

# Introduction

This book has been written over a period of fifteen years, during which I have been working with priests who suffer with psychological and spiritual problems. They have taught me much and I gladly share what I have learned from and with them.

Over these fifteen years, each of these chapters has slowly taken shape, beginning as articles and talks. The ideas therein have been gradually refined and integrated, and now they comprise a unified reflection on the priesthood.

Sometimes people ask me if ministering to priests in difficulty discourages me or assails my love for the priesthood or the Church. Of course, there are moments when I feel upset by what I have heard or I am saddened by their grief. If I lose the ability to be touched by genuine tragedy or if I am no longer angered by egregious behavior, then I have overstayed in this work. But, such moments have been fully overshadowed by a stronger grace.

I have grown in my admiration for our priests. I have been given a stronger love of the priesthood and the Church. In their weakness, these men have shown me the immense dignity of the priesthood and the beauty of the Church. In vulnerability, grace shines more brightly in the human spirit. I have come to know, even more clearly, that the priesthood is a great blessing for the people of God and for those who are its recipients. The laity have instinctively known this truth for centuries. Sometimes we priests forget this reality. We ought never to forget.

This book is meant especially for my brothers, our priests, but I think others might profit from its words. I gladly dedicate this book to our priests with thanks for all they have done. I myself, like other Catholics, owe a special debt of gratitude to some priests in particular, those who have supported me and guided me up close, and those who provided a guiding beacon from afar. As I sit here composing these words, their names and faces cross in front of my mind's eye. I am grateful to God for them and I ask the Blessed Virgin to keep them close to her heart, as I do for all priests.

Many priests speak of Mary in loving, affectionate terms. She is, indeed, Mother of Priests. Her maternal love for priests is the spirit that animates this work and the force that nurtures my own love for them. A priest who has a fervent devotion to her will not stray long or far from the right path. We pray, "Mary, Mother of Priests, intercede for us."

I thank God for our priests and I am grateful for the gift of priesthood. I am especially grateful for having been given the opportunity to journey with many priests in their darkest hour. They have fought with courage and faith. Many have found their way back to health and sanctity. Some are still struggling. The ground we walked together was sacred. It was sanctified by the blood that fell from their pierced hearts and the tears that fell from their eyes. It was in the midst of this struggle that they showed themselves most truly to be priests. It was on this Golgotha of their crucified spirits that we both found the grace of life.

chapter 1

# Priesthood Is Difficult

Priesthood is a lot better than I thought it was  
going to be . . . and a lot tougher.

✝ FR. FRANK McNULTY

**M**Y BROTHERS IN THE PRIESTHOOD, OUR LIFE IS not easy. Those of you who opted for the more austere monastic orders probably expected a difficult life. Anyone familiar with the life of a Trappist monk or a Carthusian hermit is aware of the commitment to self-denial and penance that these lives entail. On the surface, the life of a priest in ministry looks easier. We have some money in our pockets (not much), the appearances of a bit of freedom, and a life that does not look too ascetical or very rigorous. At one point in our priestly lives most of us have been asked by the laity, "Father, what do you do all day after you say morning Mass?" The implication is that there is not much else tugging at our sleeves once the Mass is over. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Priesthood is difficult. Ironically, we might actually have more vocations to the priesthood if our young people realized how challenging the life really is. Many generous young people want to commit themselves to a life that stretches them and one that, in the end, will mean something. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the stricter, more traditional religious groups are currently receiving increased vocations. Young people want a life of meaning and challenge. Priesthood, when lived with integrity, is such a life.

One of the greatest asceticisms for priests in active ministry is the asceticism of time. Our time is not our

own. The parish priest or chaplain is virtually on call day and night. And people *do* call us. A bereaved parent will call a priest when a child has died. Adult children, painfully watching their parents suffer in the hospital, will ask the priest to visit. The lonely and troubled will look to us for understanding and solace. These needs do not fit into a neat nine to five schedule. At times, it feels to us as if we “don’t have a life.” By that I mean we do not have much private space or private time. This is true. Giving up control over one’s time is a great sacrifice. It is akin to the monk who promises stability, that is, to stay in his monastery for the rest of his life. He, too, loses control over his time and his space.

The demands on our time and energy are relentless and, at times, overwhelming. Every family in the parish has its own story. Each individual experiences moments of joy and moments of sorrow. The longer we spend in a ministry, the more we become involved in their stories. Many invite the priest to share in their lives in little ways, by simply being the recipient of the news outside the church doors after Sunday Mass, or in more extensive ways by walking with the family on their journey. Sharing in the lives of the people whom we serve is one of our greatest joys and it is one of our greatest burdens. If the priest is a caring man at all, he will feel some of the pain of their losses and he will rejoice with them in their moments of joy.

