

## **The Priesthood, Part One**

Last week, I celebrated the 20-year anniversary of my priesthood. A few days later, I celebrated the priestly ordination of four of my former novices. Naturally, I've been relishing the joy of priesthood and reflecting on its qualities. I'd like to share with you two of my own images of priesthood.

### **Mirror of the Presence of Christ**

If you were to fly to a third-world country during the summer or spring break, as I have done several times, you might well see a group of young Christians (Catholic or otherwise) boarding the plane with you, headed to their mission trip. Usually, they are all wearing the fresh and clean mission trip t-shirt that has—along with their church name—some inspiring quote. Sometimes it'll say something like, "Bringing God to the People of Haiti." Slogans like this irk me because I have been to Haiti and many other developing nations and I'm here to tell you: *God is already there!* If the mission trip goes well, those young people will find God in Haiti, then will point out God's presence to the people who maybe are too beaten down to sense that Presence already dwelling in them, and then they will take God back home with them, bringing themselves and their loved ones ever closer to the Kingdom.

A priest does not "bring God to the people" so much as hold himself up as a mirror so that the people might finally see God in themselves and in their own complicated lives. All of us are weary and discouraged and we forget that the God of hope, peace, and consolation is dwelling within us. The purpose of the priesthood is to help find this indwelling God and to lift it up, proclaiming, "Behold the Lamb of God!"

### **Keeper of the Sacred Stories**

A priest is a Keeper of the Sacred Stories. This is my own personal definition of the priesthood. Every person on the planet has a sacred story that they are carrying with them everywhere they go. It is a story from their life that is kept in the most tender place of their hearts. The story may be exuberant, sweet, frightening, traumatic, shameful, calming, consoling or downright ghastly. But even if it is a hard and painful story—even if it is ghastly—it is nonetheless a sacred one because of its impact on one's very identity. It's the story that one goes to bed with at night and wakes up with in the morning.

God has created us in such a way that we are compelled to share our Sacred Story with at least one other person. This is why Adam and Eve share a common rib—the protector of the heart. What this means is that everyone in the world is looking for someone who can help lift up the heaviness of the Sacred Story—lift it up to the Heavens. On the good days, everyone has someone: a spouse, a friend, a sibling with whom to share the Story. But everyone has a not-so-good day when it seems no one is around who is able to hold with tender reverence their Sacred Story. And that is where the priest enters. The priest is here to receive, to help hold, even to keep in his own heart the Sacred Stories of the universe—of the people as a whole and of each individual soul. Sometimes we baptize the Story. Sometimes we absolve it. On most days we place it on the altar alongside the simple produce of bread and wine. And along with the bread and the wine, our Stories become infused with the Presence of Christ and then given back to us.

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