

THE THIRD CROSS

Vocation to the Catholic Priesthood

by

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WHAT IS A CATHOLIC PRIEST?

A Catholic priest is first of all a Catholic – no less than and no more than any other Catholic. This may seem like a simple statement – but it needs to be made. St. Augustine speaks of being a Christian *with* the flock he shepherds as a bishop, but a bishop *for and above* them. A priest holds the same position as far as authority and responsibility is concerned – being in a sense an extension of his ordaining bishop.

And so: what is a Catholic? Taken from a separate pamphlet on the subject:

A Catholic is one who is baptized into the Death and Resurrection of Christ! He/she is a “new creation” because of their “going down into the waters” of death – and coming up dripping with the “waters of life!” What changed in the process was infusion of the Holy Spirit of God which raised Christ from death – the same Spirit that “breathed over the waters” at the very beginning of creation – the very same Spirit that validates and vivifies the entire Church as gift from the Father and the Son.

For the baptized there is an irrevocable ontological change that can never be undone. The very being of the new Christian is entirely different than it was before the baptismal ceremony. Where before there was a natural man (woman) – loved and gifted by God, true – but incapable of self-redemption – now there is a child of God who has super-natural powers and gifts as a member of God’s own family.

A Catholic is one who is confirmed and strengthened and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a life of relatedness – in a community of believers – the Church – the living Body of Christ – sharing with one another gifts given for the sake of all. No one can nor is expected to do it all – we are however each expected to do our own custom-made part with tools that have been fashioned just for us.

A Catholic is one whose primary spiritual nourishment is the Holy Eucharist – derived from the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass (by the working of the Holy Spirit) – which we do in memory of the one who commanded us to do it. We receive the Risen Christ (as

well by the working of the Holy Spirit) who simultaneously receives us and reassures us of his friendship, his care and his power to help us live good, useful and redemptive lives.

A Catholic is one who avails him/her self of the Sacrament of Penance when the symphony of his life is “out of tune” **Self Others Nature God (SONG)**. Nothing is more irritating to all involved than an out of tune instrument. It is only by the working of the Holy Spirit that this reconciliation – this returning to the right path can occur! There is no other way!

A Catholic is one who can be fortified with a special sacrament when sickness comes or death is near. The Anointing of the Sick produces great joy and hope and peace for the sick Catholic. The Holy Spirit fills and hovers over the sick one – and leads them ever forward to health, wholeness, perfection and fulfillment.

But rather than a special sacrament like that of Marriage to reflect the self-giving love of God for his people...the priest – by the working of the Holy Spirit in him - is called to a different kind of special sacrament which also has as its primary focus to channel the love of God both to and from God’s own people! – especially in the Church, which he created for our benefit on our pilgrim way back home.

From the moment of the Prayer of Consecration and the Laying on of Hands everything becomes different again for the baptized, confirmed and now ordained Christian man. By his ordination, a priest ontologically becomes configured in an irrevocable way to Christ the head and Shepherd of the Church (by the working of the Holy Spirit)! This is a change in “being” “ontology” – it can never be “changed back” for any reason whatsoever. Just as one can never become “unbaptized” or “unconfirmed” – these are alterations of being that are permanent – demonstrating the faithfulness of God to his promises and covenant – a priest is a priest forever!

A priest, subsequently, receives a change in the way he is regarded and addressed by not only those in the church, but also in the world. His title becomes “Reverend Father” – correlating to the ontological change. This too can never change. Even in our secular military and political society title remains until death. A “General” or a “Private” is so until death. A President of the United States is “Mr. President” – until death. Even more so is it true of a priest who carries his reconfigured being with him into eternity. “You are a priest forever!” Subsequently – a priest should always be referred to as “Father” – by everyone, including fellow priests. It is my experience that when this occurs the true dignity of this very sacred and special vocation is preserved and celebrated! In this way – the priest can remember exactly who and what he is, and who and what he is not! (So much of the difficulties that priests have found themselves in over the years is that they “forgot who/what they are!”)

