

Seven Deadly Misconceptions About the Catholic Priesthood

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Since I was ordained a priest almost seven years ago, I have always encouraged young men to think about the priesthood, and to remain open to the possibility that God might be calling them to be a priest. It just makes sense to me, that when you love something, and when you have found a way of life that brings you happiness and peace – you want to share it with others. This is what I am after. I want other young men to consider sharing in the extraordinarily rich and beautiful vocation that has brought such joy to my life. I want them to know that the priesthood might just be part of God’s plan for them.

Unfortunately, it is not unusual to run into resistance when I encourage young men to consider the priesthood – not just from the young men themselves – who can often be surprisingly open to the suggestion; but very often from otherwise faithful Catholic parents! When I first began to encounter this resistance from parents, it was a great surprise to me. My mother, who is Irish Catholic to the core, always dreamed of having a son who would be a priest – partly (I think) because there is an ancient Irish belief that the mother of a priest will automatically go straight to heaven! Of course, after raising six, sometimes difficult children, I am pretty sure my mother won’t need my help getting into heaven.

Today, the situation is much different than it was in my mother’s generation. More than half of the young men today who enter the seminary have at least one parent who does not support their decision to do so. Roughly half the men who visit our seminary encounter some type of resistance from their parents. I am sure that the trend toward having smaller families can, in some cases, lead parents to worry about the possibilities of having grandchildren some day. However, I also believe, based on my interactions with many “good” Catholic families, that a wide range of misconceptions have surfaced over the past thirty years with regard to the Catholic priesthood. These misconceptions can be quite harmful, not just to the awesome gift that Christ established when he instituted the priesthood at the Last Supper; but also to

the young men who may be genuinely called to a priestly vocation. As Catholics, we have a responsibility to do everything in our power to counteract these misconceptions rather than perpetuating them. Here are the misconceptions I have encountered in my time as a priest:

1. You shouldn't become a priest if you like girls.

How many times have I heard, "Father, I can't become a priest. I like girls too much." Or worse yet, on several occasions a mother or a father has told me that their eleven year old son shouldn't be a priest because he likes girls too much. Of course, most eleven year old boys are more into frogs or Peyton Manning than they are into dating girls. But the implication here is that somehow priests don't like girls; and as a priest who happens to like girls, that can be a pretty insulting thing to hear. But really what this statement says is that choosing to give your life to something other than marriage; to forego an intimate sexual relationship of love in order to love in a different way – a chaste, celibate way – is somehow impossible or even unnatural. Archbishop Buechlein often says, "The priest is alone so others don't have to be." Certainly, the call to chastity for a priest is not always easy, and can sometimes be a sacrifice – but it is also a genuine gift that allows priests to give of themselves to others in a way that a married person could never do. This is something that seems to have been lost in a contemporary culture that equates sex with love, and labels anyone who does not have a partner as some sort of loser. But Jesus was called to a different way; and with God's grace, those who are authentically called to serve Christ as a priest or religious will find that God will bless those who are faithful to the promise of chaste love with many spiritual children.

2. Only nerdy kids would be interested in being a priest.

One time after Church I was talking to a fifteen year old boy. He was a good athlete and a very outgoing and popular kid and I said, "You know Jeff; you would make a great priest. You really ought to think about becoming a priest." Immediately, his mother jumped into the conversation and said, "Oh no Father, his younger brother, Jimmy, is the one who I think should be a priest." Of course, young Jimmy was the most shy and socially awkward child in their family, and I thought to myself, "This is so typical!" When I talk to high school kids about the priesthood, I tell them God doesn't just need the real quiet and bookish kids (though he can use some of these, too) – he needs the captain of the football team as well as the valedictorian of the class. He needs the leaders; the president of the student body, the leader of the band, the kids who are popular and respected among their

peers. Who do you want as your spiritual leader: someone who never comes out of the rectory except for Mass, or someone you can relate to and respect? When I interview candidates for the seminary, one of the first things I tell them is if you don't think you can be an effective leader, the seminary is not the place for you. To be a priest, you have to be a leader.

