

Uniting in the Heart of Christ: Why do priests serve?

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

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What was behind our men becoming priests? The answer begins in God's impulse to create and redeem us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." This John 3:16 quote is the fulcrum of the kerygma, the core message of God's initiative toward us.

To put things in context, as *The Catholic Moment* reveals the scope of clergy assignments, our attention should be on God's impulse to share his life, share his son through word and sacraments.

Our diocese and parishes continue to answer the call to missionary discipleship. It is difficult to describe in a short slogan what Uniting in Heart has been moving us toward. But I can say for sure that it is not "restructuring." That is about places and place holding. Rather, we look through the lens of our religious mission to find another term. Since becoming our Holy Father in 2013, Pope Francis repeatedly calls us to "pastoral conversion." To read a sample, you can find online his December 21, 2019 talk to the Roman Curia.

At a recent meeting of all the priests, I told them that I am carrying a lot with me. First of all, pride in the work of the Clergy Personnel Advisory Committee. Their interaction with our priests exhibits much cooperation and openness.

Next, I carry in my heart the Presbyterium, the community of a bishop with his priests. During his seminary years, a diocesan priest accepts that he will be ordained to serve the whole diocese, not just certain parishes or ministries. Over time, it is healthy for him to grow through various assignments. And as much as parishioners enjoy a priest's personal gifts, they also add to them and must be generous in sharing that man with yet other parishes. I know from long experience that personnel changes require a certain amount of grieving. Both very good things and very difficult events can be equally stressful. Going forward, we will be aware that priests will grieve the loss of what is familiar, and parishioners will too. Priests and parishes will refresh their awareness about this dynamic at our leadership formation meetings in upcoming months.

I carry as well a mental picture of how people understand their church differently. For some, it is defined by the interior of their worship space. For others, it is the rectory and parish office that represent the local heartbeat. A parish church with a school is another vital expression of our mission to save souls.

Of course, I work with people in our central administration. I know that the chancery is but one aspect of a diocese, but it is essential in church history and law. I am proud of my co-workers here whose talent and faith are an inspiration. I pray to be worthy of them. They and several diocesan boards assist me in my episcopal (literally oversight) obligations. A canon lawyer friend of mine once mentioned that the "office" of bishop translates from the Latin word for "duty." The list under this category is daunting.

Wounded survivors of sexual abuse and their families are also on my heart. But I am not alone in this. Clergy and church members have been mourning this sadness, while simultaneously creating safer

environments. Our pastoral conversion will carry awareness of this history so it does not repeat itself. And so we don't relegate victims to invisibility.

As the result of more priest retirements and health limitations than we could have anticipated in mid-February, some difficult planning decisions presented themselves. I suggest that you take all this news to prayer, and allow the dust to settle (there's an Ash Wednesday image!). Or to say it another way, temper any quick judgments, and look for pastoral conversion opportunities in which we can unite our hearts in Christ's heart.

Much has happened since I wrote this column on March 6. I ask your prayers as we negotiate responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak across our country. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) states that the diocesan bishop "must promote, regulate, and be vigilant over the liturgical life of the diocese." You are already aware of some diocesan wide changes, and I ask your patience. I hope that we can wade into this with eyes wide open so that we can act with the common good in mind, and be willing to support others whose burdens may yet appear on our horizons.