

SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski

*Extracts from his talk at the opening session of the 3rd Continental Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life. Montreal. April 2002.
(Unofficial translation.)*

The Logo of the Congress is the Sower. There couldn't be a more significant image.

In fact using the parable of the Sower as a launching pad means being aware of the fact that the Divine Sower spreads the seed of his call to the priesthood and consecrated life in large handfuls. The seed is thrown out abundantly. But there may be no response because of the unfavorable state of the soil that characterizes our society: a person's heart may be a prisoner to various attachments, distracted by distractions, ensnared by the brambles of passion. Styles of life that often reflect a secularized world-view may make their own negative impact on the young and may suffocate the seed of a vocation as soon as it germinates.

However, we are called to nourish carefully and assiduously the essential spiritual dispositions of the heart in which the Divine Sower sows the seed of vocation to the ordained priesthood.

In this perspective it is appropriate to note that the seed may also be dessicated when there is lacking in the Church, particularly among those whose job it is to nourish the seed as it germinates, a clear understanding of the nature of the call to priesthood and consecrated life. This seems frequently to be the case at the present time. We are not taking due care of the seed of a vocation if we do not help a young person to understand the beauty of the gift received so that he may decide joyfully and courageously to welcome it.

While cultivating the dispositions of heart — or the soil on which the seed of a vocation falls — we must at the same time present the priesthood so that its true nature may be seen, this true nature being described in full harmony with the teaching of the Church.

In fact there is a close link between an authentic presentation of the specific identity of the vocation to the priesthood and the welcome of that vocation on the part of a young person. In other words, the more the gift of the divine call appears specifically as it is, sublime and supernatural, the more the human heart is ready to welcome the gift with generosity, devotion and joy; so that the seed may develop and bear the desired fruits.

At this point my talk is directed to us all: it implies that the whole Church is

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responsible. We are all called to realize ever more clearly that , more important than anything else in the support of a sincere response to the Divine Call, is an accurate and true presentation of what the gift of a vocation is.

A foggy ideal has no attraction, no allurements, to the young. It cannot draw someone to devote their whole life to it. A presentation of the priesthood that does not respect its originality or fogs up its supernatural beauty, will not be able to evoke a generous response on the part of young people. Even if they have the interior dispositions pre-required for accepting the call they need to have a clear understanding of the specific nature of the priesthood.

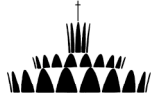
In this context we need to remember the words of John Paul II in *PASTORES DABO VOBIS* : “An understanding of the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood is both a necessary pre-requisite, the surest way of guiding and the most powerful way of stimulating in the Church, those measures that will promote vocations to the priesthood, help the discernment of such vocations and provide the appropriate formation for those called to be ordained priests.”

This may be realized if we are convinced that the point of reference in a vocation must always be Jesus, in his supernatural mystery. He is the one who calls, who knocks at the door of our heart; he is the one who is the divine companion on the journey of our vocation. This is why we need to offer assistance to a young person, particularly in the form of spiritual guidance, so that he may become used to living in an intimate relationship with the person of Jesus and may develop a personal friendship with Him. Authentic discussions about the priestly vocation must include this aspect of a personal relationship of love and faith with the Lord.

This means that in the nitty gritty of daily life a vocation ripens and develops when it is anchored deeply to an interior life itself rooted in personal prayer, adoration, the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, devotion to the Blessed Mother and a love for the Church. The seed of a vocation will easily wither and die if the person fails to grasp the central importance of the Eucharist and fails to live deeply from the life it offers.

This living and personal relationship with Jesus is essential if a person is to give a positive reply to his call. It will not be out of place to mention here Jesus' meeting with the two disciples which St John talks about in his gospel. (Jn. 1,35-39) They become enthusiastic about Jesus when John the Baptist points his finger and says: “Behold the Lamb of God!” To the apostles' question: “Where do you live?” Jesus answers: “Come and see!” Their response to this invitation is prompt. No uncertainty and no hesitation.

The comment that John makes which underlines the apostles' decision to stay with him for the whole day can only be understood in the light of their being



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fascinated by Jesus. The evangelist does not say how the time was spent. There is almost an intentional silence about this. As if the fact of staying with Jesus and experiencing him was itself the profound influence that led them to respond to his call and to decide to follow Him.

Lumen Gentium states that there is a difference of NATURE rather than DEGREE between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the baptised, even though both share in their own way in the one priesthood of Christ.

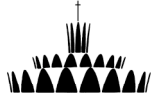
The basic reason for this difference is the fact that the ministerial priesthood, through its own particular sacrament and its character, configures the priest to Christ as Priest, Leader and Shepherd. This configuration occurs at the level of his BEING. It is thru this configuration to Christ that the priest continues the very mission of Christ.

