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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
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The Thirtieth Sunday of the Year (C)
Priesthood Sunday

Referring to the consecration of the Holy Eucharist, one of my high school students asked me, "What are you thinking about when you bless the bread?" My response was, and is: "Who am I, Lord, weak as I am, that you should use me in this way?" This question is an apt one as we consider this "Priesthood Sunday."

To be a priest of Jesus Christ is to be one whom he has called and has configured to himself to be his own instrument. The priest is the one who makes Christ present in the world through the sacraments he celebrates and the life he lives.

The priesthood is a great and marvelous gift to the Church and to the world for it is through the hands of the priest that our Lord comes to us. Said Saint Francis of Assisi:

See, daily He humbles Himself (cf. Philippians 2:8) as when He came from "the royal throne" (Wisdom 18:15) into the womb of the Virgin; daily He comes to us in a humble form; daily He comes down from the bosom of the Father (cf. John 1:18) upon the altar in the hands of the priest.¹

The Lord Jesus takes the hands of the priest and makes them his own to extend his healing touch and loving presence in the world. In light of how Jesus uses his priests, what other response can one have but awe, love and humility?

¹ Saint Francis of Assisi, *Adominitio* I.14.

What is a priest? A Dominican friar beautifully described a priest in this way:

To live in the midst of the world
 without wishing its pleasures;
 to be a member of each family, yet belonging to none;
 to share all sufferings;
 to penetrate all secrets;
 to heal all wounds;
 to go from men to God and offer Him their prayers;
 to return from God to men to bring pardon and hope;
 to have a heart of fire for charity
 and a heart of bronze for chastity;
 to teach and to pardon;
 console and bless always.
 My God, what a life!
 And it is yours, O Priest of Jesus Christ!²

This sounds a high and lofty ideal, yes, but it is true. This is what every priest is called to be and to do, though not all, we know, attain it.

Priests, like all people, are at times the Pharisee in the Gospel and at others the tax collector (cf. Luke 18:9-14). We know that priests can be proud, arrogant and haughty. They can also be humble, compassionate and sincere. They can be sinful and they can be holy. They can have bad days and they can have good days.

Each priest, like every member of the faithful, is a redeemed sinner; even so, Christ chooses to use his priests, sinful men as they are, to sacramentalize his presence in the midst of the world.

² Henri Lacordaire, O.P. (1802-1861), "Thou Art A Priest Forever."

Who of us would ever choose to do such a thing, to do something so dangerous as to entrust that which is supremely holy to sinners? Yet it is precisely this that the Lord does.

The strange thing is ... that God entrusts himself to such fragile vessels. That he has taken such a horrible risk with the Church. He has put himself into hands that betray him time and again. And he has left us the opportunity of falling and of being corrupted, so that he still has to support the Church himself again and again through these very tools that have proved unsuitable. It is a consolation, on the one hand, that the Lord is stronger than the sins of men, but, on the other hand, a great challenge for all those who have turned toward this calling and who believe they have received it to let it truly mature in fellowship with Christ.³

Every priest, then, needs our prayers each day that he might more fully imitate the Lord Jesus each day of his life, to be his docile instrument so that his life may give greater witness to God who is love.

This holy task is one that no priest can take upon himself and to which no one has a right. "Indeed, no one claims this office for himself; he is called to it by God."⁴

It very often happens that when a young man first hears the Lord calling him to the priesthood he is reluctant to respond. When Christ says to him in the silence of his heart, "Come, follow me" (Matthew 4:19), the young man responds, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8).

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time: A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2002), 430.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1578.

This was my own response when I first began to recognize the call of the Lord. I was all of fifteen years old. To the one who beckoned, I said, "Surely there are others, Lord, others better than I, more gifted, more talented, more popular, more holy." Yet the Lord did not relent; he simply said, "Follow me," repeatedly and incessantly.

It often happens that we do not understand the ways of the Lord, yet we must trust that he does, in fact, know what he is doing. He knows whom he calls and why he calls them. If they are not already equipped for the mission when he calls them, he will see to it that they will be when the time comes. The Lord is skilled at using insufficient instruments for his purposes.

I knew I was - and am - unworthy of the call of the Lord, of sharing in his own priesthood. I knew I had failed time and time again to love as he loves, yet he still called me to his service. I said, "Why me, Lord?" His answer was simple: "Why not, you?" I had no response and I knew I was his and that I was to be his priest.

Conscious of this to this day, I encourage all young men who hear the Lord Jesus calling them to his service: Do not be afraid! If the Lord wants you, give yourself to him. He knows what he is doing. He will not abandon you. He will not disappoint you. He will fulfill your deepest longings, all through your devoted and faithful ministry in his name.

On behalf of my brother priests, I thank all of you for your prayers and encouragement; your cards and notes of gratitude are very uplifting. There is, though, one way that you can thank us above all others. First, continue your prayers for us, each day if at all possible. Second, encourage those young men you know the Lord to be calling to heed his voice. Through your encouragement they may begin to see something in themselves that would lead them to trust more fully in the Lord and follow where he leads. In this way the "prayers of the lowly [will pierce] the clouds," the Lord will hear us and rescue us in our distress (cf. Psalm 34:18) through the ministry of his priests. Amen.