

2007 EASTER MESSAGE: PRIESTS AND THE EASTER EXPERIENCE

One of the most moving elements in the celebration of Easter is the sight of our priests renewing their priestly commitment during the Mass of the Oils. Easter reminds us that Jesus instituted the priesthood at the Last Supper. It reminds us too that priests are called to be instruments of the Risen Christ for his people.

It is important for the whole of the Church to reflect periodically upon priests' own experiences of the Risen Christ. It is these that strengthen the priest's capacity to serve others.

A personal calling from Christ

The calling to priesthood is a personal one from Jesus himself. The first to hear this call were the Apostles.

Like the prophets of old, a priest's calling comes in various ways. Samuel, for example, heard his call more directly [1 Samuel 3]. Elisha, on the other hand, realised he was called only when Elijah abruptly placed the hair cloak of a prophet on his shoulders [1 Kings 19:19]. There are other examples.

Every priest has his own story of personal calling. It is always an interesting story. But it is Jesus himself who, through the Holy Spirit, has called.

Love through self giving

During the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist: 'Take this all of you and eat it: this is my Body'. 'Take this all of you and drink it: this is my Blood'. The ultimate expressions of his self giving were his sufferings and death.

At his ordination, every priest promises his life to Jesus and to the people assigned to his pastoral care. Imitation of the self-emptying love of Jesus is the ideal to which priests commit themselves.

No priest would claim to have achieved this ideal. It is the vision towards which we struggle daily, conscious always of our weaknesses. It is through our personal struggles that priests develop the understanding needed to support and encourage others in their struggles to follow Christ. And it is our experiences of the Risen Christ helping us that teach us how to help others to draw on his power for their own lives.

Personal Experiences of Christ

Every Christian calling brings its own experiences of the Risen Christ to the extent that each of us responds. We can come to realise that we are having these experiences in various ways. For some, awareness can be immediate. For others, it may come only by looking back after a period of time, or by journaling.

The Sacrament of Marriage

Married couples, for example, find through the Sacrament of Marriage the power of the Risen Christ's divine love strengthening and purifying their married love. Through Christ's love, their human love is gradually purified of selfishness. They discover these experiences to the extent that they pray daily about their marriages and families, and strive towards the ideals of the Christian vocation of marriage.

Couples are empowered too to carry their daily crosses, particularly their marriage and family difficulties. Christ helps them to rise again after minor and major falls from their marriage ideals. He helps them to forgive each other, to bear each other's burdens, to serve each other, and to renew the tenderness of their love when this is needed [*Catechism* 1642].

The Sacrament of Holy Orders

In a similar way, priests experience Christ personally to the extent that they live daily their priestly commitment. They are empowered to carry the crosses that come with their callings – particularly the challenges, disappointments and frustrations of parish life. Christ helps us too to rise again after we have fallen from the ideals of priesthood – particularly that of loving our people and each other with Christ-like self emptying love.

The word of God

Priests experience the Risen Christ as we struggle each day to proclaim his Gospel effectively to congregations, groups and individuals. Like the Apostles, we have to watch our daily routines, for ‘it would not be right for us to neglect the word of God’ [Acts 6:2].

We priests have to pray the scriptures daily, particularly before Mass, and to study the insights of scripture commentaries in order to grow further in our understanding. None of us can give others what we do not have ourselves.

We know that faith is stirred or nurtured in others to the extent that they can see precisely where the Gospel and their personal lives meet. Helping our hearers to do this is a huge challenge. Unless they do so, they will not experience its power in their lives. There are other challenges as well.

Some, for example, suggest that, to attract people today, we should say little about those teachings of Christ that people do not like to hear. Others suggest that we should not call people to convert and change. Then there are those who would have us preach a Christ so bland that one would wonder why he was crucified.

In fact, to ‘edit’ the Gospel so as to appeal to people today would be lack faith in Christ, whose teachings make up the Gospel. And, without conversion, people will drift away from the faith eventually.

Jesus never compromised to attract people. Indeed, when crowds started moving away because of his teaching on the Eucharist, he also challenged his Apostles: ‘What about you, do you want to go away to?’ [John 6:67]. The Risen Lord helps us to remain faithful, and to acknowledge that faith and conversion involve the action of God – and that we are called simply to play our part in God's action.

The Sacraments

We priests know that it is not us, but the Risen Christ, who works through us when we celebrate sacraments. It is he who baptises, changes bread and wine into his Body and Blood, forgives sin and strengthens the sick.

A key part of our role, however, is to help people develop the personal faith needed to participate actively in liturgies; that is, by offering themselves and praying to God from their hearts. As we prepare our own hearts before celebrating a Mass or any sacrament, priests find Jesus touching us also. But we have to watch. If we allow other things to interfere with our preparation, there can be even the temptation for our liturgical celebrations to become routine.

To lead in love

One of the spiritual gifts the Risen Christ gives his priests is that of building Christian community, and of leading it in love. This means helping our people to focus first upon the Eucharist, for Christ alone is the Head who builds Christian community.

It also means calling people to live as followers of Christ in today's world: to teach his Gospel in their places of work, recreation and social contact by the witness of life and words. It means calling them to fulfil their baptismal roles within the Church, especially their parishes.

