

“The Priest’s Relationship to the Lay Faithful: Building Up Unity for the Sake of Mission”

Rector’s Conference Given to Students of St. Patrick’s Seminary

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Introduction

Whenever I celebrate Mass for our parish schools, I take advantage of the opportunity to explain to them in the homily the symbolism of the miter and crosier. I explain how the crosier is a shepherd’s staff, and point out all of the practical uses it has for a shepherd tending his sheep in the field: the crook to rescue sheep who have strayed far off to keep them from danger and bring them back into the fold; the staff to guide them on the path and prod them to move forward to greener pastures when they get lazy, and also to beat back wolves and other ferocious beasts who find sheep to be very tasty. I explain how all of this is a very apt symbol for the role of the bishop and the priests of his diocese who share in his Priesthood in caring for God’s people.

In this last of my three-part series covering the three-fold relationships of the priest to his bishop, his brother priests and the lay faithful, I would like to reflect with you on how this, indeed, is exactly what the priest is called to be and to do for the people entrusted to his pastoral care.

The Priest’s Disposition to the Lay Faithful

When you think about it, the priest’s relationship to the lay faithful is, ultimately the reason why you are here, it is why this seminary, and every seminary in the world, exists: to prepare men for priestly service to the People of God. As *Pastores Dabo Vobis* puts it,

The whole formation imparted to candidates for the priesthood aims at preparing them to enter into communion with the charity of Christ the good shepherd. Hence their formation in its different aspects must have a fundamentally pastoral character. ... the coordination of the different aspects of human, spiritual and intellectual formation ... are all directed to a specific pastoral end. This pastoral aim ensures that the human, spiritual and intellectual formation has certain precise content and characteristics; it also unifies and gives specificity to the whole formation of future priests [n. 57].

At this point the Apostolic Exhortation cites the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on the Formation of Priests, *Optatam Totius*, which says:

[T]he entire training of the students should be oriented to the formation of true shepherds of souls after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd. They are therefore to be prepared for the ministry of the ... parish: that they might know how to make Christ present to men, Him who did not ‘come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45; cf. John 13:12-17) [n. 4].

The fundamental disposition of the priest, then – and above all, of the parish priest – is toward the People of God. In treating this aspect of the priest’s relations with others, the Council’s Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, sums it up this way:

... priests have been placed in the midst of the laity to lead them to the unity of charity It is their task, therefore, to reconcile differences of mentality in such a way that no one need feel himself a stranger in the community of the faithful. They are defenders of the common good, with which they are charged in the name of the bishop. At the same time, they are strenuous assertors of the truth, lest the faithful be carried about by every wind of doctrine. They are united by a special solicitude with those who have fallen away from the use of the sacraments, or perhaps even from the faith. Indeed, as good shepherds, they should not cease from going out to them [n. 9].

To do this, and to do it well, the priest must know his people. If he does not know his people, there is no way he can effectively lead them and build up unity among them, to animate them so that they in turn will be welcoming. This is more urgent than ever in the contemporary setting of the Church, especially in those places such as ours that are marked by the prevalence of multi-cultural parishes and people with competing points of view. Without knowing his people the parish priest will not have the pastoral skill to know how to welcome those who are far off while teaching and modeling the truth in a compelling and winning way.

Pastoral Presence

Woody Allen is often quoted as having said that eighty percent of life is showing up. I don’t know about all sectors of life, but I would certainly say that it’s true when it comes to pastoral ministry! The priest has to be with his people in order to know them. Even more so, he is called to love his people. Presence is the language of love; you naturally want to be present to the one you love. But the priest’s love for his people is directed not at his own longings or self-fulfillment, but rather at leading them to a deeper love for Christ, to greener pastures. If the shepherd is going to guide his sheep on the path to greener pastures, guiding them to stay on the path and prodding them to move forward, he has to walk in their midst. He cannot do so if he’s far away. As our Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Viganò, told us bishops recently, “the closeness of the pastor to the

people is what really matters.” And he can say this because he walks the talk: he is very present in the local churches, far beyond what his basic duties require, and because of that, he knows the Church in this country well.

