleventh commandment. There's a kind of narcissism, a self-indulgence, that seems to place the greatest weight on what "I need," what fulfills me, what I need to make me happy. These priests need to be reminded that to represent Christ the Shepherd is to be called to serve and not to be served, to lay down one's life for the sheep.

Sadly, some good priests leave the priesthood because they don't take care of themselves - they "burn out" and find themselves empty, even bitter and angry. Often, it seems, these priests neglected their prayer, and allowed themselves to believe that everything rested on them and their efforts - rather than on the Lord.

Sadly too — and I think I see this more frequently in young priests - some priests leave because they never took to heart the fact that priesthood is a life of self-giving. The man called to priesthood will only find fulfillment, integrity, happiness, and peace in giving himself generously in ministry - in pastoral charity. At times, this self-giving will be met with gratitude and praise and support from the people and his peers in ministry. But often it won't. Too many priests seem to leave because they're not "happy," or not feeling "fulfilled," or not feeling appreciated by the bishop, the pastor, or the people.

Now, happiness is a wonderful thing: being fulfilled is an authentic goal. And maybe we should get (and give!) more support and affirmation to one another. Yet real, deep, and lasting happiness for the priest must come from living the pastoral love in ministry to which he is called by God. Fidelity to one's ministry as a priest is the source of a deep peace and joy and sense of fulfillment that can - and sometimes must - co-exist with a period of feeling unhappy when there's conflict in the parish, or on the pastoral team, or in the rectory.

Jesus had many friends; he enjoyed life; he went to banquets and wedding feasts. But his real happiness was found in doing the Father's will. His fulfillment was found in being faithful to his identity as a Shepherd who came to serve and not to be served, and even to lay down his life for his sheep. If we would be his priests - to share in his ministry as Head and Pastor and Shepherd - then, we cannot hope for a merely superficial happiness (although there is obviously great happiness in ministry). We must work for the deep and authentic happiness that comes in giving our lives as Jesus did.

The priest's holiness then — precisely as a priest - is found in a prayerful ministry and in a ministerial prayer that gives shape to a pastoral love, to a pastoral self-giving, in serving others in our priestly ministry. This ongoing journey is nourished by the love and support of the people of God, by the challenge and comfort of his brother priests (especially, for example, in support groups), and by the direction and affirmation of his bishop.

The spirituality - the holiness of the priest - is shaped by who and what he is. He is the representative of Christ the Head of the Church, the Pastor and the Shepherd. He attains his holiness (always as a work of God's grace) through living and acting as a shepherd and a pastor - that is, in his ministry shaped by pastoral charity - by a pastoral love for his people.

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