Leadership in love is the calling to serve our people as Christ showed when, like a slave, he washed the Apostles' feet during the Last Supper. It calls us to work to be servants of the kind of unity the Holy Spirit alone can bring to our parishes, to reconcile differing views, to form people to fulfil their roles in society and in the parish.

Leadership in love calls us to visit and care for the sick and the elderly. The care and encouragement of parents is a special priority. In all of this, priests have experiences of the Risen Christ.

Leadership can also require suffering. There are always unresponsive people, the aggressive, the overly demanding and the disruptive. Most of all, leadership in love means being priests of the Good Shepherd who is constantly seeking to reach out to the lost.

Priestly spirituality

The drive and energy of a priest comes from knowing 'Christ and the power of his resurrection' [Philippians 3:10]. Through this power, Christ energises, renews, consoles and strengthens hope.

There can be another parallel with marriage here. The first joys of married life gradually diminish, and the strength and union within a marriage relationship grow or decline according to the degree of selflessness and effort of each spouse to make the marriage work. Similarly, the joys after ordination diminish, and the strength of the priest's personal relationship with Christ and his people, and his personal fulfilment, depend upon the selflessness and effort of the priest to respond to the spiritual gifts he has received through the 'laying on of hands'. The fulfilment and happiness of married couples and of priests come only with their self giving to those to whom they have committed their lives.

The Eucharist

As priests, our greatest and most personal experiences of the Risen Christ come through the Eucharist. The prepared heart experiences enlightenment, and strengthening resolve towards greater personal conversion; it experiences growing love for God, empowerment for the struggles against personal weaknesses, and deeper intimacy with Jesus himself. The Eucharist is the climax of our day, the moment when we are closest with Jesus himself.

Prayer before Jesus, present in the Blessed Sacrament, also brings rich experiences of the Risen Lord. As Christ's instruments, rather than being our own masters, we priests go to Jesus to pray for the needs of our people. We also seek Christ's guidance for pastoral needs and questions, for how to deal with difficult and disruptive people, for better understanding of confusing situations.

Christ's words: 'Come to me all you who labour and are over-burdened' apply in a special way to those serving his people in his manner. He strengthens us to carry on, consoles our disappointments and gives greater self understanding.

'In the Person of Christ'

The priest serves his people in 'the Person of Christ the Head'. We are instruments of Christ, whose power we celebrate and draw upon through the sacraments. It is he who touches people's hearts through our efforts to help them to relate his whole Gospel to their lives. He touches their hearts through our efforts to express genuinely self giving love in our leadership.

Our challenges are never to water down the challenges of the Gospel, or to give our personal views; rather the teaching of Christ. We are aware of our need never to give in to temptations to dominate, to control others or to place our own convenience first. These are difficult challenges, as anyone would know, and the struggle is constant.

Experiences like Christ in the Gospels

As Christ forms his priest, the priest has experiences similar to Christ in the Gospels. At times he knows loneliness, disappointment, being misunderstood and criticism. He is moved, like the Christ who wept over Jerusalem, by the lack of acceptance of the salvation Christ alone can give, by those who do not practice the faith [Luke 19:41]. The Christ who has called the priests we have today is the Christ who would weep over the vast majority in our Diocese who have drifted from religious practice.

Christ supports each of our priests in all of this to the extent that each opens his heart to Christ. Christ renews the priest through each Hour of the Divine Office as the priest opens his heart for this. We do so by recalling the joys and disappointment of the past hours of the day, and expressing our hopes and fears for the coming hours. Christ supports us too as we pray our daily 'spiritual exercises' of each day.

Faith in Christ's promises

Christ deepens in us also the hope that comes from his promises. The grain of wheat that dies to itself, for example, produces the hundred-fold: the seeds of the Gospel germinate even though results cannot be seen [John 12:24; Mark 4:29].

The priest's whole life is founded upon the promises of Jesus. Without faith in these, his life would be meaningless and futile.

Our future fruitfulness

The country priesthood is not for someone who needs large crowds for personal satisfaction; nor quick results to feel valued. Such motives would be more about us than about Christ and his people. It is for the humble servant, the patient, the persistent, and the faith-filled.

These are the qualities I see and admire most in the priests of our diocese. One of my deepest convictions is that, seen through the prism of Christ's promises, the future fruit of their ministries will be abundant. Of this I have not the slightest doubt.

Please pray for our priests

The priesthood instituted by Christ in the Last Supper that first Easter is a life of richness and deep joy. The glimpses I have given are some of the mosaic pieces on a path that leads the priest to the Risen Christ and all he offers. What the priest discovers as he follows this path is what he can share with his people.

I want to thank the priests of our diocese this Easter for their ministry to our people. It is not easy, and can be very difficult at times. There can be times of personal problems also. But our priests are signs of the love of Christ in the midst of his people, the love of the Good Shepherd and of the Christ weeping over Jerusalem for those who have gone away from his flock.

Let us all appreciate our priests who have renewed their priestly commitment once again this Easter. Let us pray that they continue to grow in their personal experiences of the Risen Christ so that they, in their turn, can continue to encourage and support those they serve in their quest 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection' [Philippians 3:10].