There are so many ways the parish priest can exercise this ministry of pastoral presence in both big and, especially, little ways – but it will always demand time and energy. To give just one small example – it’s a very simple practice, but one which I applaud: greeting people at church on Sunday. And I don’t mean only the lay people who have been instructed for this role, but the priest, too; and not just after the Mass he’s celebrated, but even when he’s not the celebrant, and, even more importantly, *before* Mass, as the people are arriving. It’s a very simple gesture of hospitality, but one that can go a long way in making people feel welcomed and a part of the parish. Building up unity among the people of God means, most immediately, that they have a sense of belonging to their parish community. I’m happy to see that this has become a common practice, because it hasn’t always been that way. I remember when I was a young priest and our parish held workshops on the different liturgical ministries, in which we introduced this idea of hospitality and greeting people outside of church as they arrived for Mass. Some of the more seasoned ushers were a bit dismayed over this. Before Mass the following Sunday I asked one of them to instruct the other ushers about something. He responded: “we’re not ushers anymore.” I looked at him with a puzzled expression on my face. He continued, disgruntledly, “We’re ministers of hospitality.” Thankfully, we’ve come a long way since then! And I hope this practice will become even more common.

All of these gestures of welcome and hospitality, of being with one’s people in order to build up unity among them, is all to draw people into the communion of the Church, to build up the bonds of that communion so that they may grow more deeply in communion with Christ. This communion, though, is a communion on behalf of mission; that is, it all goes back to the Great Commission. The priest must commission his people so that they can make their rightful and valuable contribution to the mission of Church. Number 9 of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* also has something to say about this:

Priests must sincerely acknowledge and promote the dignity of the laity and the part proper to them in the mission of the Church.... They must willingly listen to the laity, consider their wants in a fraternal spirit, [and] recognize their experience and competence in the different areas of human activity.

What prophetic words! This applies all the more so today, fifty years later, with much more collaboration with lay persons in ecclesial ministry. All the more so, then, must the priest listen to his people: they have the right and even the duty to make their opinions known on matters concerning the good of the Church. And believe me, when I make my parish visitations, they do so! This has given me a sense of the sort of concerns that are uppermost on our people’s minds. And no, it is not the clergy sex abuse crisis. This dark chapter in the recent history of our Church has once again received prominence in the news; it seems never to go away. And yet, despite this, people bring up other concerns to me in my conversations with them, concerns that are very mission-oriented, such as concern for our young people, that we are losing them and not doing enough to keep them actively involved in the Church and appreciative of their faith and their gifts; or

concern for how to more effectively evangelize, recognizing the challenge we have in bringing people into the fold of the communion of believers and keeping them there; or concern for an adequate number of priests and the quality of the formation of our priests; a concern for good preaching and for uplifting, inspiring liturgies. People look for a priest who is a loving and compassionate shepherd, a holy and spiritual man, a good teacher and preacher, and a true leader who engages, listens, and empowers.

There are many people, too, who do not like it when the priest skirts controversial issues, and this applies especially to preaching. Granted, there are many other who *do* like it and prefer that he not go there, and perhaps these are the people for whom using the crook of the shepherd’s staff is most indicated. To preach well, convincingly and compassionately, not skirting hard topics but addressing them with both clarity and pastoral sensitivity, is challenging indeed. And for us as ordained ministers in the Catholic fold, it is especially challenging, for we have a pre-set Lectionary. While some Protestant denominations do, too, most do not – the preacher just chooses the text on which to speak. The Lectionary moves us out of our comfort zone and makes us engage selections in the word of God not of our choosing, and often provides the opportunity to address very timely and serious issues.