A priest has grace and power available to him which was just not there before the ordination ceremony began - by the Holy Spirit working in him:

A priest *prays with Christ* the prayer of the Church: the Liturgy of the Hours, unceasingly: to the glory and worship of God the Father.

A priest *offers with Christ* the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass – re-presenting Calvary on the altar – each day of his life – both for and with the People of God, but for himself as well.

A priest forgives sin *in the name of Christ* and the Church. What an amazing thing it is to actually and truly forgive sin through the Sacrament of Penance.

A priest is sent on a mission of pastoral charity – to bring the *mission of Christ* to the ends of the earth until he comes again. This means that he is literally sent somewhere by his superior, and when he – through obedience - arrives he has the special power to do his work – whatever it may be! The more the priest gets out of the way and gives himself totally to Christ – the more effective he will be.

A priest shepherds the People of God – *configured as he is to Christ the Good Shepherd*. He leads them gently, lovingly, compassionately, patiently. He teaches them, rules them and guides them. He nurtures them and protects them and would even give his life for them: which he does in many ways, great and small.

A priest does all these things using among other virtues the prayed-for “priestly virtues” of *humility, obedience, joy, prudence, patience, courtesy, simplicity of life, integrity of life, fidelity to his life and calling, all kept alive by a slow burning zeal – the kindling fire of the Holy Spirit* --- refreshed and renewed at each and every celebration of Eucharist – ever leading him forward with courage and perseverance to his work of pastoral charity – giving all to Christ – so Christ can use him as He would.

But right up there with all of the other gifts and powers that are his from ordination forward – a priest is one who has been especially chosen by God to carry the weight of a THIRD CROSS.

When a Catholic is baptized he/she is baptized into the death of Christ on the Cross – and into his glorious Resurrection. At that time he/she is given as a special gift of God a perfectly weighted cross to carry through life. “Unless you take up your cross and follow in my footsteps you will not have everlasting life.” Jesus was not kidding when he said this – he meant it. It is perfectly sized because with family, parish and friends to help a baptized person can carry their cross with dignity and honor. As life goes on, if the cross which manifests itself in many different ways as we grow up – becomes too heavy – it is usually of our own doing – and not God’s – or anyone else’s. The Sacrament of Penance – later in life – helps to trim the cross back to its right size.

When a baptized Catholic is confirmed, the tremendous gifts of the Holy Spirit are given him/her – in order to be of optimum service to all the brothers and sisters in the community which is the church: gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, piety, fortitude, fear of the Lord. At the same time – the cross is weighted with a second major “fitting” of circumstances and purposes known by God alone. But it is with the great gifts and charisms of the Sacrament of Confirmation we can again most efficiently and effectively carry our newly-designed “right-sized” cross. We need remember though – that the gifts of the Spirit are not merely given as external objects – the very gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit living within his own temple: the body of the baptized and confirmed Catholic – is greatly increased and multiplied. There is now certain clarity of understanding of the presence of God within us – and our relationship to Him and to others!

When a man is ordained a priest – he not only is configured to Christ as Head and Shepherd of the Church (as I mentioned earlier), but he also – and this is my own experience and opinion – given a THIRD weighting of his personal CROSS: one that can be quite misunderstood, even by priests. I, myself, was unaware of the conceptualization of this THIRD CROSS until I was ordained for over 30 years. But, hindsight being 20/20 – it

seems clear to me now that on ordination day, Christ's own gift to a new charge is a specially increased, weighted and lovingly dispatched cross (usually unlike the other two crosses.) As in the other two crosses: if one simply and with faith asks for help in the carrying: it will be given immediately and always – the Holy Spirit will always help those who ask for his help!

This special configuration to Christ that is the reality of priesthood, I think, cannot be separated from an intense sharing in the very cross of Christ – on a deeper level: hence, THE THIRD CROSS!

