

The Challenge of a Priestly People

On June 19, 2009, Pope Benedict inaugurated a Jubilee Year for Priests. In the letter inaugurating the year Pope Benedict wrote, “This year is meant to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world.”

Clearly, it is a year intended for the ordained priests and it is a year meant for us to deepen our commitment to interior renewal in order that we might give effective witness to the Gospel in the world of today.

As we look at this challenge one of the first things that needs to be said is that this type of interior renewal calls for the involvement of everyone. As priests we need your help, the help of the non-ordained, the priestly people. A very basic attitude that we need to cultivate is that we are on the same faith journey as are those to whom we are called to minister. The same beatitudes challenge us, the same weaknesses tempt us. We cannot pretend to some sort of achieved state of holiness conferred on us by our call to ministry. Our faith is lived in the face of questions and doubts. We walk the same way, challenged by the same Jesus who called himself the Way.

Looking at this more specifically in the eyes of the ordained, there are expectations of us and these could be expressed in four main areas: proclaiming the Word, presiding at liturgy, guiding persons in their spiritual lives and leading the Christian community on its journey of faith.

- a) **Proclaiming the Word:** The first thing a community expects is that we priests engaged them (involve them) with the Word of God. We are to “break open” the Word. What is very clear is that we can’t “break” this bread without having first tasted what it has to offer ourselves. AS preachers we are not merely telling the story like a parent telling a bedtime story to a child. As servants of the Word we must also be engaged as one of the participants in the story. To do this we must allow ourselves to experience what the people are going through. For us as preachers Sacred Scripture must not be simply a book of recipes for soothing or moral guidance; the words must burn, sting, confound, convict as much as they inform. One consequence of this is that a homily should only rarely, if ever, contain the word “you”. The preacher, who is priest, must stand within the circle of those addressed. A homily should be a “we” experience: the anguish of David – “You are the man” – the pain of Peter – “Do you love me” – the joy of the beloved disciple – “It is the Lord”.
- b) **Presiding at Liturgy:** Liturgy is the primary place where the priest joins the life of the faithful to the ongoing story of God’s faithfulness. What needs to be kept in mind here is that it is not the ordained minister who celebrates but the gathered faith community. The community of the holy priesthood celebrates as a single body. The minister leads by calling the Spirit of prayer from the heart of the congregation. If I preside in such a way as to communicate that the laity are merely in attendance at my act of making Jesus really present I am clouding the profound truth of the Risen Lord’s presence in the lives and gathering of the priestly people.

Central to this, one might say even essential to this, is that the community has a right to ask that the liturgical experience be one of prayer. This is not saying prayers or reciting the canon but rather praying. The community will be challenged to enter into an act of common prayer to the extent that the leader is actually engaged in prayer, standing in the presence of the Lord in the present and at that moment. As presider I am about to lead this community into the presence of our common Father with the offering of Jesus in my hands. “The very act of celebrating sacraments is most effective in making people ready to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly and to practice charity”.

Note: It has been said that the three most important things for effective liturgy is the presider, the homily and the music.

- c) **Guiding in Matters of Spirit:** People look for one with the ability to accompany them as individuals as they attempt to discover the workings of the Spirit in their lives. To be trusted to provide spiritual guidance in the complex world faced by today’s adults requires a demonstrated high level of sophistication. Spiritual guidance requires finely honed sensitivities. It is not a question of teaching or giving a pat answer or providing flowers. Listening skills are needed and these require training a mentoring of a high order; a high degree of discernment is needed. Wise priests will recognize that some lay members have greater ability to companion others in the Spirit than they do. Priestly pastors will not be threatened by the gifts of others but will rather give thanks for them and ensure they are well used.
- d) **Leading the Faith Community:** The community looks for leadership on the part of the ordained. As it requires an extraordinary amount of skill to lead a community what is needed is the ability to recognize, respect and call forth the skills of others. In order for this to be a reality there must be much listening and good, honest communication. On the deepest level the prime requirements of leadership is the commitment to stay at the table with the community. Both the ordained leader and the members of the priestly community are called to share their experience together in honesty, whether this be the joy of the Lord’s mercy and freedom or the pain of our human disappointment, breakdowns and sin. A good leader will create forums of all sorts at which the competing sounds will be brought together. The resulting sound can vary. What is really important is that what is really going on is genuine and named for what it is and that all persons are treated as adults.

When one looks at all the expectations that the priestly people have of us there is one image that surfaces and it is the very biblical image of God caring for God’s people, that is, the image of the Good Shepherd.

The main virtue of the Good Shepherd is that of love for the sheep. The element that cannot be expected when the Church calls members to pastoral service - and yet it is the key to all the rest and is the leaven which turns raw dough into the miracle of bread – and that is love. In the end we are always brought back to the challenge of the Gospel. It is the challenge of love. A clergy that loves the people they serve and a people who love the ministers they have called forth from their midst will not be seduced by any poisonous fruit. Lovers do not abuse the powers entrusted to them by the beloved. As we will see, this is mutual.

As we look at the expectations that are made of us we can ask what is it that we need to grow in, in order to deepen our commitment to interior renewal. There are gifts we need to ask of you, the priestly people.

1. The Lord speaks to us equally through the Word of Sacred Scripture and the word on the street. What is required is that priestly people make every effort to come to a deeper appreciation and understanding of the Word, the faith journey implied in the acceptance of baptism. What is also required is the serious discipline of inquiry into the spiritual meaning of the events we have come to regard as merely secular.
2. In common worship the ordained are challenged to bring their priestly, baptismal reality to worship, to stand in prayer as we lead the priestly people, so the priestly people are called to that same kind of personal presence in the liturgy. There is a single human communication system in play. The whole community is the actor in dialogue and exchange of gifts with the Lord. This means that there are to be no spectators at the liturgy. We are called to full and active participation. Either the presider and the congregation feed off the signals coming from each other, or the hunger in the one is only frustrated by the dry response of the other. It works both ways.
3. Growth in spiritual maturity: It is important to speak up, claim one's personhood, and name one's experience even where the effort might prove some discomfort. Mature adults know how to stay at the table and show respect without backing down. As we desire to grow spiritually we also need to take some initiatives, to seek out resources. Spiritual growth is like every other form of growth: it costs, personally, and we need to be willing and ready to pay the price.
4. Active participation in the faith community: "God has willed to make women and men holy and to save them not as individuals without any bone between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness" (LG#9). This tells us that we are called to participate actively in the communal journey to our Lord. We are mutually responsible to each other for the life of our faith community, both clergy and laity.

As we saw when reflecting on the ministry of the ordained priesthood, the heart of the matter is love. So it is with the priestly people. Beneath all the other challenges facing the laity - if you are to make your distinctive contribution to the life and growth of the Church - lies the call to love those who have been called to serve as pastors. This love is not some romanticized warm feeling, but a strong love with all of its demands and challenges; it is a love which reaches out to us as wounded healers and moves the community forward together.

My dear collaborators in mission and ministry, coworkers in the vineyard of the Lord: leadership and discipleship are mutual co-creating realities. A true Church will cost us all. But it promises the highest fulfillment. As St. Paul puts it: "May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory ... give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him. May the eyes of our hearts be enlightened that we may know what is the great hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of his glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe" (Ephesians 1:17-19).

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