

# The Challenge of Being a Priest Today

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## A Life Uncommonly Blest

Why would anyone want to be a priest today? Not an easy question to answer. Certainly, for a good priest willing to put himself out for the people he serves, the life is not easy. The demands on his time are many and constant, the pay is minimal, and the rewards are few. Yet Catholic people respond with a deep appreciation to priests who give signs that they genuinely care for them and are willing to do what they can to serve them. And there are other rewards as well. My own experience as a priest has been that of a life uncommonly blest.

One of those rewards is a deep sense of doing something that is worthwhile, even if the fruits of one's efforts are not always immediately visible. I've often been struck with how unhappy so many people are with the jobs or careers into which they are now locked; they don't enjoy beginning a new day and can't wait for it to end so that they can escape from the office or work place. Their work is not a meaningful part of their lives.

How much better it is to find a life that is in touch with one's deepest desires than to simply fall into one on the basis of circumstances or obligation. In his *Spiritual Exercises* St. Ignatius of Loyola advises the person making a life decision to place him or herself on their deathbed, to review from that perspective the choices about to be made, to experience whether those decisions brought happiness and fulfillment, or were choices now regretted. Sometimes taking such a perspective can bring a new kind of freedom into our decision-making. To find a sense of satisfaction and peace in what one does with one's life is a real grace. The life of a priest demands sacrifices, but it also can be deeply fulfilling.

There are moments for every priest when his own life becomes transparent to the presence of God working in and through him. At such times he becomes aware of the Spirit within his ministry touching others, at someone's deathbed or in extending a reconciling hand to a person who had been alienated from God and from the Church, or in gathering a community for prayer in the liturgy. Sometimes when he is preaching, the Spirit unlocks something deep within the priest, the homily notes are put aside, no longer needed, and he speaks to his people directly from his own heart. These are special moments, little epiphanies, when the priest becomes in an experiential way a sacrament of God's grace. One feels afterwards a deep sense of peace.

Another reward of the Priest's life is the friendship one discovers with other priests. If it is true that some priests become caught up in a clerical culture that is offputting to many people today, it is equally true that many priests experience a fraternity in the priesthood which is both very real and sustaining. Most priests enjoy being with each other. The friendships they form are usually lifelong, rooted in their common seminary

or formation experiences, in their solidarity with each other in the priesthood, and in a shared love for the Church and its people.

### Priesthood is not a Career

No doubt some who are attracted to the priesthood see the requirement of clerical celibacy as an obstacle. This is an issue that needs to be honestly addressed. Priests have the same need for affection and love in their lives, for close friends with whom they can share themselves in an intimate way, as other men and women. Indeed, they must be able to love if they are to image in their lives and ministries the compassionate love of Jesus. Properly embraced, a celibate life can free a person to love in this compassionate and inclusive way.

This is not to pretend that a celibate life is always easy. Not all are able to live a celibate life; it is a gift not given to everyone (cf. Matt 19:11-12). There is no question that celibacy can be at times a burden, but the very fragility and need it reveals within the priest can open him to becoming more dependent on God who alone can fill the emptiness of the human heart.

In the final analysis, priesthood is a vocation, not a career. Those who seek the priesthood with the idea that it offers them security, status, or personal advancement will be disappointed. Priesthood rightly lived out is an expression of Christian discipleship, not the only one, but certainly one very close to that of Peter and Andrew, James and John and the other disciples called to be in Jesus' company and to share in his ministry. Those who seek the priesthood today must do so because they have heard that same call.

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