At this point it might be good to make some important emphases:

The first is the absolute essential necessity for the newly ordained or for any priest at all – to center his entire life on the daily celebration of Eucharist – and praying the entire Liturgy of the Hours – to the extent that it is possible. The ideal is seven prayer times a day which due to scheduling and time constraints have to be modified – practically on a regular basis – but, the underlying framework and sense of rhythm of daily Office – like the steps of Jacob's Ladder to the heavens – needs to be imbedded in the mind of the priest! And so there is Office of Readings; Morning Prayer; Midday Prayer; Evening Prayer; Night Prayer – along with the celebration of Eucharist; and a time for private devotional prayer and reflection – ideally in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. This needs to include a strong devotion to the Holy Spirit – for the Spirit is the “engine” which runs the “vehicle” of the Church. No Spirit, no life, no motion, no Church! Everything is done in the Church by the working of the Holy Spirit!

Just doing this much can be a full time job: ask any monk! And the steadiness and routineness of it can indeed become in varied ways part of the “Third Cross.”

“The Mass is ended. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” This goes especially for the priest. Living is for giving! Christ gave it all! We, as priests, are called to do the same! Doing this in a host of different ways during the day can contribute quite a bit to the realization of a “Third Cross.” But we must never forget that the more we give ourselves to Christ for his own personal pastoral use the more he will do just that – and the cross will become a great deal lighter – more manageable – and amazingly enough just our own size. Jesus was limitless self-gift (by means of the Holy Spirit working in him.) Empowered by the same Spirit, we too can feel ourselves extending far beyond what we ever thought possible or is even explainable.

As I mentioned briefly above – this whole idea of the THIRD CROSS is not emphasized – perhaps not even mentioned at all in seminary training – especially in the last years just prior to ordination. It is my opinion that this is a noticeable omission in priestly formation. A man has a right to know all that is involved before he freely makes a decision to be ordained.

Also, as the reality of the THIRD CROSS makes itself known in the life of the newly ordained priest – it is also my opinion that a structured program of post-seminary type support, classes, periods of prayer, reflection and discussion on that part of the newly

ordained, their bishop, their pastors and peers – to help them through the significant changes that occur at the ordination ceremony. This could ideally extend from ordination to three years after or more. Foremost in this process is the development of a very close and personal relationship between the newly ordained and the bishop. A priest can act only in virtue of his bishop. There must be a deep and trusting personal working relationship between priest and bishop. As “*Pastores Dabo Vobis*” (John Paul II) tells us: bishops ought to consider their priests as sons, and the priest should relate to the bishop as to a loving father. Bishop and priests ought to pray together often - individually and as a group. The Holy Spirit works best when shepherds have their open hearts ready for His input. So often on leaving the cathedral the newly ordained – deep down - think that “it is all down-hill” from here on out. Actually, the real hill of it all has just loomed in front of them. And they need to be guided on their journey up it!

There also seems to be at least two syndromes that occur in the first year or so of ordination: the Messiah Complex; and the Martyr Complex. Neither of these seems completely avoidable. The Messiah Complex results from a newly ordained priest’s conception of himself as “savior” of whatever pastoral situation he finds himself in. It is his subconscious belief that his “flock” to some extent has been waiting for him to arrive to “rescue” them from all their varied and sundry ways. The working of Jesus the Shepherd is indeed powerful in him, as it is in any priest – but since he has no experience in using the power – this “feeling” inside the new priest can be a common occurrence. Thus – a closely supervised first year under the guidance of truly caring, loving and understanding veteran priest’s – along with the bishop – would seem to be a mandatory requirement.

The Martyr Complex can occur when the new priest feels an overly exaggerated sense of “messiahship” – and that the weight of the entire Catholic church and world are on his shoulders. It would seem that his personal suffering and angst is necessary for it all to work out according to plan. Unfortunately, this is as well a common occurrence – the sad and pained look on the face of such a priest celebrating an overly “depressing” Eucharist would be a good sign of this complex. Again – compassionate guidance and support can help a priest with this mistaken approach to ministry.

When a new priest walks out of the cathedral on ordination day he truly is a changed and different being from the one who walked in. *Nothing* about his life is really the same. Just as the baptized are made totally new creations – so too the priest is a totally transformed creation – transformed and configured into the very likeness of Christ the Head and Shepherd of the Church. That is quite a change. And it takes a great deal of getting used to.

