

LETTER TO AN ASPIRING PRIEST

by Thomas Joseph White, O.P., March 2019

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I'm grateful to you for getting in touch. Many people today would no doubt think you are strange for considering the priesthood, given the cloud that hangs over the Church. Others might congratulate you for heroism. Actually, both reactions are excessive. For a Catholic young man who is fervent in his faith, it's a normal and reasonable thing to think seriously about being a priest, and rightly so. The truth is, if you have a calling to the priesthood you should gladly embrace it, because it's an extraordinary vocation. It's sad that more young men don't consider it seriously and accept the calling.

Let me begin with definitions, rather than advice. What is the priesthood, essentially? The Letter to the Hebrews and the First Letter to Timothy provide the answer. The office pertains first and foremost to Jesus himself, who is the unique "high priest" of all humanity (Heb. 7:26) and a "mediator" between God and human beings (1 Tim. 2:5). Traditionally, Christ's priesthood is understood to operate in a twofold direction, as descending and ascending. The gifts of God descend to human beings through the unique priesthood of Christ because he is the unique source of grace and truth for the whole human race. The human community also ascends toward God first and foremost through Christ's human obedience, reverence, and prayer, for he is the "pioneer of our faith" according to Hebrews 12:2.

The ministerial priesthood in the Catholic Church takes its point of departure from these two forms of participation. Each Catholic priest is a fragile, limited human being who is called to participate in Christ's priestly mission in an entirely derivative and subordinate way. The "descent" occurs through the communication of divine truth and sacramental grace, in which the priest is an instrument of God despite his own limitations. The "ascent" occurs principally in the liturgy and the priest's pastoral governance, since the priest orients the Christian people toward authentic worship and a life of holiness. In both these senses, the priest is called to progressive conformity to Christ, and to conversion, by virtue of his sacramental ordination and his life of prayer, teaching, and care of souls. If he does this in genuine docility to the grace of God, the light of Christ shines out into the world through his ministry. If he does this in confrontation with or defection from the true mystery of Christ, he becomes a contradictory being in whom Christ's mystery is rendered painfully obscure, to the detriment of the Church and even the potential scandal of the faithful. So the stakes are high, but even while you take this into account you should not be afraid. The grace of Christ is with every person who is called to be a priest.

The first aim in seeking the priesthood, then, is to stay in the presence of Christ. The vocation makes sense only to the extent that we remain perpetually relative to him, his mystery, his truth, his Church. Christ gives priests a certain interior stability over time. To live in him is to become strong, not unstable. But the stability is dynamic: It only works if the minister remains spiritually poor and docile to Jesus, acting in him and for him. That is something deeper than a checklist of responsibilities or a sincere moral attitude. It is a habit of being that comes from the Holy Ghost. So it is good to start with this realism.

Let me mention a few basic ideas about discernment of the priesthood and appropriate preparation. First, a brief word about motives. Why should a person want to be a priest? I'd be wary of those who suggest the necessity of prolonged psychological self-analysis on this point. Of course, we should seek to know ourselves. But the vocation does not arise out of some kind of profound act of introspection, and even less does it require that we go through an inner drama as a prerequisite to our entry into seminary. That way of thinking can easily be the stuff of narcissism. The vocation fundamentally comes from a desire for knowledge of Christ and intimacy with God, despite our natural and normal desire for marriage and children. The seminarian is a person who has given up the very good natural reality of life in a family to live for something he has learned to desire more: the search for God.

You should also beware of those who define the priestly vocation primarily in terms of public utility or personal happiness. Our American culture tends to think primarily in utilitarian and therapeutic terms. "If you are a priest, you will be useful to others and psychologically fulfilled." Maybe. Probably both, at least some of the time. But these are insufficient motives. The real driving force that sustains a person in the priesthood is the desire to do the will of God and to find God. A Benedictine abbot once told me, "The reasons I thought I entered are not the reasons I stayed." Over time a person stays in the vocation, amid joy and suffering, amid human recognition or cultural ignominy and scorn, for God alone. The stability of the priesthood is at base the stability of the Cross. It comes from God, his will and his grace, not human estimations of worth or success, psychological introspection, or pragmatic arguments.

