

Priests: Men of Word, Sacrament & Invitation

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“**I**n the beginning... when God made the heavens and the earth...” (Gen. 1:1) the Word was... and we have come to know and understand this from the Prologue in John’s Gospel. The power of the Word of God has been the subject of many writings and theological reflections. In the Old Testament we see the power of God’s Word in making the heavens and the earth and all they contained. Even after creation, the power of God’s word and commands were seen and felt by the people of Israel. When God said to Abraham, “I will make you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2), he used the verb, “make,” a creative act, suggesting to the reader of sacred Scripture that something wonderful would occur. The power of God’s word and invitation is the basis of this article. This reflection is an attempt to identify the priestly gift of invitation and to witness the impact a priest has when he invites a man to consider the vocation of priesthood.

We profess that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” This Word of the Father is the very same Word who spoke, as man, a creative word to Simon and Andrew when he said, “I will make you fishers of men.” In the men of the New Testament and in the lives of priests today, we are able to see the influence of Christ’s call. That call continues to touch the hearts of men who may be considering leaving everything to follow Him.

As He passed by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Then they abandoned their nets and followed him. He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)

The Church Fathers have commented on the power that was contained in the invitation presented to the apostles. St. Augustine states:

He who made His disciples fishers of men enclosed within His nets every kind of authority.¹

And St. John Chrysostom states:

*To so great a promise they trusted, and believed that they should catch others by those same words by which themselves had been caught.*²

The powerful gift of that invitation to Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow Jesus would forever be a part of their life, and then also this gift would be transferred to the next generation of men who would radically follow Jesus by also leaving everything behind.

What the apostles received from Christ, they passed on to the others who were called to take their place. They followed the Lord's command: "...the gift you have received, give as a gift." (Matthew 10:8) The gifts and abilities given by God to the first apostles were then handed on to other men by the laying on of hands through the gift of the Holy Spirit. At ordination, a priest receives the ability and power to celebrate the Eucharist. He is able to forgive sins in the Sacrament of Penance. He has the responsibility and authority to proclaim the good news. Priests have a share in the rich gift of apostolic succession. The priestly gift of invitation carries with it the obligation of inviting others.

The role of the priest is to bring forth these great gifts given by Christ – the gift of His Body and Blood; the gift of forgiveness; the power of the Word, etc. At the same time, we should not exclude the great gift priests have in inviting men to consider the priesthood, to leave everything behind in order to follow Jesus. As the priest speaks and acts in the name of Christ when he says the words of Consecration "this is my Body, this is my Blood", the priest also serves in the person of Christ as he forgives sins, "I absolve you..." So too does the priest have the powerful gift of speaking *in persona Christi* in inviting men to consider priesthood: "Come, follow me..." In doing so, it is hoped that this man, upon his ordination, would in turn become yet another fisher of men.

The sacrament of Holy Orders communicates a "sacred power" which is none other than that of Christ. The exercise of this authority must therefore be measured against the model of Christ. (CCC, #1551)

When Jesus said, "I will make you fishers of men", He clearly desired a great number of followers - a strong catch, a bountiful catch, and from those caught, he anticipated that they would take on the task of catching others. Being fishers of men is a ministry, a life, a call – priests are fishers of men.

This gift, given through priesthood, too often goes unnoticed. The words of St. Paul contain a strong plea for the gift, which may remain just a glowing ember, to be rekindled – "Fan into flame the gift you received when I laid hands on you." (2 Tim. 1:6) For this reason, the Secretariat for Vocations and Priestly Formation of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is presenting the project: *Priestly Life and Vocation Summit: Fishers of Men*. This program gives priests within a presbyterate or

religious community a way to fan their gift ablaze so that the spark of a priestly vocation may touch the hearts of men who hear the words, “Come, follow me.”

In a USCCB survey of men ordained in 2003, 78% of the men ordained for the priesthood said that a priest invited them. Surveys in other years are equally impressive. Yet in 2001, a USCCB survey revealed that only 30% of priests in the United States (diocesan and religious) actively invite men to consider the priesthood. Recognizing the influential impact of a priest’s invitation, the Bishops’ Committee on Vocations and the Bishops’ Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry unanimously endorsed the *Priestly Life and Vocation Summit: Fishers of Men* project. Its purpose is simple and its theology sound. It is designed to encourage priests to fulfill the obligations of their call to invite men to consider the priesthood. This project reminds all priests of their ministry as fishers of men.

What inhibits priests from inviting young men to consider priesthood is a matter for speculation. During a recent diocesan clergy day workshop on the topic of priests and their role as inviter, priests were quick to offer a list of reasons why it is difficult. Some of the reasons include:

- Low morale in the presbyterate
- The fear of rejection
- The demands and hard work of being a priest
- The lack of support from others
- The recent clergy abuse scandals
- The fact that priests are too busy to think about adding a vocation program to our ministry

As mentioned, one of the reasons why priests do not actively invited is because they are too busy. The life of a priest is filled with day to day tasks that take up the majority of his attention. To add another task or responsibility may seem daunting. However, this was the same sentiment Peter had when Jesus asked him to cast his net again for a catch. Simon Peter answered the Lord by saying, “Master, we have worked hard all night... but at your command I will lower the nets.” (Luke 5:5) A priest’s response to the Lord could be similar to Peter’s – “You want me to do what? But, if you say so, Lord, I will do it.”

