

What Being a Priest Means to Me 2009

In 2007, shortly before my ordination to the priesthood, I wrote a reflection on "What Being a Priest Means to Me". I have been thinking about writing a new reflection on the priesthood now that I have been ordained for two years.

Recently, the priests of the Diocese of Rochester gathered with our Bishop, Matthew Clark, for a day of reflection on the priesthood at Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua. The day was a mixture of words from Bishop Clark and short reflections by various priests of the diocese. Topics for the reflections included remembrances of ordination days (something I will always remember), speaking of priests who served as role models for us as current priests, and the challenges and rewards of priesthood.

This, of course, helped me to think about what priesthood means to me. In the Year of the Priest I offer the following reflection.

Priesthood is about availability; being available when needed. This is one of the challenges for me. We have to find a balance between the meetings, *taking care of ourselves*, celebrating the sacraments, and still finding time when someone needs a listening ear or someone dies. I do my best to be available.

Priesthood is about "the other." It isn't about doing what I want. It is to do what I can to provide pastoral care for others. To do this I have to take care of myself. I have to realize I can't do everything. I do a lot and have come to realize how much I have taken on and decided to back off some. It isn't simply a question of how much (quantity) work I do. I need to remember to do it to the best of my ability (quality).

Priesthood is about the Sacraments. It is about celebrating the Sacraments for what they are truly meant to be, an encounter with God. I do my best to make sure that the celebration of the sacraments is not just a "mechanical process." Sacraments must be celebrated with love for God and the people present. Sacraments are celebrated with faith; faith that Jesus Christ works through the sacraments to give us the grace we need.

Priesthood is about sharing the faith. The faith has much to offer. Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose. That is central to our faith. We must realize that Jesus teaches us much about how we are to live. Faith in Jesus is not just saying that he forgives us. Living our faith means learning how Jesus calls us to live and striving to do it. For me part of priesthood as shepherd is to guide the people according to Jesus' way.

Priesthood requires taking time to pray. Praying is not just a matter of giving God a list of requests. Praying should include listening to God; listening to how God calls us to live.

Some people see priests as the ones who say Mass, preside at weddings and baptisms, come when someone is dying to anoint them, and then celebrate the funeral. Certainly, priests are the ones who preside at the sacraments. However, priesthood is more than that.

Cardinal Mahoney of Los Angeles recently said in a talk at the University of Notre Dame, ""The priest's ministry is not focused solely on the celebration of the Eucharist and other sacraments," Cardinal Mahony said. "He, too, is called to work toward integral human development at the heart of a renewed social order. But his part in this mission lies primarily in teaching and in guiding those who are intimately and integrally involved in the various spheres and disciplines that must interact with one another in finding solutions in response to the needs and exigencies of our age" (Priests must help laity to solve world's problems, cardinal says"<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/briefs/cns/20090928.htm>)

Priesthood is about making God's presence known in the world today. This happens in a very profound when the sacraments are celebrated. We can also help people to realize God's presence in the everyday, the good and the bad. Priests, predominantly in the homily, help us see how the Bible is still important and meaningful today. God's Word does not become outdated. As we develop as a culture we come to new understanding of how we are called to live out God's Word.

If all a priest does is celebrate the sacraments, then being a priest is nothing more than a function. As a priest, I believe it is important to know the parishioners. It would be nice to know every parishioner but that does not seem feasible. Rather, when I say the priest should know the parishioners I speak of their needs; such things as what is the age of the parishioners, are they an older congregation, are there many families? Is everyone retired or is everyone working? Do they have good salaries or do they struggle to make ends meet? Do they feel safe? What are their needs?

A priest can better serve the people by knowing their needs. A priest shows he cares when he knows what is going on in people's lives. As a priest, I find it VERY difficult to know many of the parishioners individually but from the ones I do know and from being attentive to what is happening in the local community and across the world I strive to know their needs and make God present.

For Further Reading

Catholic News Service, "Priests must help laity to solve world's problems, cardinal says" September 28, 2009.<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/briefs/cns/20090928.htm>.