

The Joy of the Priesthood

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Holy Trinity Seminary Welcome Dinner
Irving Convention Center, Irving, Texas
October 4, 2014

One of the most challenging questions priests hear is one that we are asked very often: “Why are you a priest?” It is a challenging question for several reasons. First, when I hear it asked of me I wonder with suspicion, “Why is this person asking me this question? Is there something about my behavior that is prompting them to ask the question?” Secondly, it is a very personal question that touches at the core upon a very subtle yet sobering experience that each priest has had spiritually with Christ. Finally, because of this personal experience with Christ, the ordinary parlance of daily conversation usually falls short of being able to capture the true measure of a satisfactory answer to the sincere question.

As a result, we priests in an attempt to counter the popular perceptions portrayed by the media, often respond by speaking about what makes us happy or satisfies us in our pastoral ministry (avoiding the mention of what can aggravate us about our pastoral ministry) and thus, we attempt to convey what we really believe the priesthood is – a truly happy life and a very worthwhile endeavor for a young man to consider. Yet, there seems to be something lacking in such a response.

I would propose that, that “something lacking” in most answers is joy – true Christian joy. Joy is different from both pleasure and happiness. Pleasure is what is appreciated by the physical senses. Happiness is what is appreciated by the internal senses of the soul. Both happiness and pleasure are very much a part of what it means to be human, and thus, what it means to be a priest. There are many pleasurable things that attract us to a priestly life: the aesthetics of music and art in the liturgical life of the church, and the comfort and security of the basic environment of our lives.

There are many satisfying and happy aspects that we enjoy and that are attractive in our priestly lives – the satisfaction of a job well done, the satisfaction of a homily well-crafted and delivered, the happiness of a parish well administered and supervised, and the satisfaction of catechetical programs well-implemented. All of these things are both pleasurable and satisfying, but in themselves are ephemeral and transitory. None of these things when taken in itself involves real joy.

Joy is a supernatural gift that we receive through God’s grace. Our joy as priests comes to us through a point of faith and a point of hope. First, the point of faith is that the priesthood exists entirely at Christ’s initiative for the sake of the Eucharist. There is no Eucharist without the priesthood. Without Jesus’ decision to institute the Eucharist, there is no priesthood.

Secondly, the point of hope that every priest considers is that his own priestly vocation is not something that he has initiated as a career or lifestyle choice, but is also even more particularly and personally initiated by Christ. “It is I who have chosen you, not you who have chosen me.” There is no institution in the natural order of society parallel to the priesthood. The priesthood is an entirely graced reality that transforms our humanity in all of its frailty for the spread of the Gospel.

Now many people receive the gift of joy through other vocations – the vocation of marriage, even particular vocations in medicine, in law, in education, in business, in political life – yet each of these vocations also exist as part of the natural order. Each of these lives receives its vocational character through the Sacrament of Baptism

– another gift freely given and fundamentally initiated by Christ. Yet, each of these vocations also exists in the natural order of human society.

Joy is something that really cannot be adequately represented on the terms of the natural order itself. In popular culture, joy is usually depicted more like delirium. Contemporary depictions of joy are usually clown-like and disturbing – manifesting what could be perceived as an acute need for intense psychotropic medication. Like suffering, joy is something that the contemporary world cannot address meaningfully. The lack of joy in our contemporary world is closely associated with the lack of trust. Our current situation in postmodern society, imbued with the fragments of the modern character of philosophy even in its textual residue, tempts and seduces us to act against trust and confidence in every facet of our lives. The Gospel that we most need to proclaim and hear is the Gospel of trust that it might blossom in confidence and joy. Priests are indispensable for this mission.

The joy of the priestly vocation makes clear that fidelity to Christ's unique sacrifice in the institution of the Eucharist (the gift of Christ's Body and Blood) is the only way of giving God fitting thanks. In entrusting us, His disciples and His priests with the mission of the Eucharist, Jesus even risks betrayal – yet, consider how necessary this act of trust is on His part to the celebration of the Eucharist and to our own salvation. His generous act of entrustment with the sacred mysteries is what gives us the grace of confidence in His love and in our ministry.

Trust: The marrow of the personal commitment of faith, hope, and charity of the baptized. It is the lack of trust (and the assault on trust) that the satisfying and pleasurable aspects of our priestly lives in themselves cannot provide. These aspects in themselves offer no trust and thus they can provide no lasting confidence for the believer in Christ. It is Christ's perfect sacrifice that offers precisely that unique gift of confidence. It is a lack of trust that threatens the integrity of the Christian community.

Trust has been wounded, trust has been crucified, and trust is precisely what is at the heart of our mission as the Church, more particularly in our vocation as priests, and even more particularly in the formational endeavor of the seminary. In the seminary, the faculty, the students, and in a special way the bishops (each and all) have a responsibility to develop what are consciously trusting relationships for the formation of a healthy and confident church – not an institution that is sick and turned inward as Pope Francis has identified. To fulfill our mission we must first trust Christ. Without this trust placed in Christ, confidence will vaporize into the arrogance and entitlement of clericalism (a truly modern characteristic repugnant to the Gospel) devoid of joy and bereft of confidence.

There are many aspects of our priestly ministry that make us happy. There are many parts of our priestly ministry that please us and comfort us. Yet, sometimes they are present and sometimes they are absent.

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the regnal patron of our Holy Father. Popular culture presents St. Francis as benign and joyful – in fact, delirious. In the popular mind he is more associated with the cable channel Animal Planet than with the Christian faith. Yet, these popular depictions neglect the means by which St. Francis is truly joyful – his entire conformity to Christ represented by the stigmata – the marks of Christ's crucifixion in which he shares. The joy of the priesthood is engendered by Christ's call to each of us to share in His Cross – because on the Cross, we see no pleasure, no happiness, but the perfect joy of the Son's will lovingly surrendered in obedience to the will of the Father.