It is my own aside opinion that a 5th year of seminary training be added. The entire 4th year being the transitional deacon year – the 5th year the first year of ordination year. A deacon should be ordained a priest and then spend the extra year in parish work while still in close contact and in formal training with the seminary. We owe it to the young men to truly help them “learn the ropes” before we release them for full active duty.

One of the projects of this time would be to identify – with the aid of their spiritual director and guide – what is the true nature of their own personal THIRD CROSS...and to have help in forming the beginnings of a life-long plan to deal with it most effectively.

A priest's THIRD CROSS can actually – with the help of the Holy Spirit – be viewed as a tremendous gift sent by God to keep the priest ever vigilant, ever prayerful, ever hopeful, ever useful in the hands of Christ the Shepherd – keeping the priest's focus off of himself, his self-image, his self-love, his selfish desires, his agenda, and his comfort – if he indeed retains any of these characteristics.

In my own experience, I have found that the most effective way to celebrate my third cross is to continue to give myself totally to Christ – as I did on ordination day – and truly have no agenda other than doing the will of the Father, as it comes through Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit – through the spiritual chain of command emanating from the apostles to the bishops to the presbyterate to me! When we turn away from our own ideas and obey with the obedience of Christ who came not to do his own will but the will of the one who sent him – then the third cross is bearable. We unite it with the Passion of Christ and with hope we are confident that it will be transformed, as we are transformed throughout our entire priestly lives into a pleasing steward of the mysteries of God.

A priest endowed lovingly with the THIRD CROSS by Jesus is called to be above all else a joyful servant of that Cross.

The joy of God is the Holy Spirit!

A joyful servant therefore - immersed in the Holy Spirit that was poured forth on him on ordination day – will primarily bring joy, hope and peace to all he serves – each and every day – while cheerfully and happily carrying his THIRD CROSS!

[Addendum 03-28-2009 – I have recently come to a summary understanding of a vocation to the priesthood which includes just three elements: 1) the willingness to SUFFER; 2) the willingness of PRAY; 3) the willingness of BE A FRIEND. Is this not what God the Father asked his Son before he was sent into our world: Can you suffer? Can you pray? Can you be a friend – even to those who are your enemies, and who will eventually kill you? I believe that this is also what Jesus asked of his Apostles: Can you suffer (drink the cup that I will drink)? Can you pray (with me for at least one hour)? Can you be a friend to your brothers and sisters and all of humanity – even when you too are persecuted– sharing with them the Word's of Friendship; and the Broken Bread of Friendship, my very body and blood?

These three things ought to be primary in an interview for a prospective seminarian these days: especially, now, when the Church is called to the front lines of defending all that is good and right and holy and concerned about LIFE. Young man, can you SUFFER? Can you PRAY? Can you BE A FRIEND to all others – even to those who might kill you?

Thanks be to God – every priest will always have the special grace of ordination to see him through whatever his vocation entails!]

WHEN SICKNESS COMES TO A PRIEST

I was going to write a separate pamphlet about sickness and the priest, but I decided that having it in the same place makes more sense. It naturally seems to flow.

We pray that priests – newly ordained – or ordained any amount of time – maintain good health throughout their ministries. However, nature being nature – the body being corruptible; the mind being destructible; the spirit being susceptible – a priest, like any other human being may find himself facing illness in any or all of these areas.

My first word here is to the priest:

- Never lose hope!
- Rest in the Spirit of God's Mercy and Love
- Trust and have faith that all is fundamentally well!

My first word to any one who is in any kind of a supporting relationship to the sick priest:

- Never lose visible respect for the dignity of the priest you are attending! Ever!
- Seek the Spirit of Joy and Peace to help you always bring comfort and consolation to the sick priest.
- Pray unceasingly that God the Father's will be done – the example of Christ is taken into consideration – and that resolution peace, restoration and health is possible by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Before going into greater detail concerning the above I would like to suggest that the “key player” in resolving health issues for a priest is his bishop.

