
THE NATURE OF THE PRIESTHOOD

A PERSONAL REFLECTION: BR NATHAN-JAMES SSF [DARRYL JAMES HARRIS]

Introduction

The Priesthood is an extension of a Christian's Baptismal vows. They have the same responsibility to live their lives as disciples of Christ as every Christian. A priest, however, has accepted a call to a particular way of life as a member of the Body of Christ; just as Jesus' early disciples accepted his call to leave their life and follow him. A priest's life is a vocation, not simply a job. It is a call from God, heard by the person, and the community in which they live, to take on responsibility for gathering, teaching, encouraging and nurturing the people of God.

Called to be a Disciple of Christ

Br Giles, the visionary behind the early development of what would become the Society of St Francis, stated that *life as a friar was only a 'fuller' living out of a Christian's Baptismal vows*; to live our lives in imitation of Christ. Ordained ministry within the Church has intrinsically the same endeavour. Whether one is a Deacon, Priest or Bishop they are fundamentally called to live as disciples of Christ; to *love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with your mind and with all your strength... to love your neighbour as yourself (Mk 12:30-31)*, to serve the least among us (*Mt 25:31-46*), to *worship the Father in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23)* and to *eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood (Jn 6:53)*. This is the calling, the responsibility, of all the Baptised, as members of the Body of Christ, to be the witness of God in the world; for as it has been said *today you may be the only Gospel anyone reads (unknown)*. Or as St Francis urged *the brothers should preach always and if necessary use words (St Francis of Assisi)*.

Called to a Vocation

From the time of his early ministry Jesus gathered around him those he called to follow him (*Mt 3:18-22*). He taught them to serve the least among us (*Mt 25:31-46*). He sent them out *to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Lk 9:1-6)*. After his death Jesus appeared to his disciples and commissioned them to *... go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Mt 28:16-20)*. Many *... devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42)*. As the community of believers increased concern was raised that some members were being neglected. Thus, some were chosen to minister to the needs of the community while others continued to *give [their] attention to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:1-6)*. Similarly, as the Church grew it became necessary to identify and appoint different persons to different roles and functions according to their gifts and talents (*1 Cor 12:12-31*).

Called to Gather the people of God.

The Priest is called to gather the Body of Christ in prayer and the administration of the Sacraments. Prayer is the fundamental basis of Christian life. It is through prayer that we come into communion with God. In prayer we receive and respond the God's Word. Through prayer we allow God's Word to become a part of us and to change us so that we can be a living example of God's Word in the world. As witnesses to God's Word we seek build up the Body of Christ, to make a present reality the Kingdom of God on earth. The priest therefore must devote time to personal and corporate prayer; for this is the place which feeds and nourishes them to do God's work. The priest must also then create a space for the Body of Christ to meet in prayer, so that they too may enter into communion with God.

The Sacraments of the Church are the way in which we experience the living presence of Christ. In Baptism we experience the death and resurrection of Christ as candidates are die to their old life and are reborn in the life of Christ. In the Eucharist we experience presence of Christ in his Body and Blood. When we partake of the elements join with Christ, remembering the gift of life given to us by God through Christ. Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation we experience the mercy and love of God. We have opportunity to reaffirm our relationship with God in Christ. We bring to Christ those things which separate us from our relationship with God and restore us in a renewed sense of relationship with God. In the Sacrament of Anointing we experience the healing power of God. The Body of Christ are assured of God's being with them in their suffering and God's desire to bring healing and wholeness to their lives. In the Sacrament of marriage we experience the presence of God in the joining of two people. We are reminded of God's desire for us not to live alone but to live as members of a family.

The priest is then charged with administering the Sacraments so that we might have outward signs of God's Grace and presence in our lives. They must make every opportunity available for the people of God to have access to the Sacraments.

Called to Teach the people of God.

The priest is called to teach the people of God. The priest must be faithful to the Word of God and the teachings of the Church, and the must be ever ready to oppose all that is against God and the Church. The priest must be the vehicle by which the word of God is read and interpreted to the people of God. They are to preach at gatherings of the faithful, and to create opportunities for the faithful to learn more about the Word of God. They are to instruct the faithful in the traditions and mysteries of the Church; by instructing and preparing candidates for Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, and Marriage.

Called to encourage the people of God.

The priest is called to encourage the people of God. The priest must help members of the Body of Christ to live their lives as Disciples of Christ, to help them fulfil their Baptismal vows and to discover and fulfil God's Will for them in their lives. There for priest must create opportunities for people to identify and develop their own particular gifts and talents and to encourage them to develop their own ministries within the Church. The priest then is the leader of the household of God, helping each member to identify and contribute fully to the work of the household.

Called to nurture the people of God.

The priest is called to nurture the people of God. The priest is charged with building up the Body of Christ. They therefore must be ever mindful of the pastoral needs of the community. They are charged with the care of the spiritual needs of the members of the Church through pastoral visiting and spiritual guidance, companionship and mentoring. The priest meets people in their hour of need, in illness, death, in times of difficulty and offers comfort through Word and Sacrament. As well the priest uses parish resources wisely to help those who come in need.