There are also certain times of the year that naturally lend themselves to preaching about key topics of our day: October is Respect Life month, and therefore the perfect time to preach on the many critical human life issues of our time across the broad spectrum of sins against human dignity; it is more than obvious that the Sunday closest to January 22nd is a time to speak about the scourge of abortion. The Sunday before that would be an especially appropriate time to preach on Christian Unity, since the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is celebrated at that time. We Americans are proud of our freedom, so the Sunday closest to July 4th is an indicated time to speak about what authentic freedom really means; indeed, this is a critically important issue in our time, as the misunderstanding and misuse of freedom is such a prominent cause of so much of social devastation taking place in our time. The Sunday of Labor Day weekend is a good time to bring up issues of worker justice and principles of Catholic Social Teaching in general, which we all know is rightfully called “the best kept secret of the Catholic Church.” And, of course, election time lends itself to preaching on the virtue of faithful citizenship. Granted, many of these topics have to be approached with extreme sensitivity, but we cannot claim to be honest in our preaching if we always skirt tackling them head on. In fact, I would say that a priest or deacon who has never felt drained after delivering a homily, as if it took a pound of flesh out of him, and never really preached.

Sound Pastoral Governance

The key to all of this is integrity. Integrity means that the priest has to be selfless, willing to suffer for the sake of the truth, because the very purpose of his existence is to help his people make progress on the path to eternal salvation. It is not “my way,” but rather leading God’s people into all truth. People have a right to expect that their priest be a “man of the Church” who is feeding them with the rich fare of Catholic teaching and practice, and not just his own pet theories. This, though, often comes at a price. I

would like to quote here a statement made by Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. This comes from a book-length interview with him by Nicolas Diat entitled, “God or Nothing.” It was recently published by our own Ignatius Press. It is a very profound and moving insight into this very ardent yet gentle shepherd, and I will be quoting extensively from it throughout this talk. On this point, Cardinal Sarah says:

In his encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Paul VI declared that evangelization is supposed to quench a thirst that could be summed up as a three-fold search, for the truth about God, the truth about man, and the truth about the world (see EN 78). *We are neither the authors nor the masters of the truth, but rather its stewards and servants. Reverence for the truth is the true spiritual worship that we must render to God* [emphasis added, p. 244].

This, of course, flies in the face of the relativistic age in which we live. We have to be on guard to keep in check the ways we give into this mentality, even unwittingly. It is God’s truth, not ours; our reverence for that truth, no matter the cost, is the measure of our spiritual worship. One cannot attain spiritual greatness without it. Cardinal Sarah also speaks about how this requires a transformation of the mind away from the way the world thinks, so that we might be able to think with the mind of God. He says:

We must not be conformed to this world but allow ourselves to be transformed by renewing our way of thinking, so as to be able to discern God’s will. Often the media present speaking out against the Church’s Magisterium as a form of courage. In reality, no courage is needed for that, because then we can always be sure of the applause of the public. It takes courage, rather, to adhere to the faith of the Church, even if that contradicts the scheme of the modern world. Following Saint Paul Benedict XVI called for a ‘mature’ faith [p. 134].

How easy it is to lose sight of this. We can so easily become smugly comfortable, blind to how we have adapted a worldly outlook. Above all, be on guard against feeding your own ego and feathering your own comfortable nest. This is very easy to do for the parish priest, because there will always be parishioners who are favorably disposed toward you. Christ has placed a great trust in his parish priests to steward responsibly and selflessly his people’s good will. How easy it is for him instead to manipulate their good will for his own immediate desires. As I once heard when I was a young priest from one more experienced than I, “why be a millionaire when you can live like one?” This is not acting out of love for Jesus Christ.

The priest must also be on guard against feeding his ambition. He should be ambitious for souls, not his career! Pope Francis often speaks against this mentality of “careerism,” not unlike his predecessors. Last October, when he canonized Louis and Maria Azelia Martin, the parents of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, along with them he also elevated to the altars St. Vincent Grossi and St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception. He took the opportunity in his homily to speak out against this attitude:

There can be no compatibility between a worldly understanding of power and the humble service which must characterize authority according to Jesus’ teaching and example. Ambition and careerism are incompatible with Christian discipleship; honour, success, fame and worldly triumphs are incompatible with the logic of Christ crucified. Instead, compatibility exists between Jesus, ‘the man of sorrows’, and our suffering.

