

Priesthood Sunday – 2008

Last Sunday in several communities, our parishes celebrated Priesthood Sunday. In recent years both Serra International and Worldwide Marriage Encounter have designated a day in which parishes would honor their priests and in simple ways thank them for their service. I was privileged to be with parishioners of St. Mary's Cathedral and Notre Dame Parish at St. Marguerite D'Youville Academy as people from the Ogdensburg area gathered to honor and thank their priests. All of us like to be appreciated and priests are no exception.

Priesthood Sunday serves another very important purpose. More than honoring our priests, it honors the priesthood. It gives parents and families an occasion to reflect on the importance of creating in their homes positive attitudes and affection for the priesthood. It helps to remind all of us that from among all who are called to holiness in Christ, some are called to the priesthood. Hopefully they will respond with humble readiness.

Each priest has his own vocation story. For some the awareness came early. Others were called later in life. Most were invited by someone to consider the priesthood. The call of God is sometimes heard through the voice of another. Sometimes it is heard as a tiny whisper in the quiet of our own thoughts. Prayer and reflection open not only the ears, but the mind and heart to God's call. It is not a quick process.

People sometimes ask me when I decided I wanted to be a priest. In my case it came early. My wonderful, old pastor served our parish for forty-five years. He asked me in 3rd or 4th grade to be an altar boy and took the time throughout grammar school to encourage me. At the time I did not know what a priest's life was like, but I liked what I saw. In eighth grade, he suggested that I go to the Preparatory Seminary in Buffalo – a day school – where I would go home every night. In those days you were in the Preparatory Seminary for four years of high school and two years of college. It provided me with ample opportunity to be associated with other young men who had the same aspirations. (Of the 81 who started with me in first year high school, nine were ordained.)

Following the Preparatory Seminary I was assigned to study at St. John Vianney Seminary in East Aurora for the last two years of college and four years of theology. (Among my classmates were the late Father Ivan Boyea and the late Msgr. Gerald Service, priests of the Diocese of Ogdensburg, who have been called home to God.) During these long years of Seminary study, I had many opportunities to deepen my relationship with God and to decide if the priesthood was the life for me. The Seminary was a graced period that prepared me for the privilege of serving God's people.

I am grateful to God for the gift of my vocation as I am sure the priests who serve you are. I pray each day that God will inspire other young men to follow the Lord's call. I pray also for our priests that they will be happy and faithful in their vocation serving the people of this Diocese and leading us all ever closer to Christ.

At the present time, the Diocese of Ogdensburg has eighty-four active diocesan priests and thirty-five retired priests, many of whom continue to serve to the extent that they are able. We have five young men preparing for the priesthood at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia.

We all have heroes in life from the youngest to the oldest of us. My hero is the parish priest. He serves day in and day out in quiet and effective ways. He is with his people at all the important moments of life. And he does so much in the parish that goes unnoticed and is therefore not appreciated.

Father Michael Heher in a recent book, *The Lost Art of Walking on Water*, describes the complicated, wide-ranging and multi-faceted life of a priest. It touches almost all aspects of life.

“We are often bureaucrats charged with worry about the lights, locks, leaks, loot, litter, and liability – especially liability these days. But we also direct the spiritual and moral formation of adults, the upbringing of children in the ways of the faith, the organization and direction of many intersecting groups, the management of often tight finances and the fund-raising it requires. We explain the scriptures, pass on the tradition and history of the church, and facilitate the conversion of souls, not to mention fielding frequent questions and doubts about the meaning of life and human destiny.” (p.116)

I am grateful to our priests for all they do. I pray that God will inspire the sturdy and faith-filled young men of our diocese to consider carefully the call of God. The priesthood is an exciting and challenging and wonderful life for those called. After almost forty years as a priest, I can tell you that although there have been challenges, each day has brought me joy and fulfillment as I offered Mass, celebrated the sacraments, comforted the sorrowing, visited the sick and those imprisoned and did countless other things along the way. As Abbe Lacodaire, the famous preacher at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris said: “My God, what a life! And it is yours, O Priest of Jesus Christ.”

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Bishop of Ogdensburg
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