Our life is emotionally intense and rich, but it can also be draining. People do not call us when everything is going fine. They call when they are troubled or when there has been a tragedy. Or they will contact us when there are great joys, someone is about to be married, or they are celebrating the birth of a child. It is not uncommon for a parish priest to preside at a funeral Mass and burial, and then go directly to witness the

wedding vows of a young couple followed by a joyous reception. The priest in public ministry lives life in its intensity.

In this life, we are constantly reminded of our limits and of the flood of human needs everywhere around us. There is simply no way that we can respond to all the needs out there, including many requests that are truly legitimate. Survey research has consistently shown that priests struggle with their workloads. In a 2001 study sponsored by the National Federation of Priests' Councils (NFPC), the second and third problems most often endorsed by priests were "too much work" and "unrealistic demands and expectations of lay people."<sup>1</sup> Ministry has always been a bottomless pit. But the bottomless pit has become even more foreboding with the declining numbers of priests in the prosperous nations of the world and increasing numbers of Catholics. I conducted my own survey of priests from September 2003 to January 2005. There were 1,172 priests surveyed from 15 dioceses across the U.S.<sup>2</sup> The survey showed that 42.9 percent agreed with the statement: "I feel overwhelmed with the amount of work I have to do." That's a lot of priests.

This, too, is a form of asceticism we must endure: feeling our limits. We cannot say yes to all because ministry is a bottomless pit. We priests want to be thought of as nice guys and we find it a pleasure to say yes. It is painful to say no or not to respond to valid human needs when there is no time. It is an asceticism to say no. Each day, the priest makes the difficult discernment of deciding which needs he can fulfill and which ones he cannot. Frankly, some are not doing this well and many are overextending themselves in the process. This is a challenge we must face personally and collectively. Our priests need assistance in setting appropriate limits.

I recall a priest from South America visiting a parish in the United States. He was surprised to see the priest attending so many private social functions such as wedding and baptismal receptions. He remarked, "In my town there is one priest for 50,000 people. I cannot attend private functions. I am only able to go to social functions when the entire community is present, like great feast days." Perhaps we can learn from our brothers in other countries. We must engage in the painful process of rethinking what it is a priest can and cannot do.

Another asceticism of the priest in ministry is the loneliness of uniqueness. The priest is one who lives among the people. Like them, we are human beings and Christians. Thus there is a common bond that we share. But we are also priests, an office that sets us apart. The priest is their spiritual leader. He is both one of them and always slightly separate. The wearing of clerical or religious garb is a clear sign that we have willingly taken on this yoke of distinctiveness. At times, there is some isolation in this position.

It is important that we priests have other priest friends. It is with them, and usually with our families, that we can be fully and truly ourselves. For a few moments, we can forget our burdens and blend in with a group who calls us by our familiar names without a hint of artifice or awkwardness. This is a blessing. I find it alarming when I hear of priests who do not like priests or who do not regularly gather in their company. There is always a small percentage of priests who do not attend priestly gatherings. This does not bode well for them or their ministries.

Another asceticism is the celibate life itself. Celibacy takes on a unique challenge when it is lived among the people. Some have suggested that celibacy is only appropriate in a religious order. It is true that a religious

community offers special supports for a celibate life and is clearly ordered to such a commitment. The priest in public ministry who lives in a rectory does not enjoy the support of a religious community per se. In addition, he is surrounded by people who do not share his call to celibacy. Many of them do not understand or even support it. This can be particularly isolating and a constant challenge.

However, living among the people makes our celibate witness and our commitment to God all the more visible to the people of God. Given our sex-obsessed, materialistic, and narcissistic culture, this witness of dedication and sexual self-discipline is desperately needed. The celibate priest witnesses to the immediate presence of God and to a celibate form of loving which is a rich source of grace for both the community and for himself. But it is difficult.

There is in our modern Western society a presumption of a life of comfort and entitlement. It is no accident that vocations to a dedicated life that includes significant self-denial are seen as unrealistic and, on the surface, unattractive to many. Given years of societal affluence, people now come to expect their lives to be comfortable and believe that they are entitled to have the possessions that commercials and advertisements offer. When suffering strikes, as it inevitably does to all, or their lives do not live up to the materialistic standards as advertised, which they cannot, our people often feel hurt and angry. Their hearts shout out, "Whose fault is it? Whom should I blame? Whom do I sue?"