This is a perennial problem in the Church; it has existed in every generation. I’ve always been struck that, in the second longer, patristic reading in the Office of Readings, the longest continuous reading is from St. Augustine’s Sermon on Pastors, occurring in the 24th and 25th Weeks of Ordinary Time. There must be a reason for this! In it, he decries pastors who fleece the flock for their own glory (wool representing honor, since it is used to make clothing) and milk the sheep for their own comfort (meaning “whatever temporal support and sustenance God’s people give to those who are placed over them”). Not only do they do great harm to those sheep that are sick by not healing them, to those that are weak by not strengthening them, and to those that have strayed by not bringing them back, but their neglect even weakens those that are already strong. How easy it is to see this effect upon our people!

Cardinal Sarah likewise has harsh words for those priests who fall into this worldly, careerist mentality. He says:

A priest who seeks material well-being, worldly comfort, or his own glory instead of Christ’s is working for the devil. A priest who uses the appearances of his priesthood to enjoy more fully the pleasures of this world is a renegade. A priest who forgets that true power comes from God alone breaks the promises that he made at his ordination [pp. 240-241].

And also:

[P]ersonally, I bitterly denounce those priests who, ultimately, are responding only to a desire for human success, for power and personal ambition, for recognition in politics and the media. The cleric is here on this earth to speak about God, to serve God, and nothing else. Fear, feverish activity, and vanity remain the fierce enemies of men who have given their lives to God [p. 237].

These are certainly very strong words. They call to mind the court prophets of the Old Testament, derided by the true prophets. They were the counsellors to the king, who were to give him sound advice which they were to discern that *God* wanted them to hear. Instead, they told the king what they thought the *king* wanted to hear, in order to ingratiate themselves to him.

We need, then, the courage not to be intimidated into silence. To cite our Papal Nuncio once again, in speaking to us bishops he also cited Gregory the Great’s “Pastoral

Care,” in which the saintly Pope refers to the care of souls as “the art of arts,” and where he provides a practical guide on how to deal with different kinds of people. Archbishop Viganò cited for us the following passage: “Imprudent silence may leave in error those who could have been taught. Pastors who lack foresight hesitate to say openly what is right because they fear losing the favor of men.”

Yes, the shepherd needs courage in order to beat back the ferocious predators who would eat up the sheep. At the same time, though, he also needs the prudence not to speak words that are rash; after all, one can also seek glory for himself by posturing as a “crusader for the truth,” because there will always be other people who will herald him for doing so. How does one strike the balance that avoids these two extremes, i.e., speaking rashly or being intimidated into silence? No surprise: by knowing one’s people! When you know your people’s struggles, failures and successes, when you understand their perspective on their deepest desires in life, then you learn when and how to speak, in order to lead people into all truth.

This is the role of the shepherd, to keep the sheep moving down the path to greener pastures, the Kingdom of God. But, of course, people are more than sheep! They are a priestly people, a people who have been sent. They are indispensable to the Church’s fulfilling of the Great Commission she received from her Lord. All of this pastoral activity of the priest, then, is aimed at empowering the lay faithful to fulfilling their true vocation in the world, bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ into their sectors of influence and so fulfill their unique and rightful role in the Church’s mission of evangelization.

Leadership in the Christian sense, then, most emphatically does not mean arbitrarily wielding one’s authority over others. Remember Jesus’ denunciation of the authorities of his own time in the Gospel of St. Matthew: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:25-28). But the roots of this teaching go back further. Perhaps you learned in your Old Testament class that the Hebrew language, with a limited vocabulary and very concrete mentality, uses one word to express different ideas that, in the mind of the native speaker of the language, are related. As an example, the verb “to rule” also means “to shepherd.” Now, remember the story of the selection of David to be King of Israel, he who became the greatest King of Israel, leading Israel to its zenith and ruling over them at this golden period of their history: he was a shepherd. The prophet Samuel had gone through the first seven sons of Jesse; David was not even among them, not even within the perfect number. He was the eighth son, off in the fields tending the sheep. He is the shepherd king, who is the model of pastoral governance of God’s people.

