

MAINTENANCE TO MISSION

VISION FORMATION GATHERINGS



SESSION 3: THE PRIEST'S UNIQUE ROLE IN THE CHURCH'S MISSION OF EVANGELIZATION



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"Without priests the Church would not be able to live that fundamental obedience which is at the very heart of her existence and her mission in history, an obedience in response to the command of Christ: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' and 'Do this in remembrance of me'."

– Pope St. John Paul II

Essential Takeaways -

1. The Church exists to evangelize. The priest is called to an essential role in this mission. This role depends on the priest living a life of holiness – living out his priestly identity and mission in its fullness.
2. Fundamentally the priest has to become a conduit for the grace of Christ, like the branches for the vine (John 15:4-7).
3. To do this, he has to stay anchored to the Lord. Relationship – Identity – Mission. It is critical to get the order right.
 - a. Mission without Communion becomes mere activism.
 - b. Communion without Mission becomes self-referential.
4. The gift of the priesthood is not for the priest's sake. He becomes a priest for the sake of the Church. As Venerable Fulton J. Sheen said, "The priest is not his own."
5. The priest's unique identity is to be configured to Christ the high priest. His mission is to lead in Christ's relationship with the Church as:
 - a. Head of the body
 - b. Shepherd of the sheep
 - c. Servant of the People of God
 - d. Spouse of the Bride of Christ

6. Common pitfalls to living this out today include:
 - a. 'Activism' – an unhealthy focus on productivity leading to workaholism and becoming a 'lone ranger'. This is often accompanied by a breakdown of consistency and intimacy in personal prayer life, and is sometimes triggered by a struggle with addiction or anxiety.
 - b. 'Pragmatism' and 'Functionalism' – an unhealthy focus on numbers and efficiency.
 - c. 'Effectivism' – prioritizing being 'effective' over being obedient to God's will.
7. Engaging in this identity and mission healthily requires:
 - a. Being spiritually rooted: anchored in prayer, free to discern God's Will,
 - b. Discerning of Gifts and Charisms,
 - c. Relying on a team of healthy, prayerful disciples,
 - d. Getting out of God's way and avoiding clericalism. Paraphrasing St. John the Baptist, the priest says: "Jesus must increase, I must decrease."

Foundational Presuppositions

The Church exists to evangelize.

- The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. The Holy Fathers, dating back to Pope St. Paul VI, have made it abundantly clear that evangelization is the Church's 'main thing'.
- "We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church.... She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection." – Pope St. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14

The priest is tasked with an essential role in this mission.

- This role depends on the priest living a life of holiness – living out his priestly identity and mission in its fullness.
- "The new evangelization needs new evangelizers, and these are the priests who are serious about living their priesthood as a specific path toward holiness." – Pope St. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 82

Scriptural Reference Point

- "Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you" – John 15:4-7

- Fundamentally, the priest has to become a conduit for the grace of Christ like the branches for the vine. He has to remain united to him. This is essential to the fruitfulness of evangelization. The heart of this is the phrase, 'without me we can do nothing.'

Relationship - Identity - Mission (RIM)

It is critical to get this order right: Mission flows from Identity. Identity flows from Relationships.

- **Mission without Communion becomes mere activism** – spinning our wheels, doing lots of things, but not necessarily being fruitful.
- **Communion without Mission becomes self-referential** – all about me and not the gift of self, which is where communion is supposed to lead.

Who is the priest and how does his mission flow from that identity?

- As with all the baptized, the priest's identity is rooted in relationship with the Trinity. If he is rooted in his relationship with God and thus secure in his identity then he can be fruitful in his mission.
- However, it's very easy to begin to take our identity from our mission; that is, from what we do. When we do that our relationships get distorted, which then further distorts our identity and, in turn, draws us into false missions.

Ordination Roots Priestly Identity in Two Specific Relationships:

Relationship with Jesus Christ –

"The priest finds the full truth of his identity in being a derivation, a specific participation in and continuation of Christ himself, the one high priest of the new and eternal covenant. The priest is a living and transparent image of Christ the priest." – Pope St. John Paul II, PDV, 12

Relationship with the Church –

"Reference to the Church is therefore necessary, even if not primary, in defining the identity of the priest. As a mystery, the Church is essentially related to Jesus Christ. She is his fullness, his body, his spouse." – Pope St. John Paul II, PDV, 12

- The priest's role is to teach, govern, and sanctify the people as head, shepherd, servant and spouse – which are all relational identities.
- Just as a family would fall into disfunction if a father refused to take up his role, the priest must take up these roles and identity because of his ordination: it's who he is. If that gets confused the community cannot flourish.
- The priesthood is not for the priest's sake. He becomes a priest for the sake of the Church. It gives him a power to do something for others. Fulton Sheen: "The priest is not his own." He belongs to the Church and his life is given for the Church and he exists for the salvation of the people.

