

Not my Son

Recently, priests received a list of “open” parishes from the Bishop. It was a frighteningly long list. We have suffered tremendous attrition from the ranks of priests without much in the way of addition. We have lost priests through the sudden death of some who were relatively young, and the removal from ministry of those accused of abuse. And the list of retirements is long.

In addition to this problem, the pandemic had accelerated the decline of some parishes and institutions in the Church such that a whole other level of reorganization will be necessary. Some attempts at creating collaboratives with several parishes under one pastor have gone fairly well, while others have foundered.

The biggest contributing factor to this decline is the loss of families of faith to the secular culture. Another factor has been the loss of credibility of Church leadership and the tarnished image of the priesthood because of the abuse scandals. It is worrying to think that by the time I approach the age of retirement, (circa 70 or 75 years old), I may be tasked with oversight of 3 or more parishes. I’m not looking for pity: Lord knows you work harder than I do. But the prospect is daunting.

I may have conveyed this story to you previously, in some form or other, but a young mother came up to me one day, after Sunday morning Mass and expressed gratitude and appreciation for my ministry as a parish priest. But then, there came an immediate backhand when she said, ***“But, I would never want my son to be a priest. It’s such a lonely life.”***

I know that this woman meant no insult, and I didn’t take it as such. But it was a strange juxtaposition of sentiments: She was simultaneously attracted-to and repelled-by priesthood. Priesthood seemed a threat to her motherly concern that her son have a happy future, populated by loving people. Did she see something in my example suggesting unhappiness or an inordinate struggle with life? Or was she buying into caricatures of the priesthood promoted in the popular culture?

Let’s be clear about what it is that Christian Faith requires of us in this life: We are required to

respond to a “calling” and to live some form of consecrated life. Marriage is a very serious and difficult calling: We know all too well that it isn’t all “wine and roses.” So too, intimacy cannot be reducible to sex. After 30 years of pastoral ministry, I know that there are many, happy, sexless marriages out there: The sex aspect, for any variety of reasons, had given way to friendship and other dimensions of loving intimacy.

My concern is as old as my own vocation: Parents, family members and, even, the Catholic “culture” do not encourage young men to consider the priesthood. The priesthood is always for someone else. Yet, surely, the Lord is calling men to the priesthood now as much as when I was called back in the 80’s! The big difference between then and now is the immense influence of social media and life in cyberspace. How does a modern kid have any mental and spiritual space for contemplation? There was just as much reticence and/or ambivalence about one’s kid joining the priesthood when I was called as there is now. But I had ‘space’ and time to hear the call, in part, because there were no glowing screens to stare at to the point of stupefaction.



Yet, the issue is broader than I have thus far presented it: The prospect of committing to anything for the rest of one’s life might be the greater factor. The modern world puts forth the illusion that life can and ought to be about infinite variety and freedom. A life-long commitment of any sort, including marriage, looks like prison. Somehow, we have to recapture and re-present the beauty and the nobility of such commitments. How beautiful is the long-lasting, stable and faithful commitment of a couple married 50, 60 or 70 years! It is something to honor and reverence. So too, those consecrated men and women who have given their whole lives to the missions or the contemplative life; are they not heroic in their own way?

I don’t have answers. I can only reflect with you and leave it to the Holy Spirit to inspire in us new and better ways to model and celebrate this aspect of our Faith.