This is headship in the Biblical sense. How often I’ve heard stories of priests who rule by force of their own fiat. They make changes according to their own likings and when people object – who inevitably had no say in the matter – they are dismissed with the rebuke, “If you don’t like it, you can go somewhere else.” And this, by the way, happens at both ends of the ecclesiastical spectrum. To adapt Cardinal’s Sarah’s

denunciation I mentioned earlier, we can likewise say that those priests are to be denounced who, ultimately, drive people away because they are responding to their own insecurity and petty desires to be comfortable with the decisions they’ve made even at the cost of the good of souls.

In contrast, always keep in mind the example of Christ himself: he interacted personally, calling each by name. He tailored his preaching to the mind of his hearers and he suited his interactions to the individual he was with: he called the rich young man to leave everything and follow him; he sent the healed demoniac who wanted to do so back to his family. This individually-tailored interaction was not so that each one might hear what they wanted to hear but what they *needed* to hear, rescuing the stray and moving them forward on the path to his Kingdom.

If the parish priest is going to be the good shepherd who builds up the bonds of communion among his people and sends them forth to proclaim the Gospel, he must know each by name. He must shape the exercise of his priestly ministry by the needs of his community and the individual. You are everyone’s priest in the parish. There are different forms of prayer, some variations in liturgical styles, a wide range of ministerial duties. Some you will like and will appeal to you; others you’ll find unpleasant and would be more comfortable just avoiding. But you are called to interact with people in all of these areas and animate them to seek always the Kingdom of God. You must rein in the impulse to spend all your time in that part of the garden that you like the most.

Making It Personal

Now, all of this is not just to remain theory in your head; to translate it into reality, you have to personalize it. Listen to these words the bishop prays in the Prayer of Consecration in the Ordination of Priests immediately after the imposes hands on them: “Grant, we pray, Almighty Father, to these, your servants, the dignity of the priesthood; renew deep within them the Spirit of holiness; may they henceforth possess this office which comes from you, O God . . . and by the example of their manner of life, may they instill right conduct.”

“Instill right conduct”: never underestimate the power of the priest to do so. By ordination, the priest is assimilated to Christ the head, shepherd and bridegroom of his Church, *and*, people instinctually know this. They may not have the theological eloquence to state it this way, they may not grasp these categories of thought, but they do understand it through the *sensus fidei*. That is to say, to put it simply, the priest represents the Church to them, and the Church mediates their relationship to Christ. This is why a bad example does so much harm, and the example of a prayerful, zealous, compassionate priest striving for holiness can do so much good.

This may seem like it is asking a lot. Too much, maybe? I recall a story a bishop told me of a meeting he had with his Diocesan Pastoral Council on the topic of priestly ministry. He wanted to hear from them what their concerns, needs and desires were with regard to the priests of his diocese. The response was pretty much along the lines of

what I have been saying here. The bishop told me that after the meeting he said to one of the members of the Council, “It sounds like you want Jesus of Nazareth for your pastor”; to which the person replied, “No, just someone trying to be like him.”

Conclusion for Lent

That’s what we are called to do, to strive to be like Jesus of Nazareth. And that comes with a cost, a real death to self: generosity with your time, patience with difficult people, overcoming interior resistance to doing things that aren’t your particular favorites, and so forth. But without this, the priest will never be a man of communion and of mission. Communion means serving the needs of all, not just those who share your particular interests and priorities; mission means to be a man of the Church who proclaims the truth in faith and morals with integrity, and who serves where he is needed regardless of whether or not it happens to be something that he particularly enjoys. All of this is a very high calling; indeed, it may seem like a Herculean task way beyond the capacities of us mere mortals. Certainly, we cannot hope to come close to the mark without striving to grow in union and in identity with Christ.