Challenges to living this out fully today

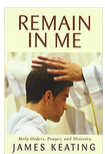
- 'Activism' – this is the temptation to an excessive and unhealthy focus on productivity leading to workaholism.
 - This is generally accompanied by a breakdown of consistency and intimacy in personal prayer life. It sometimes happens when there is a struggle with addiction or anxiety.
 - It leads to a scattered life, not a gathered life and sense of burnout.
 - At root this is a spiritual problem of acedia, or spiritual sloth, since it is placing mission ahead of relationship and identity.
 - The antidote therefore is a spiritual one: more prayer, deeper prayer, silence, and spiritual direction. This will enable better discernment and freedom to pursue God's will.
- Undue focus on 'Results' and 'Success'.
 - Pope Francis speaks of this as 'pragmatism' and 'functionalism' – a preoccupation with numbers and efficiency. These are of course good things to pay attention to, but they are not paramount.
 - A look at the ministry of Jesus shows he was not focused on numbers or effectiveness, but rather on discerning God's will and being fruitful in following it.
- Undue focus on 'effectiveness'.
 - It is easy (and even understandable at times) to be disheartened when small numbers show up for confessions or a bible study. Nevertheless, St. Teresa of Calcutta said, "God doesn't ask that we succeed in everything, but that we are faithful. However beautiful our work may be, let us not become attached to it. Always remain prepared to give it up, without losing your peace."
 - Right when Jesus' ministry was reaching its peak, it crumbled in 'effectiveness' as the crowds disappeared; and even his disciples left when he got to his deepest and most challenging teaching. Nevertheless, in this moment Jesus taught, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).
 - St. Paul's witness of persevering in zeal for the mission through constant struggles and trials – including limited 'effectiveness' – is a great example to us.

What is needed to approach priestly identity and mission correctly?

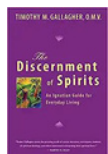
- Being spiritually rooted is the foundation.
 - The life of prayer is what keeps a priest living in his fundamental relationship with the Trinity, Jesus Christ and the Church.
 - This allows him to be discerning in living out his unique role as head, shepherd, servant and spouse. Not just doing what seems best to him personally, but really being attuned to the Holy Spirit guiding his priestly ministry.
 - Very helpful resources on this are:
 - Deacon James Keating's book Remain in Me.
 - Fr. Timothy Gallagher's book Discernment of Spirits.

- Priests must discern their own general gifts and charisms, but especially as pertains to their role in the mission of the parish.
 - A very helpful resource for this is the [Catherine of Siena Institute](#). They work with parishes and dioceses to help leaders prayerfully assess the gifts and charisms the Holy Spirit has given them.
 - This is a crucial part of leading any organization into mission.
- Priests cannot be 'lone-rangers' – they need to take a team approach.
 - Discernment of persons is as important as discernment of projects.
 - Priests need to be patient and allow the Lord to build their teams.
 - Priests should look for people who are:
 - Humanly healthy – when individuals have personal baggage it makes leadership very difficult.
 - People who are true disciples – no one is perfect, but parish leaders need to all be committed to working to put Christ at the center of their lives.
 - People who have a prayer life – again, no one is perfect, but parish leaders need to be committed to a consistent life of prayer.
- Get out of God's way.
 - Like John the Baptist, the priest's entire mission depends on the Lord: "Jesus must increase, I must decrease."
 - Clericalism is the opposite of this approach: instead of giving honor that is due to Christ back to him, the clericalist takes that on the honor for himself.
 - Cardinal Ratzinger, commenting on Augustine says, the priest's job is simply to provide a voice for the word of God.
 - Again, the priest's fundamental task is to be a conduit for the grace of God, a branch for the vine as in John 15.
- The heart of the priesthood is pastoral charity
 - This is the Grace of the priesthood, to share in Christ's very own burning desire for souls.
 - Bishop Cozzens concluded by telling the story of a man he met in Belgium who had been bed-ridden for decades but had made his life a living sacrifice of prayer. His motto was a perfect motto for the priesthood, "I am just a man with all my weakness, but my heart burns with love."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Remain in Me
Dcn. James Keating



Discernment of Spirits
Fr. Timothy Gallagher



The Catherine of Siena Institute

DIOCESE OF SUPERIOR

EVANGELIZATION & MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP



JOHN 15:5