The Beauty of the Catholic Priesthood

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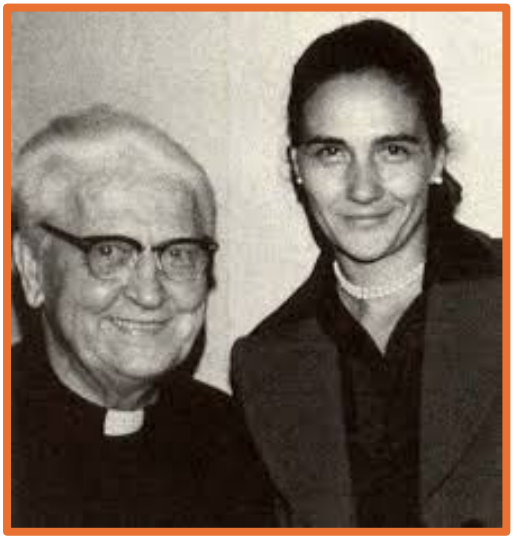
"The priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus." - St. John Vianney

My dear friends,

For Catholic Priests, few days are more meaningful than **Holy Thursday. It's the day when Jesus instituted the ministerial priesthood.** The following post is longer than usual, but I felt compelled to share it with you. It is my first Holy Thursday homily, given in 2002. To all my readers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, I hope in some small way my words and sentiments communicate the beauty of the priesthood.

Holy Thursday homily, 2002:

Fr. Walter Ciszek was a Jesuit priest in the first half of the 20th century. As a young man Walter felt called to be a priest, so he decided to enter the Jesuit seminary. One day the priest who was novice master read an important letter that had just come from Pope Pius XI. The letter was addressed to priests and seminarians, especially Jesuits, asking them to consider



Fr Ciszek with Conchita



becoming missionaries in Russia. Immediately, Walter experienced a strong desire to be a missionary priest in Russia. He said it was like a direct invitation from God. So he finished his novitiate, went to Rome where he completed his studies, and eventually went to Russia.

But what Fr. Ciszek would encounter in Russia was not what he'd expected.

While there he was arrested for being a priest and convicted of being a danger to the government. He was sentenced to years of hard labour in Siberia. And it was in this cold, harsh prison camp where Fr. Ciszek would come to understand more deeply the awesome power, dignity and beauty of the priesthood.

It eventually became known throughout the camp that he was a priest; however, the security measures in the camp were so strong that if the guards suspected that he was ministering to the people he would be severely punished. But in secret he began ministering to the prisoners; and he came to see that even Russian security guards in a Siberian prison camp could not hinder the priestly ministry that Christ entrusted to the Church, nor could it

hinder the desire within God's people to receive God's grace through the sacraments.

Fr. Ciszek later wrote:

"The amazing thing to me was how little all these security measures affected a priest's relations with other prisoners. The moment he appeared on the campgrounds by himself or with a fellow priest, he would be joined by passing prisoners. The moment it became known in a new brigade or new barracks or a new camp that a man was a priest, he would be sought out. He didn't have to make friends; they came to him instead. It was a very humbling experience, because you quickly came to appreciate that it was **God's grace at work and had little to do with your own efforts**. People came to you because you were a priest, not because of what you were personally. They didn't always come, either, expecting wise counsel or spiritual wisdom or an answer to their every difficulty; they came expecting absolution from their sins... You realized that they came to you as a man of God, a representative of God, a man chosen from among men and ordained for men in the things that are of God; you realized, too, that this imposed upon you an obligation of service, of ministry, with no thought of personal inconvenience, no matter how tired you might be physically or what risks you might be running in the face of official threats."



The power, the beauty, the dignity of the sacred priesthood! This Holy Thursday Night, we come to this church to celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper. We celebrate that night when Jesus Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood. Tonight is that one night of the year when priests are humbled to be able to speak about the dignity and beauty of the Priesthood, the priesthood which Christ entrusted to his Church to continue his sacred ministry.

