

What Being a Priest Means to Me?

The following is a reflection I wrote as I began my final semester in the seminar on what I thought being a priest would mean to me.

As I begin my final semester at Theological College, I wish to reflect on what being a priest means to me. As so often is necessary for me to put my thoughts into concrete form, I sit down to write out my thoughts on priesthood.

Obviously, the most visible part of being a priest is the celebration of the sacraments, most especially in the Sunday Eucharist where the parish gathers as “one” community to celebrate. I do not see the role of priest simply as one who presides at the sacraments according to the prescribed rite. For me, it is part of the role of the priest to help make the sacraments come alive for those receiving the sacrament and those present.^[1] A sacrament is not something simply given by God to a passive recipient. Sacraments are encounters with God where we come to know more fully the presence of God in our lives. All the sacraments now include in some form a sharing of God’s Word that is followed by the sacrament itself. The Word is part of the rite to help bring forth God’s presence in an interactive way. We are not passive recipients of God’s grace. The grace we receive calls us to be in *relationship* with God.

Celebrating the sacraments is a vital part of the ministry of a priest but it is not all a priest does. The Eucharist is the summit of priestly ministry. There is nothing greater than the Eucharist. The Eucharist begins the ministry of priest and is the culmination of priestly ministry. At Sunday Mass, the priest is the one who *leads* the community in giving praise and thanks to God. Particularly in the homily, the priest is the one who *teaches* the people. In celebrating the Eucharist, the priest is the one who acts *in persona Christi*, making Christ present.

The priest is indeed all these things at Mass but it does not end at Mass. It is the role of the priest to lead the community not just at Mass but in all things. The priest *must* work with the people to know and understand the needs of the people but it is the priest who ultimately is the leader of the parish. I know several priests who dread administrative duties. There are certainly administrative duties best left to those more qualified, for instance, financial bookkeeping. However, as the leader of the community the priest cannot shun the responsibilities that go with leadership.

To properly understand the role of priest as the leader in the parish, one must understand the origin of the priest as pastor of a parish community. In the New Testament, the terms *episcopoi* (bishop) and *presbyter* (today’s priest) were interchangeable. As the Church developed the bishop became the one who presided over the community and the presbyters served as advisors to the bishop. The bishop became the one who presided over the Eucharist. It is only after the end of persecution of Christians following the Edict of Milan that presbyters became priests who presided at the Eucharist in the individual parishes. The bishop remained the one who had primary responsibility for the care of the people. The priest/presbyter leads the parish on behalf of the bishop. So, today when we speak of the priest as the one leading the

community, we must realize that he does so on behalf of the bishop.^[2] It is in this sense that the priest helps form a bond between the parish and the wider church.

It is also important to realize that when I speak of the role of priest as leader, the leadership of the community most properly refers to the role of *pastor*. After ordination, I will most likely be assigned as a parochial vicar under another pastor. As a parochial vicar, I will lead at the liturgies where I preside and will fulfill some leadership responsibilities in the parish but the pastor will be the leader of the community as a whole under the bishop.

In the homily, the priest teaches. I hope one of the focal points of my own priestly ministry will include teaching that begins with the homily. However, it does not end there. The homily needs to call people to want to learn more about their faith. For me, I wish to extend the teaching in my ministry to include adult faith formation. I do not speak of classroom teaching here but parish gatherings with parishioners who have an interest in learning more about putting their faith into practice such as issues of morals and biomedical ethics. This ministry begins with the homily to call forth the people but it does not end there.

In celebrating the Eucharist, the priest acts *in persona Christi* but the ministry of priest involves bringing Christ's presence to the people in all the sacraments and in the way we act towards the people in all things. For instance, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation the priest is not simply one who offers the words of absolution. The priest must be an expression of Christ's love. It is the role of the priest to act as a reconciler within the Sacrament of Reconciliation and in all encounters with people, showing them God loves them and always wishes to be in full relationship with us. The priest serves as reconciler outside the sacraments guiding people to be able and willing to work together.

The priest is one who offers healing, most profoundly in both the Sacraments of Reconciliation (healing our relationships) and in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, offering the healing power of God's grace. We pray for physical healing but what we are most about is spiritually healing and helping people come to terms with the events and things of our lives.

Offering the presence of Christ to the people involves more than "popping in and popping out" for a sacrament. It requires listening. It requires sharing with the person. It is loving the person. In the Gospels, Jesus did not always spend extended periods of time with those he ministered to but he did make them feel loved. I will not have time to get to know every parishioner personally. Without a doubt, I will learn the names of only a fraction of them. Yet, I can still strive to attune myself to their needs by listening to those I encounter in a way they helps them to understand that they are important, that they are God's children and are loved by God and by me.

Last is the question of availability. For me, being a priest is a 24/7 role. It is not a job. It is a way of living but being 24/7 does not mean that I never take a day off or that I never say no. That would burn me out at the least and let me to an early grave at the worst. 24/7 means being available when I can but taking time for myself to keep myself healthy. 24/7 means living what I do rather than just fulfilling a role.

As a priest, I look forward to celebrating the sacraments, most especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation. I also look forward to teach the people, helping them to build bridges between their faith and their lives in this world. Christ offers us his love. May I be a minister of that love.

[1] Of course, the priest-presider does not do this alone but working together with musicians, servers, lectors, Ministers of Communion, and the people of God.

[2] This is a brief summary of a paper I wrote on the historical development of the relationship between bishop and priests, "Bishops And Priests: A Changing Relationship," written for TRS 641B – Eucharist and Ordained Ministries, professor Rev. Paul McPartlan, December 1, 2006.