

Along The Way

With Bishop Matthew H. Clark



Ministry of the Priest in the Diocesan Church

(Last of the three-part series of Bishop Matthew H. Clark's speech at the clergy conference.)

Let me make a considerable shift in focus but remain within the theme of the ministry of the priest in the local Church by asking you to think about it from the perspective of the laity. What do the laity find most appealing, inviting in their priests? What do they ask of us? What are the guideposts, standards or criteria they hold out to us by which we can change or develop in response to all of the pastoral challenges which lie before us? I do not know the answer to those questions, but I have been helped in thinking about them by an article published recently in America called, "How to Identify a Future Priest." — Jo Ann Miller, Patrick McCaslin, George A. Deinlein "How to Identify a Future Priest," America, Vol. 150 No. 6 (Feb. 18, 1984), pp. 104-108.

The article describes in some detail the methodology followed in an attempt to isolate and identify the qualities which seem to mark persons especially gifted for effective priestly ministry.

Through a long series of interviews with those judged to be particularly effective, gifted, successful priests; and through interviews with a whole network of their peers and those they served the process identifies what are called themes or recurring patterns of thought which characterize the dominant behavior of a person. The process is meant to "identify most reliably the qualities always known to be present in the sort of priests that the Church and the people of God have always wanted more of..." (Ibid, p. 105)

According to the article, the most important themes or qualities suiting a person for priestly service are the following:

1. **PRESENCE:** regularly conscious of God's presence and beneficent action...in self and in others. Experiences continual response to God...this distinguishes the priest and affords him constant opportunity to help other people see God's presence in ordinary experience.

2. **RELATOR:** desires positive relationships with others...has strategy to build them...positive human relationships range from acceptance and recognition of another's worth to active willingness to sacrifice one's life for another...moves easily beyond the minimum to seek an extended and enduring relationship of mutual support with others...from this point of view: no Christianity without relationships.

3. **ENABLE:** experiences satisfaction at each increment of growth in another...not only attuned to noticing growth but expresses appreciation of it...becomes involved in assisting still further development...frees for growth by supporting, teaching, delegating...helps others understand meaning of their own experiences...searches with them to help them find their own choices...respects their need for ownership of their decisions...by supporting their struggle to do so sets them up for success.

4. **EMPATHY:** capacity for using subtle clues to sense or read the feelings of another person...uses this knowledge not to manipulate but to plan how to develop a trusting relationship...can offer sense and describe feelings of another person before the person can...but most effectively would use their empathy to determine the readiness of a person to clarify and disclose feelings.

5. **COURAGE:** capacity to ask others to make commitments...in face of resistance, a courageous priest will only

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increase his determination...can give voice to important and relevant ideas but without becoming angry...has capacity to be direct and straightforward with people...to take charge...to give directions when necessary...ready to meet with people in very difficult times in their lives, and at those times he is able to call to their attention their talents and their opportunities for growth. (Ibid, pp. 105-106)

These ring true to me for three reasons: one is that I can remember the priests I have known and now know, and realize that these themes were/are very much a part of them. Secondly, it intrigues me deeply to realize in how many ways the Lord in His own ministry gave expression to these themes. Thirdly, they describe very much what I would like to become in my own ministry. I invite you in your prayer to consider the Lord in light of these themes. I think you will find it of great interest as well to let these thoughts touch your own priestly ministry. It may be helpful to speak about these qualities with your colleagues in ministry and with the people you serve.

I hope you are taken as I am by the convergence between the encouragement given by the two bishops and the themes presented in the article just summarized. To me that convergence drives home the realization that we all minister most effectively in the local Church when we are more and more aware of our own humanity and that of others who with us are members of our faith community.

There is a humility in that which frees us to be ourselves before others and provides the root possibility for us to be bearers of that compassion and kindness which touch human hearts and allow them to be still enough to find God in the quiet breath of the Spirit.

The same humility draws us to a profound kind of service which allows us to be receivers and then to become proclaimers of thanks. Henri Nouwen in his book "Gracias" captures that so well when in what I judge to be the central theme expression of his book he says, "Gratitude is the attitude which enables us to receive the hidden gifts of those we want to serve and to make these gifts visible to the community as a source of celebration." — Nouwen, Henri J.M., "Gracias: A Latin American Journal." (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 18.

That insight was the fruit of the isolation and powerlessness Nouwen experienced when he immersed himself as fully as he could into the culture and language of Peru. He says of that experience:

"What moves me most in reflecting on these opportunities is that they lead us to the heart of ministry and mission. The more I think about the meaning of living and acting in the name of Christ, the more I realize that what I offer to others is not my

intelligence, skill, power, influence or connections, but my own human brokenness through which the love of God can manifest itself. The celebrant in Leonard Bernstein's Mass says: 'Glass shines brighter when it is broken...I never noticed that.' To me that is what ministry and mission are all about. Ministry is entering with our human brokenness into communion with others and speaking a word of hope. (Ibid. p.18)

It is that basic disposition of heart which we cannot achieve but can only pray for, which will be the source of our strength in ministry in the years ahead in the Diocese of Rochester.