The key, then, is, once again, to *strive*, sincerely and earnestly, to be like Jesus of Nazareth. People are willing to forgive their priests all kinds of shortcomings and weaknesses, if they sense he genuinely cares about them, is present to them and attentive to them, and is always there for them in their time of need and in the important moments of their life. Given that we are right now in the season of Lent, you could say that this is the ascetical program of the parish priest. What it means to take up one’s cross in our life is to die to ourselves in two ways: fidelity to our faith, and fidelity to our people, all of them.

None of this is possible without the interior life. Take advantage of these years in the seminary to cultivate your interior life. These are precious years, a unique opportunity the Lord gives that will never be repeated. Establish that firm foundation of the interior life now, while you can, *before* you are, God willing, sent off to the heavy demands of parish life. If you have not done so already, work up to spending an hour before the Blessed Sacrament every day, for the Eucharist is the heart of the Priesthood and the very reason for its existence. Get into the habit of praying all of the hours of the Liturgy of Hours (not just those hours you pray in common as part of your seminary schedule) in preparation for the serious promise you will make at your ordination. And, of course, cultivate a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of priests. Pray especially the holy rosary, a very powerful pray, and one that will assure you of her intercession and protection. She will not let you down!

To quote Cardinal Sarah one last time, he also speaks to the importance of the interior life and the priest’s devotion to the Mother of our Lord. He says:

... We need priests who are men of the interior life, ‘God’s watchmen’ and pastors passionately committed to the

evangelization of the world, and not social workers or politicians [p. 129].

What matters most is the quality of a priest’s heart, the strength of his faith, and the substance of his interior life. Intense and lasting fidelity requires a profoundly spiritual interior life and solid human maturity. Thanks to an authentic interior life and proven maturity, a priest can detach himself from what is merely superficial and transitory so as to be more fully present to what is essential. Fidelity often demands a long struggle [p. 129].

... the priestly vocation is inseparable from the Virgin Mary. This is one great lesson from the life of John Paul II. The life of a priest is inconceivable without a filial bond with Mary. The Mother of Christ supports priests in their fidelity to their commitments. Thanks to the Blessed Virgin, I am convinced that the priesthood will never disappear [p. 128].

Yes, we all know well the profound devotion that St. John Paul had to our Lady, and his great love of her rosary. He even wrote an Apostolic Letter on the subject! He makes a point I find especially pertinent to us priests in how the rosary will help us imitate her example by giving our own obedient response to God’s call in our life where he says: “As we contemplate each mystery of her Son’s life, she invites us to do as she did at the Annunciation: to ask humbly the questions which open us to the light, in order to end with the obedience of faith: ‘Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word’ (Lk 1:38)” (n. 14).

It is not surprising, then, that he concludes his Apostolic Exhortation on the formation of priests with a prayer to the Mother of priests. I will conclude this talk with the same prayer:

O Mary,
Mother of Jesus Christ and Mother of priests,
accept this title which we bestow on you
to celebrate your motherhood
and to contemplate with you the priesthood
of, your Son and of your sons,
O holy Mother of God.

O Mother of Christ,
to the Messiah-priest you gave a body of flesh
through the anointing of the Holy Spirit
for the salvation of the poor and the contrite of heart;
guard priests in your heart and in the Church,
O Mother of the Savior.

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O Mother of Faith,
you accompanied to the Temple the Son of Man,
the fulfillment of the promises given to the fathers;
give to the Father for his glory
the priests of your Son,
O Ark of the Covenant.

O Mother of the Church,
in the midst of the disciples in the upper room
you prayed to the Spirit
for the new people and their shepherds;
obtain for the Order of Presbyters
a full measure of gifts,
O Queen of the Apostles.

O Mother of Jesus Christ,
you were with him at the beginning
of his life and mission,
you sought the Master among the crowd,
you stood beside him when he was lifted
up from the earth
consumed as the one eternal sacrifice,
and you had John, your son, near at hand;
accept from the beginning those
who have been called,
protect their growth,
in their life ministry accompany
your sons,
O Mother of Priests.
Amen.