

Thoughts from the Second Floor Front

IV Sunday of Lent

March 31, 2019

Holy Orders – Part II

The third and fourth dimensions of priestly formation are Intellectual and Pastoral Formation. Intellectually the preparation is grounded in the study of philosophy then theology. Knowing philosophy aides in the exploration of theology. The philosophical and theological traditions of our Church have a long and powerful history. The gospel is an ideal that combines ideas and yet it is so much more than a matter of ideas. But one must understand ideas in order to competently preach the gospel. From Augustine to Anselm to Aquinas to Benedict. From Teresa of Avila to Edith Stein to Katherine Drexel to Elizabeth Johnson. These theologians, philosophers and religious have made significant contributions to the idea and ideal of the gospel throughout our tradition.

One does not have to be a member of the Mensa Society in order to be priest. However, anti-intellectualism, and its polar opposite, a tendency to over spiritualize matters, does not offer a strong support for priestly ministry. I heard once that St. Teresa of Avila was asked in her selection of a spiritual director what does she seek. Her response was something like: If I had to choose between a holy priest and an intelligent one; I'd pick the smart one every time. Teresa was the real deal.

I knew a priest who once joked (at the time I thought he was joking): "After ordination there are only two books I need: my breviary and my check book." Sadly, he went off the job within a few years after ordination. Evidently, he was only using one of those books. His house was built on sand.

Pastoral formation, while fourth on the list, is not without its importance. Afterall a priest is ordained to serve most commonly in a parish. All of us know that it is the life of a parish priest for which we were ordained. I had been in education for twenty-four years before being returned to pastoral work as a parish priest. When I became a pastor, I often called my former students and asked them questions about matters ranging from canonical procedures to sacramental preparations. Being back in a parish after having been in education for so long, I found the learning curve to be a wee bit steep for a while. Getting into parish work again wasn't like riding a bike.

Pastoral ministry requires a sharpened sense of the importance of interaction on a human level. Pope Francis famously remarked in a Holy Thursday Homily that the priest should have the stench of the sheep on him.

Those who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators, gradually become intermediaries, managers. We know the difference: the intermediary, the manager, "has already received his reward", and since he doesn't put his own skin and his own heart on the line, he never hears a warm, heartfelt word of thanks. This is precisely the reason for the dissatisfaction of some, who end up sad – sad priests - in some sense becoming collectors of antiques or novelties, instead of being shepherds living with "the odor of the sheep". This I ask you: be shepherds, with the "odor of the sheep"...

(Chrism Mass Homily, March 28, 2013)

More than twenty-five years ago a Catholic American writer offered this, much of which is, I believe, prophetic.

*There has been much talk, especially in the secular press, about the bare ruined choirs and the imminent dissolution of the Church, an end that has been regularly predicted for 1900 years.... [We live in an age in which the values of society are] ever more consumer oriented, ever inclined to view a person as an immanent being in an environment; therefore, a view of humanity which is in subtle ways not so much **hostile** but rather **indifferent** to Christ's radical injunction to his first priests: To follow me, go your way carrying neither purse nor scrip nor shoes. Hostility is no stranger to the Church, she often thrives under it.....*

Those who aspire to priesthood want something more ... they are less and less impressed by the easy pitch and more and more exhilarated by the singular challenge.

...I am speaking in particular of the vocation of the parish priest who is one of the heroes of this age. There is one positive good which may come to pass from the present crisis in the vocations and scarcity of priests, and it is this: the time may come when we may come to value the very person, we have taken for granted all these years. What we took for granted was the parish priest.

The life of a parish priest, like all things, has changed. Heraclitus wrote that one can never step into the same river twice. Priests in ministry 50 years ago could never have imagined the state of things we contend with regularly today. However, the church will survive. Teresa of Avila wrote: *Nada te turbe* ... Let nothing disturb you. All things change. God alone remains. Priesthood, the Church, our parish, it is all in God's hands. I for one am grateful for that.

Faithfully,

Msgr. Diamond