

Homily: July 25-26, 2015

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

The Future of the Priesthood

Forty-three years ago I was about to be ordained with my five classmates. Our class was smaller by half than preceding classes of seminarians, which had numbered from over a dozen into the twenties each year. We thought that our small size flagged an issue that diocesan leaders should address, so together we tried to start a conversation about the shrinking numbers of priests for the future. We didn't get anywhere.

About five years later there was a meeting called for all the priests of the diocese, on some topic I can't remember. I thought this was an opportunity to spark a conversation so I got some statistics from the seminary and the diocese about the numbers and ages of priests and seminarians and did a little actuarial study of what the priesthood would look like in the future, given then current trends of ordination, death, and the like. I ran off several dozen copies on a mimeograph machine (remember those?), and at the priests' meeting gave it to anyone interested. Quite a few priests took a copy, and there was some informal discussion – but again the topic went nowhere.

Fast forward to yesterday. Just before going into the church to hear confessions I got a call from Fr. Gabriel, who is in Ghana on vacation visiting his family. His mother had just passed away and, Fr. Gabriel told me, the funeral will be on August 7 – so he won't be home on August 1 as expected, but about ten days later. Fr. John is leaving Thursday to go back to work in his diocese in India. Fr. Gius will be away on his own vacation beginning tomorrow. So from this Thursday until mid-August Our Lady of Grace will be a one-priest parish: me. There are no other priests to be found – none. The future priest shortage has, at least here and for two weeks, arrived.

I tell you this not on my account: I'll manage for two weeks. This is about the church you – if you're a few decades younger than I – and your children and grandchildren will live in. I'll have hung up my spurs in a decade or two, but what we hear in today's Gospel – Jesus' desire to feed with the Eucharist those who are hungry – will still be central to that Gospel message. Our Lady of Grace may be a one-priest parish for a few weeks this August, but some day not too far in the future it will be a one-priest parish for good. How will that hunger be fed?

A few years ago I was at a national conference and, when my seminar was finished, I sat in on a discussion among some diocesan leaders from across the country. One said something I carried home. He said that the church's major problem in this country is its "seeming inevitability": that people presume that the church will always be there when they need it.

So far as priests are concerned, that's no longer true. There are right now in this country over 3400 parishes with no resident priest to serve the people. If they have a weekly Eucharist, it's celebrated by a priest who rides in before Mass from another parish and rides out again after Mass to serve yet somewhere else. Or they may not have Mass at all except on special occasions.

Without the Eucharist there is, simply put, no Catholic church. Parishes may turn into charitable agencies or social clubs, but without the Sacraments the Church ceases to exist. And that is the direction we're headed.

So what's the path out? Here's one key part.

It happens sometimes – and may well happen during the next two weeks – that I have to tell someone that we can't do what they want because there's no priest available. Most times people are understanding, but occasionally someone gets nasty and wants what they want when they want it. (That's the "inevitability" of the church.) At those moments I want to say (although I don't), "Do you have any male children or grandchildren or nephews? How often did you encourage them to consider becoming a priest? If you didn't, where do you think priests come from? Or is that always somebody else's problem?" (As some of you suspected all along, I'm a lot less virtuous than I may at times appear....)

Having priests for the future is every Catholic's job. It's my job, and that of other priests today, to show that this vocation can be a happy and fulfilling way to live. It's your job, especially with your children, grandchildren, and nephews, to raise the possibility with young people. And it's everyone's job to consider the way we talk about the priesthood and about priests. I will grant you that the past dozen years of scandalous behavior by a few priests and bishops may be difficult to see past. But the priesthood will only be sustained and reformed if the most talented of the next generation hear an invitation, consider a possibility, and accept God's call should it be given to them.

This is the way I see it: On a level playing-field, priesthood can hold its own with other potential life-paths for talented young Catholic men: law, medicine, engineering, business... and any of the rest. But we need to ensure that the playing-field is level: Not that other possible choices are encouraged, and priesthood is ignored or worse. Just because churchgoing Catholics are often closer to the priesthood than to these other life-paths, we may know the flaws in priests and in the organization better than we know the problems that beset other career paths, and so be wary of recommending it. But as someone who has something of an insider's knowledge of professional psychology, I can tell you that there are as many messes – individual and organizational – in that field as there are in the clergy. It's just that outsiders rarely see them. All boats leak.

So the task that falls on all of us is to be fair. By faith we trust God is not abandoning the Eucharist, and is still calling young men to be priests. Church leaders have their job to do, giving a more sensible structure to this way of life. But we also have ours, and it's not only to pray for vocations. We need to see that every young Catholic man, especially the most talented, is presented with a fair picture of what it would mean to choose to become a priest. And any such person has to know that there will be support for that choice and way of life.

Let me end on a personal note: I've been watching this crisis build for the forty-three years I've been a priest. Understandably, awareness among lay people has been growing more slowly. Having only one priest here for the next two weeks isn't in itself, any crisis: We'll get through it in a way most of you will hardly notice. But it might drive the point home that encouraging and supporting the next generation of potential priests who will serve in our parishes is everybody's job. Whenever you want the services of a priest, from now on ask yourself, "What have I done to encourage a new generation of priests? If I don't do it, where will priests come

from? Who will provide the Eucharist for my children and grandchildren?" And if this job is not done and done well, one-priest parishes – and then no-priest parishes – will dot the landscape; and the hungers Jesus wants to feed in coming generations will remain.