Who is the priest? Pope John Paul II once wrote that the priest is ***"the living and transparent image of Christ the priest."*** The man who is a priest is chosen and consecrated by God to make the love of Christ present in the world. **At his ordination, the man who is ordained a priest is configured to Jesus Christ, the true High Priest, in a very special way. On his ordination day, a man becomes a priest in his very being. From that day, his deepest identity is that he is a priest, a priest forever.** He is a priest in his very being. It is his life. Even if he is not functioning as a priest, he is always a priest. This is one of the lessons Fr. Ciszek learned in the prison camps: people were drawn to him when they learned he was a priest. It was not so much what he did, but who he was, who he represented. He was another Christ, and the people knew that his life belonged to Christ and that he was to make Christ's love present to them in concrete, tangible ways.

With all the negative press lately, with the revelations of the failings of priests, I feel compelled on this Holy Night to speak about the true beauty and dignity of the priestly vocation. A sweet burden is placed upon the shoulder of a priest: in imitation of Christ he is to offer his life in service to the Church, the People of God. On the day of his ordination he literally prostrates himself on the floor symbolizing his union with Christ who offered his life for us all. The priest is ordained to lead people to God, particularly through the sacraments.

On this night we celebrate the **institution of the Body and Blood of Christ.** It is through the priest that the **Body and Blood of Christ are made present on our altars.** It is through the priest that we **receive absolution from our sins.** It is through the priest that **the sick are strengthened and the dying are made ready for Heaven through the anointing of the sick.** As Fr. Walter Ciszek lived, so every priest is called to put aside all personal ambition; he is called to sacrifice his own personal comfort for one reason: **so that people might come to know the Person of Christ through him**. He freely chooses to live celibately as another way to love, as a way to model himself **after the person of Christ**. The priest is celibate for you! Through his celibacy his people should see that he is wed to the Church and shares a special union with Christ.

To be a priest is a beautiful vocation! It is particularly sweet because the priest is called to share a special union with Christ crucified. The moment that Christ revealed the depth of his love was his crucifixion. **The priest should live his life in such a way that when people see him they should see Christ pouring his life out upon the Cross all because he loves!**

Yes, the priesthood is a beautiful vocation, **a gift to the Church**. And just as Russian prison guards and Siberian prison camps could not hinder the ministry of priests and the desire of God's people to receive the sacraments, neither will the present crisis in the Church hinder the ministry of good priests and the desire of God's holy people. **The priesthood was instituted by Jesus Christ and the priesthood will continue to flourish because of Jesus Christ.**

We give thanks this night for the **sacred priesthood and for the Holy Eucharist**, which is our life, our strength, and our pledge of future glory.

The Tremendous Value of HOLY MASS

- At the hour of death the Holy Masses you have heard devoutly will be your greatest consolation.
- Every Mass will go with you to Judgment and plead for pardon for you.
- With every Mass you can diminish the temporal punishment due to your sins, more or less, according to your fervour.
- By devoutly assisting at Holy Mass you render the greatest homage possible to the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord.
- Through the Holy Sacrifice, Our Lord Jesus Christ supplies for many of your negligences and omissions.
- He **forgives you all the venial sins** which you are determined to avoid. He forgives you all your **unknown sins which you never confess.**
- One Holy Mass heard during your life will be of more benefit to you than many heard for you after your death.
- Through Holy Mass you are **preserved from many dangers and misfortunes** which would otherwise have befallen you.
- During Holy Mass you kneel amid a multitude of holy Angels, who are present at the **Adorable Sacrifice** with reverential awe.
- When you hear Holy Mss devoutly, offering it to Almighty God in honour of any particular Saint or Angel, you afford that Saint or Angel a new degree of honour, joy and happiness, and draw his special love and protection on yourself.
- By piously hearing Holy Mass you afford the **Souls in Purgatory the greatest possible relief.**
- You shorten your **Purgatory** by each Mass.