

THE BLESSINGS OF 25 YEARS OF BEING A PRIEST

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How am I blessed? First and foremost, I am blessed because Jesus Christ loved me enough to die for me upon the cross and teaches me how to carry my cross daily. Secondly, I am blessed to be given the honor and privilege to consecrate bread and wine, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the Body and Blood of Christ. How many of us remember saying “My Lord and My God” when the priest would elevate the host and the chalice? What an awesome experience it is to be in the presence of God at the altar of sacrifice for every Mass! As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI once said, “the Holy Eucharist is not what. It is who, whom we hold. This is real. This is a person whom we receive every Sunday.”

For twenty-five years I have strived to celebrate Mass every day. Why? Because I have had great teachers, who taught me that you can’t give to others what you do not have. When I was first ordained a priest, I prayed but it was more out of obligation. Now, prayer is slowing down, learning to listen, asking God to give me His eyes to see, really to see, to see what is going on in the lives of people who suffer, to listen, to listen attentively, to ask what they are not telling me, because many times someone comes to a priest, a pastor, thinking that incident A is the issue when in reality incident B is the real issue.

As a priest, I have been blessed by great mentors, lay and clergy. When I was first ordained, there were three couples with whom I dined on a regular basis. Priests do eat by the way! Sometimes someone will say that I want to have Father over for dinner, but he is soooo busy. We have to eat sometimes! Cook some rice! We will come over. Sunday lunch, probably, is one of the better times for clergy.

When I would sit with a family over a meal, an example given by Jesus in the Gospels, I learned a lot about families and priesthood. I learned about love, that

love is not a feeling, but a commitment.

A couple who taught me that love was a commitment were Joseph and Helen (not their real names). In our first meeting, I told them that I was not going to marry them, but instead I would officiate as the Church's official witness in the Sacrament of Matrimony. They were to marry one another, to give themselves to one another in accord with Genesis 2:24. "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body."

Joseph had a heart condition. Everything seemed fine with Helen. Their first child was a boy. He grew, and about five years later, they decided to add to their family. Helen was pregnant with a girl. Prior to her delivery, she felt additional tissue in her breast. Her obstetrician was not alarmed but said that it was due to the pregnancy. He did not order additional tests.

After their daughter was born, Helen still felt the additional tissue in the breast. She decided to see another physician who ran additional tests and concluded decisively that she had breast cancer. Joseph and Helen found a cancer facility in Arlington, Texas, which was known for aggressive treatment. Every 3 weeks Joseph drove his wife to this facility. Other family members assisted with the care of the small children.

Every day Joseph was there for his wife. Every week Joseph and Helen were at Mass. In fact, in time, Helen--who was raised Baptist--chose to become Catholic. She wanted to worship as a family. I would like to think that it was due to the influence of her husband who was Catholic.

Once, when I stopped to visit, Helen greeted me with a beautiful scarf wrapped around her head. By this time, she had lost her hair, due to the chemotherapy. One of her sisters, if memory serves me correctly, also was in the room. Yet, what struck me the most was when I saw her husband, Joseph.

"Joseph," I said. "You shaved your head." "Ah, Father," he said, "I didn't

have that much hair to begin with.” “No, Joseph,” I said, “It is the message. You didn’t have to tell me your love for your wife. You showed me your love for your wife.” He taught me that love is not a feeling. It is a commitment.

Today, 25 years later, I can say that I love being a priest and I am committed to this vocation. Granted, there have been a few hectic days when I felt like being committed, but it is true that I love being a priest. Why? I love being able to remind people in some small way that Jesus Christ loves us and He loved us enough to die for us. I likewise cherish being reminded by parishioners that they see Christ in their priests.

One day after Mass (remember that I live in the country of Ragley), two small children, a boy and a girl, about the age of 4, were waiting by the office building. Once I approached, the girl looked up at me and asked, “Can we go play on that hay?” There are round bales of hay near the parish hall.

I looked at her and responded gently, “No, that is not my hay. That is another man’s hay.” Then, I left them outside and went into the office building.

That evening, we had a Harvest festival, a Halloween party for the children. The mother of the girl approached me and gave her daughter’s description of what transpired that morning. She told her mother, and I quote, “God said! That is not his hay! That is another man’s hay.”

Although I appreciate the compliment, I am not God.

It is very affirming, however, when a child or adult recognizes Jesus in their priests. We are called *alter Christus*, another Christ. We stand at the altar of sacrifice in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, *in persona Christi capitis*, in the person of Christ the Head. We are not indispensable. Yet, it is wonderful to hear someone say that they see Christ in us.

When I became a priest 25 years ago, I wanted to help people. I still do. 25 years later, it is my hope and prayer that I help people turn to the cross and

sacraments in order to recognize God's love for them. It is my hope and prayer that together we will pursue the path to holiness, and the path to heaven. It is my hope and prayer that we will see Jesus in ourselves, and when we look to the cross know for a fact that we are worth dying for.

I think that we overanalyze many things. Why does God allow suffering? Why did God allow this tragedy to happen? I don't know.

What I do know is that what appeared to be a tragedy over 2000 years ago was the greatest commitment of love known to humanity. An innocent man was put to death, convicted of a crime He did not commit. He called God his Father, Abba, Da-da, making himself equal to God.

Well, He is. He is, in the words of Saint Thomas, "my Lord and my God." John 20:28 What more does He have to do to convince us that we are loveable?

As a pastor, some of the greatest moments have been when I was left speechless, when all I could do was hold a hand, put a hand on a shoulder, weep with those who were weeping, and laugh with those who were taking themselves too seriously, including myself. It's all about Jesus and for that I am thankful.

Several years ago, prior to becoming a priest, I was on a retreat and I was meditating in my room when I suddenly dozed off. It wasn't horizontal meditation! I believe that I was sitting in a rocking chair when I began to dream. I was unsure of myself, feeling unworthy to serve as a priest, not holy enough, too great a sinner, when all of a sudden I had this unusual dream.

In the dream, this very forthright woman emphatically spoke to me these simple words, "Move, you lose!" I said, "What?" She said it again in a commanding voice, "Move, you lose!" In her unique way, she was instructing me to give God a chance, to give diocesan priesthood a chance, not to run away from the call of God.

I thank God for that dream because she was right. Had I run away from this

call, had I moved away, I would have been the one to have lost. Instead, I have not lost much. I have gained so much more.

Saint Peter once said to the Lord, “We have given up everything in order to follow you.” Mark 10:28 Jesus told Peter that all those who have given up family, possessions, will inherit so much more.

I don't think that I have given up that much. My parents raised seven children on a meager income. My sacrifices pale in comparison to the sacrifices that my parents made for their children. Parishioners have become my children and my family. After all, do we not address our priests with the title '*Father*'? A father must sacrifice for his family, the family whom I love and the family whom I know loves me.

I began by saying that I am blessed because Jesus Christ loved me enough to die for me upon the cross and teaches me how to carry my cross daily. It is an honor and a privilege to serve as a priest of Jesus Christ. You all are worth it. May the Lord continue to use each one of our hands, each one of our feet, to bring His Good News to the whole world.

Thank you.