While it is true that everyone, including the priest is responsible for taking care of himself mentally, physically and spiritually – this process ought to be accomplished with the genuine interest and personal input of the bishop. As I said earlier in this document the relationship between bishop and priest – in the sentiment of Pope John Paul II in “*Pastores Dabo Vobis*” - ought to be like that of father and son. And what father is not genuinely interested in the overall health issues of his son!

And so, it is when the priest – for any number of reasons – finds himself becoming sick – (in mind, body or spirit) the bishop should be notified – ideally by the priest himself – or by one who is in a line of health-care prescribed by the diocese.

It would seem that one area that has fallen along the wayside throughout the centuries in the church is the use of curing of illness and disease as an ordinary charism. After Pentecost a great many members of the community had this charism or power. Christ himself commissioned his disciples (which include the early bishops) to “Cure diseases of every kind!” – as a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God among the people. This has fallen into much disuse. Lately it has been restored somewhat in the extended use of the Sacrament

of the Anointing of the Sick. But I believe it is meant to be still an ordinary function of the bishop of the diocese. He has power to teach! He has power to preach! He has power to cure! – and if priests are extensions of the bishop on the local level – it would seem that they too have that power – as a charism of their ordination.

And so, the bishop is in a wonderful pastoral position to intercede to Jesus and the Father for the restoration of health and well-being of his priests by the working of the Holy Spirit. Some times it might be “prayer from a distance” – some times it would be more appropriate for the bishop and priest to be in the same location so they can pray together for the outpouring of the Spirit in this particular way! I am convinced that a lot of mental, physical and spiritual malady could be dissolved in this way!

Now this all has a bearing on the idea of the THIRD CROSS – introduced above. Sometimes the sickness – of mind, and/or body, and/or spirit can itself BE the THIRD CROSS. This makes that cross even more special – because it gives the opportunity for the sick priest to conform himself to the sufferings of Christ! The bishop and priest therefore need to keep in mind in their prayer that complete removal of the illness or disease may not be the will of the Father, and that the inpouring of the Holy Spirit at the time of prayer for healing will be the inpouring of joy, and hope and peace in the face of the THIRD CROSS itself!

The bishop then, is a key player in the sickness concerns of the priest.

The second key player is the presbyterate – the fraternity of priests – to which the sick priest belongs. Unconditional care, concern and brotherly love ought to be hallmarks of this fraternity throughout the entire duration – even if it means for life.

His brother priests should ever respect the dignity and person of their sick member. Making him feel that he is a valued part of their group is a must – no matter what the sickness might be – mental, physical or spiritual. As I mentioned above one way to do this is to refer to him as “Father ____” Assuring him of their prayerful and even social support and inclusion can make all the difference in the prognosis and eventual outcome of the sickness.

And since they too have the special power (charism) of healing – the prayer of the presbyterate (both individually and as a group) for and with the sick priest can produce amazing results – If not miraculous! This prayer need always be for the will of the Father – in the name of the Son – by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Healthcare professionals having priests as clients need to know about what it means to be a priest. They need to know that as a baptized person, the priest has built into him a reservoir of *faith, hope and charity* – that can be taken into consideration when treating the patient.

The confirmation gifts of *wisdom* (divine light), *understanding* (ability to read-into situations), *counsel* (working conscience), *knowledge* (of how the creature/creator relationship works), *piety* (tenderness for others), *fortitude* (strength in the face of difficulties), *fear of the Lord* (humility in the awesome presence of God!) – can be called upon and engaged in treatment of a priest-patient.

And knowing that by his ordination the priest-patient has the power to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, and to forgive sins, and to shepherd God's people with the very heart of Christ himself – including curing them, and alleviating their sufferings – can be significant in the way he/she regards and treats a priest-patient.

It is when the priest is sick that he needs to be reminded most of all that he is still a priest!

Sometimes a priest's sickness is such that it is appropriate to him to seek a more intensified treatment program than can be given by an outpatient program. A variety of reasons may point to the use of a "treatment facility" in such cases. A treatment facility for clergy is recommended above others! But, even treatment facilities for clergy must be carefully selected.