The positive way to put this is that the priest learns little by little to exist for God's own sake, and not for any merely created thing. The priest is a sign to the world that human beings can exist for God himself, to enjoy God by knowledge and love, because God is worth it. Augustine puts it more powerfully: Nothing whatsoever is worth loving for itself except God. In this sense, the priest is the first one who has to learn to give up his idols. God alone remains. The rest turns to ash. This is why the Church depends deeply for her witness on the radicality of the religious life and the priesthood. These offices are meant to show in a visible way that the Church herself exists for God. And if the Catholic Church cannot do anything for God's own sake, she cannot do anything of real importance in the world today. Ultimately her attempts to justify her own existence will become pathetic as she tries to prove her usefulness in purely human, political, or worldly terms.

A second idea: The life of a priest is centered around the truth of Catholic doctrine. This is something many seem to get wrong in the Church today. There are many people, both "progressive" and "traditionalist," who begrudgingly accept the doctrinal mission of the Church. *Doctrina* in Latin means "teaching." The Church communicates the revelation of Christ confided to the Apostles. On a practical level, no one is more fundamentally responsible for this day to day than the Catholic priest, and if we don't see that clearly as priests, our lives effectively become sterilized. Outside the celebration of the sacraments, the core responsibility of the priest is to teach the faith. If secularization is happening in vast parts of Europe and North and South America today, the main reason is that this traditional function of the priesthood is being ignored or performed badly.

In saying that the priest is meant to teach apostolic doctrine, I'm not saying you have to be an erudite intellectual, and certainly not a professional academic. Was St. Paul a professor of theology? In fact, priestly responsibilities are very different: The parish priest needs to instruct people at all levels and all ages, from the catechesis of young children to the instruction of working-class people to young professionals, academics, and cultural leaders. This is more challenging in some respects than what academics do, but you don't need a PhD to do it. If a priest presents the mysteries of the faith simply, clearly, and accurately to others, the Holy Spirit works through him despite his limitations. It is amazing what can happen simply through a clear and courageous presentation of the teachings of the *Catechism*. It is important not to underestimate the power of truth.

Seminary formation will give you the time to study the basic truths of the faith and to practice communicating them in a sufficiently clear way. The basic virtues you need to work on at this early stage are studiousness and courage. You need to form the habit of daily study of the faith and develop the courage to speak clearly about the faith to others with prudence and love, not stridency or defensiveness. This matters because the crisis in the priesthood today is above all a crisis of faith, and faith (as Aquinas rightly notes) is a supernatural grace given primarily to the intellect, not the heart. It consists in right judgment about the truth of Christianity, and how that truth should inform our lives. A Church and a priesthood without intellectual judgment regarding Christ risks devolving into a Church without faith . . . but also a Church without love, since love is guided and informed from within by an orientation toward truth. The bottom line is that you need to cultivate progressively a true Christian intellectual life wherein you learn to see reality in the light of Christ. This is what will allow you to evangelize, and to steady others in the storm.

A third idea: A key challenge is to allow the grace of God to inform all the root desires of your heart. The priesthood is about having your hearts reoriented by divine love. This is a lifelong process. A priest is first and foremost a heart seeking God, which means he is also a person who is constantly surrendering to God, a sinner always being redeemed by the Cross, and exalted by the Cross. Nietzsche says that the priest is only dangerous if he really loves, by which he means that the delusion of Christianity only takes root if the person is a zealous fanatic. Mystically speaking, Nietzsche is right. The love of God has to guide us if we want to be of any real use to other people. The Church is not an office of sacral bureaucrats. St. Bernard of Clairvaux spoke about the Cistercian monk as a wild caged lion, contained in his monastic cell but incessantly roaring to God. The priest is meant to be a troubadour, not a manager. When a person truly loves God, it is contagious.