3. Priesthood is for other people's children – NOT MINE!

I have a very good friend who is a priest, and he told me once that when he was growing up, every day his parents and his brother would pray together – usually the rosary – and one of the prayers they said every day was a prayer for vocations to the priesthood. When he was twenty-five, he told his parents that he thought God was calling him to the priesthood. His mother started crying (not tears of joy), and his dad told him he was crazy. He told them, “I don't understand – why did we pray for vocations for all those years?” His dad responded “we were praying for priests to come out of other people's families, not ours!” It is understandable that parents who have been called to the vocation of marriage – and who have lived it properly and faithfully - can find it difficult to understand how their child might be called to a different vocation; particularly when it is one that involves sacrificing the possibility of ever having children of their own. And especially when the child may be their only hope of having grandchildren! But priests and religious offer their lives for something bigger – something supernatural; and their parents can be an active participant in this offering by sharing in and supporting their son's life as a priest. There is a tradition in the Church that when a priest is ordained to the priesthood, the bishop anoints the man's hands with Sacred Chrism to signify the sacred duties that will be accomplished through the hands of the priest. The new priest then can wipe the Chrism from his hands with a linen cloth which is called the *maniturga*. When the mother of the priest passes away, the custom is to wrap her hands in the *maniturga* so that when she arrives at the gates of heaven and is asked “what have you done for Christ and His Church?”, the mother can hold out the *maniturga* and say, “I have given my son to serve as a priest.” At my Mass of thanksgiving, when I told that story and gave the *maniturga* to my mother, she cried (tears of joy, of course). But after the Mass my father asked, “So what do I get?” To my father I gave the purple stole that I used to hear my first confession.

4. Being a priest is a very nice career.

Priesthood is not a career or an occupation – it is a way of being – a way of living in and through Jesus Christ. It would be like saying, “being a son is a

nice career,” or “being a husband is a nice career.” Once you are ordained, priesthood is permanently and integrally embedded in your very identity. You cannot “give up” being a priest to become a doctor or a lawyer, any more than you can “give up” being a husband or a father. When I meet with men who are thinking about the priesthood, I try to help them understand this. At the root of the calling must be a desire to radically give oneself, permanently and completely, to Christ and the Catholic Church. Anything short of this motive cannot bear the weight of the priestly vocation.

5. You have to be really holy to be a priest.

When I talk to groups of young people, I will often ask, “Who here wants to be holy?” Generally maybe twenty to thirty percent of the students will raise their hands. Then I will follow up by asking, “Who wants to go to heaven?” In response to this question, everyone’s hand will shoot up, except maybe for a few funny guys sitting in the back of the room. The point is, we are all called to holiness of life by virtue of our baptism – but most people – especially the people who are the most holy – don’t really consider themselves to be holy. Saint Francis of Assisi, arguably one of the holiest men to walk the earth, once said, that of all the sinners in the world, he was the worst. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta once cautioned people not to make her out to be a saint because that would make her irrelevant. She believed that, with God’s help, we can all be extraordinary instruments of His love. Holiness is something that we all must strive to attain, especially priests and religious. But the paradox is, if we are truly holy, we are never really willing or able to admit that we have attained it. The truth of the matter is that holiness can come in all different types of people. To be seeking holiness is to strive to become the fullness of the person God has created us to be. It never looks quite the same, and it doesn’t necessarily conform to stereotypes. To enter the seminary, even to be a priest – you probably should not think of yourself as being holy – but you do have to strive always to live a holy life.

6. Priests live a very lonely life.

This is a misconception on two levels. First, as a priest, I can pretty much be with others whenever I want to be. As priests we receive countless invitations to be with others and to share in the lives of the people we serve. There are also a number of friends and families, who, on short notice, I can drop in on when I need the company of family and friends. I also have several close, intimate friends (some of whom are other priests) with whom I can share my life without having to worry about fulfilling the role of

“Father.” Certainly, there are times in my life when I see a married couple with their children, who truly love one another and are living out the vocation to holy matrimony in a beautiful way and I feel that I am missing out on something special. At times I even long for the gift of married love; but I can honestly say that I have never regretted following the call to priesthood that God has chosen for me. At the end of the day, I always come back to the most important relationship in my life; the one that I can always turn to when I am lonely or filled with anxiety. This is my relationship with my friend, Jesus, and his mother, Mary. When you have Jesus and Mary in your life, you don’t have to be lonely.