Successful long-term treatment of a priest more intense mental, spiritual (even physical) illness must begin the same way as all other sickness – with the direct, pastoral, paternal care of the bishop and presbyterate (as described above) – and then by means of a healthcare facility that has as its primary focus the fact that their clients are priests! Many times a reason that a priest finds himself in such a facility is that he forgot – or never really understood fully what it means to be a priest. Restoring a clear vision of priesthood is the primary goal of such treatment – and treatment facilities. Any other type of mental and/or physical rehabilitation must flow from this spiritual reinforcement!

A great many treatment centers have less success rates than they might have because they "treat Joe for X" rather than "treating Father Joe, who is dealing with X, for reason Y, and needs Z to restore his Spirit!" This is an entirely different approach!

The power and working of the Holy Spirit in such a treatment center cannot be emphasized enough! *It is by the working of the Holy Spirit that everything happens!* Everything – both in the world – and most especially in the Church – and in the lives of priests! It is by the working of the Holy Spirit that healing and restoration of more seriously sick priests can and does occur.

Most dioceses and religious houses have a vicar or advocate for sick clergy. Such vicars/advocates need to be priests of deep prayer and devotion to God the Father, Son – but most especially the Holy Spirit. Working with the Spirit in ministering to the sick priest can be a very joyful, hopeful and peaceful experience both for the vicar/advocate and their sick brother priest – as the Holy Spirit *is* the joy, hope and peace of God!

I will conclude by getting back to my opening points of this section:

When sickness comes to a priest:

To the priest:

- *Never lose hope!* God truly is especially close to us when we are sick in mind, body, spirit. Sometimes sickness just happens! Other times we contribute to it by our behavior! Other times it might be the gift of the THIRD CROSS that a priest is lovingly invited to carry in his priesthood. And – we cannot forget that other times it

is the enemy – the devil – who is trying to derail a holy man from his sacred and holy duties. This is the case a lot more times than we might like to admit. A simple prayer: *SATAN BE GONE, IN JESUS' NAME!* is a good way to start the road to recovery, if this is the case. Devotion to St. Benedict and the use of a duly blessed St. Benedict Medal has been used for this purpose for 1500 years! *Come, Holy Spirit fill my mind with divine light, my heart with heavenly grace (love) my body with healing strength –* follows immediately on the heels of that prayer of exorcism.

- *Rest in the Spirit of God's Mercy and Love.* If you – in your sickness as a priest find yourself with free time simply repeat the short prayer: *O HOLY SPIRIT!* (Trusting that the Spirit will intercede with God the Father for you and for your particular needs). Then, rest deeply in the Spirit who loves, fills and surrounds! Repeat this prayer as often as is necessary.
- *Trust in Jesus* and have faith that all is fundamentally well! Because it is! Jesus – who loves you and called you to be his priest, will never let you down! The peace of Christ be with you – to assure you of this – that peace being the Holy Spirit himself!

To those who relate with the sick priest:

- *Never forget and lose visible respect for the dignity of the priest* you are attending! He is *not* just like any other person. He is configured by his ordination to Christ who is Head of the Church – this makes him very different from being a member of the Body of Christ at-large.
- *Seek the Spirit of joy and peace* to help you always bring comfort and consolation to the sick priest. You will know, then, just what to say to him, and do for him if you pray directly to the Holy Spirit.
- *Pray daily* that God the Father's will be done – not yours or the even the priest's himself – that the life and teachings and example of Christ are brought into play somehow, when necessary – and that by the working of the Holy Spirit *healing and health is possible!*

The very last point is this: the sick priest must never take advantage of his situation. Restoration to as much health as is possible – so that he can resume his duty of giving himself totally to Christ so that Christ can carry on his mission through him – must always be forefront in the mind and heart of the convalescing priest!

May I conclude with one of my favorite prayers:

*O Holy Spirit, soul of my soul, I adore You.
Enlighten, guide, strengthen me.
Tell me what I ought to do and command me to do it.
I promise to be submissive to whatever you permit
to happen to me, only show me Your will. Amen.*

- Cardinal Mercier