

Priests' Lives

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On June 2, I ordained two men to the transitional diaconate and two to the priesthood. In the words that follow, I want to remind us of who (not what) a man becomes in priesthood, and how he fits into the ministry of the diocese. Then I offer a few thoughts about his new relationship to the Eucharist, the Word, to service and to suffering.

You might have noticed that last week's column was a repeat. That was a timely accident. This week I return to some of the same themes. And since the seminarian appeal is in progress, it helps us all to reflect on what is entailed in the call to diocesan priesthood.

Again this week I point to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), and to numbers 1533 through 1600. These 16 pages underline the graces and interrelated duties of bishops, priests and deacons. Each level of ordained ministry is part of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. What follows is mainly about diocesan priesthood, but most applies to our priests who are Precious Blood Missionaries or Dominican friars.

While Church teaching is clear about the reality of our shared baptismal priesthood, ordination consecrates a man to a priesthood that is different in kind, not only in degree. It has permanent character, as do baptism and confirmation. Its privileges and obligations may be dispensed or suspended, but one always remains a priest.

Diocesan priests do not so much "have" priesthood as they participate in priesthood with their bishop and brother priests. It is this presbyterium that leads and serves the people under the direction of the bishop. Priests are the bishops' "prudent co-workers." Those of you who have participated at the annual Chrism Mass witness this connection in the renewal of priestly promises.

A careful reading of the CCC reveals the tremendous dignity of the ordained priesthood. While bishops exercise a different level of authority, it is incorrect to say that other men are "only priests." When one recognizes that priests and bishops act "in the person of Christ" and share in his priesthood, and at Mass make present Christ's one sacrifice, we all are directed to Christ himself. We teach this while at the same time recognizing that the human ministers are not preserved from human weaknesses.

The whole of priestly ministry draws its strength from the sacrifice of the Mass. It takes a while for a man to adjust to this felt reality. Praying publicly is one thing, presiding at Eucharistic celebrations is another.

Knowing God's word and preaching the Gospel are also at the heart of priestly ministry. The Liturgy of the Word is an encouragement not only to the assembly of the faithful, but to the priest himself. By immersing himself in this aspect of his ministry, God's grace reaches out to him. Service. Our diocesan priests are ordained first for the service of the diocese as a whole, and then as leaders in individual parishes. A few men serve specialized ministries as chaplains or canon lawyers, but each serves the needs of the diocese. Priest assignments are given in this light, and sometimes changed in order to build a man's capacity for future leadership, or to make an allowance for health or age. While we all desire "the right match" of priests and parishes, there are more variables than you might imagine. I consult with a "personnel board" of priests over many months.

During the past 12 months, it has become apparent that we are getting stretched thin, especially when trying to find "supply priests" when a pastor gets sick or takes a vacation. Later this year, I hope to have some graphic representations about the facts that are impacting our ministries. ("Date driven" decisions are only part of our reality, but they cannot be discounted.) Every bishop

here has had to deal with growth and change, and sharing our realities with priests and parishes is a work in progress.

Lastly, the priest daily participates in the dying and rising of Christ especially as he encounters the sufferings of his people. Seamus Heaney's poem "The Biretta" depicts a type of sadness that grace helps a priest to withstand. It is part of the calling to be with those who are suffering and help them unite their suffering with Christ's. As Pope Francis points out, there is suffering from loss, death and deprivation. He also acknowledges suffering in the "existential margins" when things don't seem to make sense or offer hope. Or where the truth about things is difficult to find or defend.

Please pray for priests in each of these four areas. Our men, as do we all, continually return to Jesus as the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). We do this so that we can be who, not just what, the Lord calls us to be.