

I am Ready and Willing

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Mary pondered and treasured all these things in her heart.

As we gather here at the magnificent Mount St. Alphonsus Chapel, a site where hundreds of young Redemptorists, including many of us, had their lives transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the ancient ritual of the laying on of hands, and as the Year of the Priest declared by Holy Father Benedict XVI comes to an end, we ponder and treasure, as did Mary, the mother of all priests, the mystery of the priesthood in the Church, and in our own living out of our vocations as Redemptorist priests.

I ponder and treasure one of the most priestly days of my life. I had volunteered, as did many confreres, to help at Ground Zero, after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. I served a day as a chaplain at the temporary morgue that had been set up. Throughout the day, red bags were brought into the rooms by the recovery workers. These bags contained the human remains of some of the victims.

The bags were reverently placed on a table, an officer in the fire department would say, "Hats off," and turn to me and say "Father." For a minute or two I would lead the men and women in prayers over the deceased. At first I tried to be very ecumenical, not saying any particularly Catholic prayers. I noticed though that almost all the workers would make a sign of the cross after I finished the prayer, so I became increasingly Catholic as the day went on.

What was I there for? Certainly, it was to pray for these yet unidentified souls whose bodies had been torn apart by that day of terrorism. It was to pray to comfort and support the heroic rescue workers who were laboring so tirelessly to recover these sacred remains. There was still something more. God was present in this place of death and darkness. He was present in the dedication of the workers, in the longing of the families to bury their beloved with proper dignity, and in the mystery of the priesthood. I stood there in the name of Jesus Christ.

When I was first ordained, I recall going to visit a patient at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. I had been ordained less than two months. I walked into an intensive care room where a young woman rushed over to me, embraced me, and said, "Thank God you're here." She did not know my name nor I hers. She asked me to pray for her father who was dying. I anointed the unconscious man and prayed over him and with his daughter. She told me she had just arrived from Los Angeles and that she knew not a soul in New York. For her, this young priest was the Church, was the presence of God. Pondering and treasuring.

Perhaps, the hardest loss in my life was the rather sudden death of my sister Gerry in her mid-forties. It was my first real encounter with the loss of a member of my immediate

family. My parents, my sister Maryanne, and I were absolutely devastated. The pain of the grief was actually physical; it hurt so much. Although I celebrated the funeral Mass, Father John McGowan preached a powerful sermon on the Lord of the Dance. My sister Gerry had been an Irish step-dancer. His words were healing. His words comforted all my family. His words touched my struggling faith. I needed a priest and I felt the grace of the priesthood in his ministry to my family and to me over those dark days.

A cousin of mine called and asked me to celebrate Mass at his new bar and restaurant. It had been opened for a year and he wanted to celebrate and thank all the people who helped him open and run the pub. I was happy to do so. I think of Frank O'Rourke who often says that the only pastoral experience I have is doing weddings and baptisms for my family. It can be a full-time job. So, there we were, 50 or so family crowded into the dining hall. I had set up one of the dinner tables as my altar.

I noticed there was man taking pictures throughout the Mass. He was from the local newspaper. I had the thought that the bishop might not be thrilled to read about this liturgy in the local tavern. He might want to notify my Provincial, which would have made for an awkward conversation. But this was a Mass to bless a holy place. It was through this establishment that my cousin was able to provide so beautifully for his large family. His family had poured their time and energy into creating this special space. If Jesus could turn water into wine at a wedding feast, it was good for a priest to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ in the midst of bar stools and kegs of beer, family and friends. Pondering and treasuring.

As priests we often taste the hundred fold that our Lord spoke of. Sometimes, when I am driving home from a mission or even from helping out in a local parish, a feeling comes over me about how blessed I am to be a priest, to celebrate Mass and be part of a faith-filled community, to preach his Word. Sometimes, when hearing a confession, and sensing the peace of Christ descending on someone who has carried the heavy burden of sin for many years, it is to taste the goodness of God. As you journeyed with someone over a year or two in an RCIA program, as you brought Communion to a sick parishioner, as you distributed First Holy Communions, you know of what I speak. How blessed are the feet of those who bring good news.

Yet, for most of us who count our jubilee years by not by years but decades, the world that we were ordained into has changed in ways that none of us could have ever imagined. When we prostrated ourselves on the sanctuary floor in the Mount St. Alphonsus Chapel 40 or 50 years ago, could we have imagined what our lives would be like and what changes we would experience in the world, in the Catholic Church, in the priesthood, and in our own lives?

When I was assigned to Holy Redeemer College in Washington, I would try to get home every couple of months to see my mother as she aged. When I would be home on a Sunday, I would walk over to OLPH and ask whatever confrere had the Mass if I could join them to concelebrate. Most often the Eucharistic ministers had been assigned so at communion time, rather than asking one of them to step aside, I would sit down and not

distribute Holy Communion. After Mass, I found out that my mother told my sister, “I feel bad for Pat. All those years he studied to be a priest, and now the women are taking over his job. I hope he does not leave the priesthood.” Mothers always protect their sons!