The ordinary denizens of the Church—the people of God—typically love the priests who serve them and reverence the mystery of the priesthood. Yet they only do so when they feel that he is truly at home with them, cares about them, and stands with them through their crises and under their crosses. A great deal of their trust in what the Church teaches is grounded in what they see in the lives of the personnel of the Church. When a priest prepares people for marriage with earnestness, hears their confessions with compassion, visits them or their loved ones when they are sick, counsels them when they are distressed, and buries their dead with confidence in the resurrection, then they will believe in the priesthood, and they will believe what the Church teaches.

Beware the pitfalls of clerical culture: The acquisition of material comforts are not surrogates meant to make up for celibacy, as if expertise in restaurants and international travel are legitimate compensations for life without a family. Try to be the kind of seminarian who will wear work gloves and wash dishes, not one seeking to be served or esteemed. Priests spend time with the disheartened and the lonely, not just the well-functioning or successful (though the latter matter to God as well). Also, be aware of your own emotional life. If you are preparing for the priesthood you need to cultivate healthy friendships. Every seminarian and priest needs friends he can confide in, equals who are typically colleagues, and perhaps at times also married couples who are peers or elders. Our relationships should be characterized by appropriate boundaries, and should of course be entirely chaste (emotionally as well as physically), but not overly formal or robotic. Be earnest and never cede your capacity to say what you think out loud (in an appropriate way).

That being said, if a man is preparing for the priesthood and still wants to have emotionally intense friendships with young women, he is fooling himself. Grace does not destroy nature. If a person has a vocation, he can still experience natural attraction to women, and this is one of the central places that boundaries and asceticism matter in the years a person is preparing for ordination, and afterward as well.

Our culture does not understand or value priestly celibacy, and in a way that is a good thing. It's an opportunity to bear radical witness to Christ. Celibacy is a sign of contradiction: It shows people that we can exist for something beyond the created order, for God himself. Yet in our own historical moment, there is a lack of confidence in any form of lifelong commitment. The vows of marital fidelity and the decision to have children are also difficult for many people to fathom. This does not mean our contemporaries are at ease with their sexuality. The prevalence of pornography, sterile cohabitation, and prolonged solitude without marriage and children are causing people to rethink the values of the sexual revolution. In this context, priestly celibacy for the sake of Christ serves as a point of orientation. You show all people, whether they have failed or succeeded in this domain, that they can offer their life to God in every circumstance and that their own work of asceticism is valued by the Church.

The worldly mentality suspects celibacy of being a matter of repression and inhumane sacrifice of sexual pleasure. But when it is lived rightly, there is a beauty to the priesthood as a human and distinctly masculine mode of self-offering to God. Authentic priestly celibacy presents us with a form of masculinity that is spiritual and elevated. It helps other men be better husbands who are self-sacrificing, and helps women transcend some of the neuralgic complexities of power, resentment, and seduction. In fact, it manifests something profound that can exist between men and women only in Christ: true spiritual friendship.

The truth about Christ himself is also at stake in the Church's evaluation of celibacy. His example represents the Christological center of celibacy that cannot be ignored. He was himself celibate, as were St. Paul, St. John, and many other saints, as well as the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Are the mysterious lives of these most holy people intelligible to us? The celibate priesthood reflects and embodies this reality in the heart of the Church. Can our poor human frame bear the imprint of the *imitatio Christi* in this respect? History says yes. The fruitfulness of the Church flows in some sense from her commitment to celibacy in the life of religious orders. It was these above all who brought the gospel to the continents outside Europe, and it is these above all who often evangelize today in places both not yet and formerly Christian. Celibate priests may have no physical descendants, but by baptism they have many millions of children. Our skeptical, over-sexualized enemies may scoff, but their own diminishing demographics belie their false confidence. Ignore the despair of the naysayers (even if they are German cardinals) and seek purity in Christ.

What should we do about the sexual abuse crisis and the crisis of credibility of the priesthood and episcopacy? I'm sure when you mention to people that you are thinking about the priesthood, this is the first thing that comes into the minds of many.