7. You can’t be happy as a priest.

This is the biggest misconception of all, but also one of the most widely held. On several occasions I’ve had parishioners say to me, “Oh Father, I don’t want my son to be a priest, I want him to be happy.” The fact that someone would say this didn’t surprise me. The fact that they said it to me – a priest – was really shocking. In our often over-sexualized culture, many people just can’t imagine how a person could be happy without being married. The fact of the matter is, priests are much more likely to report that they are happy and fulfilled than most married people. In his book, *The Joy of Priesthood*, Fr. Stephen Rosetti reports that 90.5% of priests either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement that “Overall, I am happy as a priest.” And only 6.2% of priests indicated that they were thinking about leaving the priesthood. In another study, he found that 92.1% of priests surveyed indicated that they “feel fulfilled ministering as a priest;” and 95.9% agreed with the statement, “I am committed to the ministry of the Catholic Church.” As we can see, an overwhelming majority of Catholic priests describe themselves as happy, fulfilled, and committed to the lives they are living as a priest. Sometimes, after referring to these findings, I will tell a parent, “If you really want your son to be happy, encourage him to be a priest!”

Since the time I was a child, growing up in an Irish Catholic home, I always knew that there was something special about our parish priest. He was an ever present member of our family – even though he didn’t realize it. We would talk about the priest (whichever one it happened to be at the moment). We would sometimes laugh about their mannerisms or imitate their voices. We would critique their homilies. And we always knew that they loved us; that their lives were committed to serving us; and that they were simply trying to lead us closer to the Lord and to the promise of eternal salvation. As the rector of a college seminary, these are the type of men we are seeking

to serve the Church; men who are capable of authentic love, men who are leaders, men who are striving for holiness, men who are seeking to give their lives to something bigger, namely, to Christ and His Church.

Sadly, today there seem to be a number of misconceptions about the priesthood; misconceptions that do great damage to the beauty and the goodness of this great gift that Christ has bestowed upon the Church. Surely, there are some priests who, over the years, have damaged the sacred trust placed in them in a horrifying way. But the vast majority of priests have lived a good and holy life, seeking only to do their best at serving the Church by loving Her people. As Catholics, it is important for us to try to dispel these misconceptions about the priesthood, and to encourage young men to seriously consider the possibility that God may be calling them to life as a priest.

Cultivating Vocations to the Priesthood

10 things that a priest can do:

- 1. Thank God every day for your vocation to the priesthood, and tell as many people as you can – especially your parishioners – over and over again – how much you love being a priest.**
- 2. Encourage young men to think about the priesthood – nothing is more powerful in the mind of a young man when it comes to encouraging them to consider the priesthood than to have a priest that they respect say – “ I think you would make a good priest – you ought to think about it.”**
- 3. Encourage parents to talk to their children and encourage them to think about the possibility of priesthood. For most of our high school age boys, the thought does not occur to them. Help the parents know that if you want your son to be happy – priesthood is one of the best ways!**
- 4. Get involved with youth at your parish – spend time with them and communicate that you care about them.**
- 5. Get your parish involved in identifying possible vocations, and encouraging them**
- 6. Develop a discernment group**
- 7. Bring young men to visit the seminary.**
- 8. Support the seminarians that you have – Springfield priests seem to support their seminarians better than others... Get them involved in the parish when they are home – expect them to serve at Mass, and introduce them to the parish – put their picture up in a public place.**
- 9. Go out of your way to encourage boys to be servers – and for those who are good at it – encourage them to be MC’s – give them a way to be involved in the sanctuary liturgically.**
- 10. Pray for vocations that young men and women who are called to serve Christ as a priest or religious may respond generously to this call. Encourage families to pray – and at Mass, pray every week that your parish may be blessed with young men called to the priesthood, and young men and women called to religious life.**

Cultivating Vocations to the Priesthood

10 things that a lay person can do:

- 1. Thank God every day for your vocation to the priesthood, and tell as many people as you can – especially your parishioners – over and over again – how much you love being a priest.**
- 2. Encourage young men to think about the priesthood – planting the seeds, and especially being God’s instrument to help a young person identify the call to priesthood is as simple as saying – “Have you every thought about the priesthood? I could see you as a priest.”**
- 3. Talk to your children (or grandchildren) and encourage them to think about the possibility of priesthood. For most of our high school age boys, the thought does not occur to them. Know that as a parents if you want your son to be happy – priesthood is one of the best ways!**
- 4. Encourage young men to visit the seminary. Visiting a college seminary dispels a lot of misconceptions, and helps young men see that priesthood might be a possibility for them.**
- 5. Go out of your way to encourage boys to be servers – and for those who are good at it – encourage them to be MC’s – give them a way to be involved in the sanctuary liturgically.**
- 6. Pray for vocations that young men and women who are called to serve Christ as a priest or religious may respond generously to this call. As a family, pray – and at Mass, pray every week that your parish may be blessed with young men called to the priesthood, and young men and women called to religious life.**