Here the identification of the priest with Christ is expressed in its deepest and most mysterious aspect — especially in the sacrament of reconciliation and in the celebration of the sacrifice of the mass. When the priest absolves a person he does not do it only in the name of Christ but, in a certain sense, he INCARNATES CHRIST, makes Christ incarnate as he says the words: “I absolve you from your sins.”

Above all priests exercise the function of Christ in the eucharist “here, acting in the name and place of Christ and proclaiming his mystery, they bring together the requests of the faithful to the sacrifice of their leader, making present and applying in the sacrifice of the mass —until the Lord comes again — “the one sacrifice of the New Covenant, that of Christ offering himself once and for all to his Father as the spotless Victim.” priests exercise the responsibility of Christ, Shepherd and Leader, when they “Bring together God’s family, a brotherhood that has only one soul and through Christ, in the Spirit, lead that family to God the Father.”

As these brief quotes emphatically remind us the ministerial priesthood is ontologically (at the level of ‘being’) connected to the mission of Christ— Christ as Priest, Leader and Shepherd. The relationship of the priest with Christ and his mission exists at the level of his very being, brought about through his consecration and his anointing in the sacrament. To present the priesthood as a simple ‘function’ in the Church, one among others, not only betrays the truth of this sublime reality but creates an obstacle to the response of the young to the call of the Lord.

In this perspective it is clear that the ordained priesthood represents “the permanent guarantee, across a wide diversity of time and place, of the sacramental presence of Christ our Redeemer.(JP II Christifideles laici #55)



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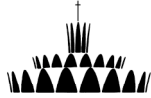
Here we see the intimate connection that exists between the ministerial priesthood and the nature as well as the structure of the Church. This cannot exist without the presence of the ordained minister.

In the same way we better understand how priests should recognize that their ministry is radically ordered to the service of the whole people of God.(cf.Heb 5,1) and in their turn the lay faithful are called to recognize that the ministerial priesthood is totally necessary for their life and their sharing in the mission of the Church.(CL #22)

In his talk at the beginning of Lent, 14 February 2002, to the pastors and clergy of the diocese of Rome the Holy Father underlined this point in terms free of all ambiguity: “We all know how necessary vocations to the priesthood are for the life, witness and pastoral action of our church communities. And we also know that the lessening of vocations is often,whether in a diocese or in a country, the consequence of a decline in the intensity of the faith and of spiritual fervor. For this reason we should not allow ourselves to be too easily satisfied with the explanation that the rareness of vocations to the priesthood might be compensated for by an increase in the involvement of the laity in the apostolate, or even that this falling off would be part of God’s providential way of favoring the growth of the laity. On the contrary the greater the number of lay people wanting to live generously their baptismal calling the greater the need for the presence of ordained ministers and for those actions that they have been specifically ordained to perform.” O.R. 15 Feb 2002.p.5.)

What is more, this dimension of the Church makes clear the specificity that is proper to the call to the ministerial priesthood. This vocation cannot be presented simply as one among many vocations that may be found in the Church, vocations based on the priesthood common to all the faithful. The vocation to the priesthood is the vocation ‘par excellence’ (in as much as, as I have already noted, “the priesthood common to all the faithful and the ordained priesthood are different in essence not in degree” Lumen Gentium #10); it involves a call to represent in a real way, ontologically, Christ in his role as Leader, Shepherd and Priest, a call to act in the place of Christ, in His person, at the service of the whole people of God.

Today more than ever the Church needs to rediscover the grandeur and the beauty of the priesthood. One could say that without a deep understanding of the supernatural value of the priesthood, there would be no motive to promote in a special way priestly vocations nor to give special support to priests who are already ordained. It is this understanding that will incite all the faithful — priests, religious, laity — to encourage the young to live their faith deeply, to pray with them and for them, to ask them openly if they have ever considered the possibility of becoming a priest and to bear witness in their lives to the great esteem and particular respect that they hold for the priest in his very being as a



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priest.

The primary promoters of priestly vocations are the priests themselves. Few young people come to the priesthood without there being at least one priest who, by the example of his life, awoke in them the desire to become a priest. Priests known for their life of prayer, radiant with the joy of the Lord, humble before the divine mysteries and before their priestly dignity, celebrating daily the sacrifice of the mass with devotion, with zeal and with due attention to the liturgical 'rules', priests who regularly receive the sacrament of Reconciliation and are always available to administer this sacrament to the faithful — these priests, conscious as they are of their proper identity and of their mission, draw young people to want to imitate them in their priestly life.