It has not always been easy to be a priest over the last 50 years or so. Some of you first learned to say Mass in Latin and had to deal with the confusion and resentment that Vatican II brought to some Catholics when the liturgy changed to the vernacular. I notice that when I write jubilee cards, I write more cards to those ordained 50 years than those ordained 25 years. The number of priests in the Redemptorists and in the United States has been in rapid decline. We wonder who will take our places. We have seen men with whom we shared so much of life and ministry leave the active priesthood.

Our Church, and each one of us, has been terribly hurt by the clergy sex abuse scandal. We wonder if people suspect us of being abusers and do they trust us with their children. This pain hurts us to the core our being. We are the men in the middle. We love the pope and the bishops, but sometimes what they say and teach seems so very remote to our people.

We are the men who have to try to live with the very real day-to-day struggles of our people and the not always clear theology of our times. We live in a highly secularized and consumer world that not only affects our people, but also can seduce us. I used to give many youth retreats. Today, I find myself afraid to speak to teenagers because I feel they will judge me as totally irrelevant. More and more we hear people say, “I am spiritual but I am not religious.” The media pokes fun at priests and often portrays them as silly men.

The days of being moved to the head of the line at Mama Leone’s and Radio City are over; I think we would say that is a good thing since we do not want to be seen as better than the people we serve. Yet, we wonder if modern society sees us as unnecessary. Might we say that our confidence in the priesthood has been shaken since those days when the oils were placed upon our hands? We sometimes feel like Father McKenzie in the Beatles song “Eleanor Rigby:”

*Father McKenzie writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear
No one comes near.*

*Look at him working. Darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there
What does he care?*

I have always found this scene from the 1973 movie “The Exorcist” very telling. Chris MacNeil, played by Ellen Burstyn, is the mother of Regan whom she is beginning to believe is possessed by the devil. She has taken her to all sorts of doctors and hospitals and found no answers.

Father Karras, played by Jason Miller, is a Harvard trained Jesuit psychiatrist, who is struggling in his own faith. Chris approaches Father Karras as he completes a jog around the Georgetown track. William Peter Blatty, the author of the novel “The Exorcist” writes,

Chris: How do you go about getting an exorcism?

Karras: I beg your pardon? Well, the first thing — I'd have to get into a time machine and get back to the 16th century...Well, it just doesn't happen anymore, Mrs. MacNeil...since we learned about mental illness, paranoia, schizophrenia...Since the day I joined the Jesuits, I've never met one priest who has performed an exorcism. Not one.

Chris: Someone very close to me is probably possessed and needs an exorcism. Father Karras, it's my little girl.

Karras: The Catholic Church insists on proof that the devil is really in a person. Then that's all the more reason to forget about exorcism...To begin with, it could make things worse. Secondly, the church before it approves an exorcism conducts an investigation to see if it's warranted. That takes time...I need church approval and that's rarely given. I will see her as a psychiatrist.

Chris: Oh, not a psychiatrist. She needs a priest. She's already seen every damn psychiatrist in the world and they sent me to you. Now you're gonna send me back to them? My God! Won't somebody help me? Can't you help her, just help her?

I am not suggesting the world needs more priests to become exorcists. I love this scene because Chris MacNeil is begging for a priest. She needs a priest. The priest, Father Karras, offers a good thing: psychiatry. Chris screams at him: I need a priest!

I believe countless people in our world today are like Chris MacNeil: they are screaming, “I need a priest!” And I wonder if some of us are so struggling with our confidence in the priesthood that we do not hear the scream or appreciate how desperately needed is our ministry.

We are the men called to bring to our hungry world the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are the men called to preach the Word of God to a longing, confused society that has begun to reject the empty words of so many false prophets who made empty promises that cannot be delivered.

We are to bless and baptize by pouring living water on a thirsty world.

With those who are sick and afraid, we are to pour out the healing oil of Christ who sweated blood in Gethsemane.

We are to confirm in faith those who share the same human struggle to believe as do we.

We are to celebrate love, witness it, bless it, support it.

We are to lift those who bear the heavy burden of sin, who are on the edge of despair, who cannot see the face of the loving God or hear his voice.

Where there are those who have no voice, we are to speak for them.

When we are helpless to relieve the pain of the world, we pray and stand with the suffering.

Where there is death, we proclaim life.

My brothers, God's people, all his people, so need the touch he can bring to his world through the priesthood he instituted 2,000 years ago.

My brothers, as the year of the priests closes, join with our Mother Mary in pondering and treasuring the wonders and mystery of God's grace in your life. We pray that we, who years ago stepped forward when our name was called for ordination and proclaimed that we were ready and willing, may follow Mary our Mother who said she was ready and willing at the time of the Visitation.

I will end with a prayer that many of the older men may have on had on their ordination cards. It captures some of the mystery and awe of the priesthood:

“To live in the midst of the world
With no desire for its pleasure
To be a member of every family yet belonging to none...
To share all sufferings; to penetrate all secrets;
To heal all wounds...
To daily go from men to God to offer Him their petitions...
To return from God to men to offer them His hope...
To have a heart of fire for charity
A heart of bronze for chastity.
To bless and be blest forever, O God,
What a life and it is yours,
O Priest of Jesus Christ!”
Father Henri Dominique Lacordaire O.P.