In one sense, it is indeed something worth worrying about. We must have a clear conviction about the need for human justice and ecclesial integrity at both the national and international levels. If you are in seminary or the diocesan or religious priesthood and you encounter individuals with problems in this domain, you have to be forthright and help bring things to light. The credibility of the Church will not be fully restored until all priests and bishops are subject to a coherent and reasonable set of disciplines, with ascetical norms and a consistent practice. This is happening little by little, despite the real setbacks we see. Outrage has its uses, but so does optimism.

In another sense, as an individual seeking God, you should not worry too much about this. You have an obligation as a Christian to find joy in God above and beyond all the pathetic defects and failures of human beings in the Church. The whole point of *ex opere operato* is that the celebration of the sacraments renders Christ present to the Church despite all the defects of men. The whole point of the charism of dogmatic infallibility in the Church is

that the apostolic doctrine remains clearly identifiable and inerrant even when some of the personnel of the Church fail to live by that doctrine or even believe in it.

I'm not counseling indifference, but the prioritization of concerns. The divine foundation of the Church comes first, not her human ministers. Supernatural faith in Christ grounds us in those foundations where we can be in perpetual contact with Christ, a "living stone" (1 Pet. 2:4) untarnished by our human failings. If you learn to live at that level, you will see the Church for what she is in her depths and love her precisely because she is always united to Christ and enlivened by his holiness. This realization, far from being a form of escapism, gives you the courage to fight for the reform of the Church and her clergy without ceding to discouragement or cynicism.

Everyone is called to happiness, but in different ways and according to different rhythms in life. Marriage is the most natural and reasonable way to find happiness in this world. I've had countless friends who really began to be happy when they first became parents and "found themselves" through becoming a father or mother. But married people also experience the limitations of happiness in this life. They feel the need for deeper conversion to God as their ultimate hope and source of happiness. In most people this takes place in fits and starts over the course of a lifetime.

The priest, meanwhile, skips some of the stages. Ultimately the vocation to the priesthood is a vocation to happiness, but in a different rhythm and in a higher key. By living without the natural recourse to happiness in a family, he has to "restabilize" at a higher register. This is both consoling and challenging, like the physical rest that comes not from sleeping, but from pausing during a steady climb toward a high peak. We can't begin the climb by ourselves, but the grace of God makes it feasible, and not just bearable, but serene and peaceful. In John's Gospel, Christ speaks about a peace the world cannot give (14:27). This is what is at the heart of the priestly vocation: becoming first a captive and then a permanent emissary of that peace. The bottom line is that we should not be afraid to surrender to the vocation, trusting in the happiness that comes from God alone. He does the essential work and we cooperate with it.

The morality of modern liberalism is both permissive and unforgiving. For our secular contemporaries, everything depends on our autonomy and authenticity, but paradoxically we can achieve very little of importance, and if we lose the favor of the elite custodians of our culture, there is no way back into the fold. Catholicism is the opposite of this in almost every respect. Our spiritual lives don't depend primarily on our own authority. Instead, God takes the first initiative by his gift of grace in Christ. Without him we may not amount to much, but with him our lives acquire both a profound center of gravity and a wonderful lightness of being. Even our sins are "useful" if we show them to Christ. He is a continual source of forgiveness and life, so that we can live without any despair.

The Catholic moral tradition is about happiness, holy asceticism, joy, self-offering, humility, and deliverance. It points us toward the sublime, and promises us the intensity of divine love. If you pursue the priesthood and your vocation is confirmed by the Church, you will eventually stand at the nexus of this mystery, yourself a mediator between God and men, bound forever by ordination to Christ and his cross. The spiritual life of Jesus passes from Golgotha through the priest to the world, in the sacraments and apostolic preaching. It is both strange and severe to stand in that nexus, near the light that is never extinguished, to let it slowly change you, and burn your heart, and that of others through you. But it is a joyful existence as well. I encourage you to surrender to it.

Thank you, again, for writing. Please know that I'll be praying for you in your ongoing discernment.

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