It is the kind of disposition which will allow us to be inviting, hospitable and encouraging of others. It will free us from any sense of protecting our own turf and prerogatives and will allow us to seek out, help develop and rejoice in one another's gifts and those of our people.

An appreciation of our own weakness will allow the gentle strength of Christ to rise in us and allow us to be the healers, reconcilers and edifiers we and our people want us to be.

This attitude of soul does not understand competition or rivalry and cannot stand at peace in the midst of that which breeds rancor, isolation, or hopelessness. It is a spirit which rests easily, if not without sacrifice, in the heart of our Lord who came not to be served but to serve.

It allows us to admit our own ignorance and to draw on the skills and knowledge of others. It allows us to be weak and vulnerable in a way that calls forth the deepest strength of those who judge themselves to be not of much good to anyone.

Such a spirit brings much rejoicing, not threat or fear, when the vitality and life of the community we serve overflows our ability to manage or control or even understand it. And when that kind of spirit is present the overflow pours into all the empty places in us because we are available to God in His people.

If we can support one another in our prayer for that kind of priestly disposition we can handle in union with our people and co-workers any challenges the Lord might place before us.

If the anticipated short-range decline in the number of priests calls us to new pastoral provisions for the service of the community, a sense of our oneness will allow us to do that with the kind of harmony born of a common spirit of sacrifice.

If the same circumstance leaves us aware of a greater need in us for flexibility and interdependence we will not cling to the ways of the past to which we may have grown accustomed but which no longer serve the needs of God's people.

If the needs of the times call us to new collaborative relationships of pastoral leadership with religious men and women and other baptized ministers in the Church, male and female, we will enter those with positive spirit making decisions for the good of God's people rather than for the preservation of status or privilege.

To have said all that is not to say that it will be easy. No! Persons and groups of persons don't usually change overnight the habits of years even when they desperately want to. We'll struggle as humans do, and must, with justice and equity, equal treatment and the reality of special circumstances and the same old propensity to sin which can drag us down now.

But we will do it because that kind of humble, serving spirit (i.e. the spirit of Christ) disposes us to an attitude of dialogue rather than dominance.

Ours it is to be tireless in engaging in dialogue of this kind with our society, our peers, our people and our own experience.

One final word: I feel that it is at the heart of my ministry to call you constantly to put on the servant, sacrificing mind and heart of Christ in the ways I have been trying to describe. That I believe is true because it is the only kind of presence which in this day and age will reach the hearts of people. But, I believe it as well because I think the signs are clear that we are being called to be a prophetic Church, free enough to speak with bold love against the darkness of the age.

Even a cursory glance at the world around us indicates that there are vast areas of our life untouched by the flame of the gospel.

People starve in the midst of abundance, nations arm to the teeth in the name of peace, economic empires are built on the heads of the poor. Some add luxury to luxury while at the other end of the chain what little they have is taken from the poor.

Our social teaching of the past 80 years is rich and challenging. Much of it is integrated in the documents of Vatican II and most certainly has been reinforced by the work of Paul VI and John Paul II. Now there are indications that the fearful challenge of that body of teaching is seeping into our life in a way that will purify us and call us to new levels of courage.

Whether I read that correctly or not, I know that our future together will not lack challenges which test our courage.

The faith of our people, the generosity of so many servants in the Church, including you, will sustain us in anything the Lord may ask of us.

For my part, I am proud to serve in the Church of Rochester.

I thank you for priestly ministry, your warm presence here and for the generous attention with which you have heard me out.

May Jesus, our High Priest, ever be our model and strength.

THE POPE

Absolution Is Personal

Vatican City (NC) — Here is the Vatican text of Pope John Paul II's talk in English at his weekly general audience March 28.

Dear brothers and sisters, After rising from the dead, Jesus gave his apostles the power to forgive sins when he said: "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them." In other words, he instituted the sacrament of penance. Last week we spoke about the accusation of sin, which is part of this sacrament. Today I wish to emphasize the absolution, which is the act of forgiveness. It is God's response to the person who accuses himself of sin, expresses sorrow and a purpose of amendment.

On the part of the priest, the absolution signifies the judgment of God, but this judgment is also the judgment of a father who desires the conversion of sinners. We see what God thinks of sin when we look at the death and Resurrection of Jesus, who himself becomes our reconciliation.

Absolution, then, is a pure gift of God. It is offered by the church acting in the person of Christ. It is something personal, meant for the individual. For this reason the church insists repeatedly on individual absolution. It is my prayer that everyone will rediscover in the pardon of this sacrament the peace of the risen Christ.

My special greetings go to the Knights and Ladies of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. May God bless your activities at the service of his church. I welcome also the other pilgrims from Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and the United States. The peace of the Lord Jesus be with you all.

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