The priest wanting to be a successful fisher of men by inviting men to consider the priesthood could learn a few things from a skilled fisherman. A good fisherman must be patient. There are no quick results in inviting a man to consider the priesthood. It takes time mentoring and nurturing a vocation. The patience required to be an effective fisher of men is the same as being sower of seeds. The vocation to priesthood has to be cultivated.

Like a fisherman, there is a need for perseverance. Discouragement cannot prevail, priests are meant to extend the invitation on a regular basis. Like the fisherman, the one who endures is the one who gains a bountiful catch. It also takes courage to be a

fisherman. A Greek saying describes the fears, “My boat is so small and the sea is so large.” Priests cannot be afraid of rejection. A vocation to the priesthood is the work of the Lord. To extend the invitation for a man to pick up his cross and consider such a vocation is to invite him to live life in a fuller way – recognizing that priests are ordained to be men of word, sacrament and invitation.

A wise fisherman will keep out of sight. Many times his shadow on the water’s surface will be enough for the fish to flee. So too, the priest who desires to present the invitation to priesthood will not present himself as the image to follow, but rather point to Christ who is to be followed - the Eternal High Priest and Good Shepherd. The priest is not called to promote himself; rather he leads others to Jesus.

Like fishermen, priests should know the right moment. Fishermen know when it is best to lower the net. In the same way, priests should be aware of when their responsibility of being fishers of men is most fully exercised. For priests, the right time and sacred space for promoting a priestly vocation is at the celebration of the Eucharist.

In his encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II left a blueprint for promoting priestly vocations. He stated:

The centrality of the Eucharist in the life and ministry of priests is the basis of its centrality in the pastoral promotion of priestly vocations. It is in the Eucharist that prayer for vocations is most closely united to prayer of Christ the eternal high priest. At the same time, the diligence of priests in carrying out their Eucharistic ministry together with the conscious, active and fruitful participation of the faithful in the Eucharist, provides young men with a powerful example and incentive for responding generously to God’s call. Often, it is the example of a priest’s fervent pastoral charity, which the Lord uses to sow and to bring to fruition in a man’s heart the seed of the priestly calling. (Ecclesia de Eucharistia 31)

Prior to entering the seminary, the men ordained to the priesthood in 2005 reported active involvement in the celebration of the Eucharist. At least 60% of the priests ordained this year had been extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist; 68% were lectors and 76% were altar servers in their parishes. Many of our future priests share in the Eucharistic celebration demonstrating by action their desire to serve the Church. Such proximity to the Eucharist and to priestly ministry affords the Church a prime opportunity to extend the invitation for these men to consider the priesthood.

The wise and prudent pastor will invite a man; especially one whom he thinks has a vocation to the priesthood, to a higher level of participation in the celebration of the Mass. This could be as minimal as inviting him to bring up the offertory gifts, or asking him to serve Mass on a regular basis. Once he has proven himself to be diligent, serious and responsible, invite him to be a lector at Mass or even an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist. This way, it is the Lord of the Harvest who is working in his heart. Once a man engages in the various roles at Mass, many times he will look at the role of the priest

and begin asking himself whether he is called to such a vocation. Then the articulated invitation of the priest, given as gift to be given, may be heard: “Have you ever considered the priesthood yourself? Is Christ calling you?”

Priests today were called for today, for this particular time, for this particular stage in Church history. They answered God’s call in this lifetime. God, in his infinite wisdom, calls men to service for a particular mission. Priests are called to face all that this current time has to offer, both today’s joys and its many obstacles. Priests can easily think of the reasons why it may be difficult to invite a man—today’s social and economic climate, fears of rejection, picking up one’s cross is uncomfortable, or an unwillingness to add another task to the long list of set responsibilities. However, the fact is, it may never be easy. Christ told his disciples there would be difficulties. Priests are configured to Christ and at ordination willingly accepted the struggles of discipleship.

However, through the hardships lie the great graces of discipleship. Recently the USCCB conducted a survey of seminarians from North America asking what would facilitate a favorable response to consider the priesthood. One seminarian wrote:

Give young men an ideal of sacrifice and strength to strive after. He is not a mere celibate social worker. He is an alter-Christus who makes God present to the faithful by the ministration of the Sacraments and the example of his own life of prayer and sacrifice.

In conclusion, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the joyful task of being a fisher of men. In his homily at the Mass in which he received the Fisherman’s ring, he said:

There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him. The task of the shepherd, the task of the fisher of men, can often seem wearisome. But it is beautiful and wonderful, because it is truly a service to joy, to God’s joy which longs to break into the world.

¹ St. Augustine, *Sermones* 1.4.

² Cf., St. Thomas Aquinas' *catena aurea* on the Gospel of Matthew n. 4.137.