But we have forgotten the Book of Genesis. It is the curse of humanity to live a life that includes sweat, toil, and pain. "I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children. . . . By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat" (Gn 3:16,19). Suffering and pain are the lot of every human life, even

in wealthy societies. This is true of our lives as well. At times, we priests suffer and may even question our vocations. Sometimes priests will see the presence of hardships as a sign that they are not being good priests. "What have I done wrong?" they wonder. Does this suffering mean that we have necessarily done something wrong? No. Suffering is a part of every life: married, single, and celibate. Questions arising about our vocation can be an invitation to move even deeper into this life and commitment. Most of all, we priests ought to take comfort and strength from the life of Jesus, who was a suffering servant.

Our society has become inured with possessions and false notions; it has become entitled and narcissistic. It is in the midst of this narcissism that the priest's life is meant to be a sign of contradiction. He is to be *in the world, but not of the world*. Imbued with the spirit and grace of the gospels, the priest lives among the people, yet he is not so filled with secular values as to become salt gone flat (cf. Mt 5:13). If he purchases every electronic gadget, buys the best of everything, and lives a privileged life, he becomes more akin to a comfortable bachelor. We ought to step back regularly and observe our lives, sometimes with the help of a spiritual director or priest support group, to discern if the manner of our living is an outward witness to the gospels. For example, it is not in keeping with our calling to be seen in seedy taverns, "pickup" locations, or gay bars. Sadly, a few of our number frequent such locations.

This being *in the world but not of the world* is one of the great challenges of the diocesan priest or any priest ministering among the people. We are to affirm whatever in the people's lives and values are true signs of the Spirit at work, and of these, there are many. But we are also to be a sign of contradiction when the culture of death,

entitlement, and injustice rears its ugly head. Of these, there are also many.

Because of the challenges and difficulties a priest faces, a danger will be to fall into extended periods of self-pity. It should be immediately noted that feelings of self-pity are often the doorway to behaviors that are incongruous with any Christian life, particularly that of priesthood. How many priests I have known who justified scandalous and sinful behavior with the thought that “I deserve it because of what I have given up,” or “I need it to continue this difficult ministry.” Instead of aiding his life, such behavior only adds to his problems. He has created yet another problem with which he has to deal. Thoughts and behaviors justifying these actions indicate salt gone flat and a soul that has fallen into the very narcissism it was meant to convert.

While the life and struggles of the priest are truly challenging, a challenge that is worthy of the most generous of souls, we should beware of a kind of “terminal uniqueness.” Each of us knows some married people. Marriage is no panacea for the challenges of our celibate priests. Looking more closely at marriage, we can see that this, too, is a life of challenge and struggle. Like priesthood, it has its joys and rewards, but it also has its share of heartaches and sorrows. Exchanging a celibate priesthood for a married life might solve some of its difficulties, but it will introduce a whole new set of challenges. Before we decide to abandon our priestly commitment to enter into marriage, we would do well to speak to those who are married and inquire discreetly about their lives. From a distance, “the grass looks greener,” but the reality is sobering.

Human life is challenging. It requires self-sacrifice and hard work, regardless of the vocation to which one is called. Priesthood is particularly difficult. Jesus promised

us that it would be so. If we are truly followers of his, he promised, "My cup you will indeed drink" (Mt 20:23). Make no mistake about it, the more closely we follow Christ, the more we participate in his suffering and death. It is currently not in vogue to speak of the priest as sacrificial lamb or victim, but such language might help to give words to the experiences of priests today. How else can we make sense of the persistent, subliminal denigration of gospel values that daily challenges the souls of our priests?

If you have been a priest for many years and you look back at decades of service and, after reviewing your ministry, cannot find one time when your preaching, ministry, or personal witness met with disapproval, you have to ask yourself if you really preached the Gospel. If our words and homilies have never been rejected by some people and if we have never been criticized for our public stance, then we have never fully preached the message of Jesus. Jesus insisted, "Whoever wishes to come after me must . . . take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt 16:24). It was an invitation and a promise. It would not be inappropriate to see the sufferings of priesthood these past few years, especially during the crisis, as a participation in this suffering. Whether deserved or undeserved, personally culpable or not, our priesthood is a sharing in the priestly cross of Jesus. It is this cross that will purify us of our own weaknesses and sins, and it is this cross that will likewise be a sign of hope for the people who suffer greatly.

Priesthood is a difficult life. Make no mistake about it. Each of us ought to be grateful to the priests who have gone before us and have paved the way with their own faith and sacrifice. Our sacrifice is no less assured and no less important. The life of a priest is a worthy challenge and ought to be presented in this way to noble souls in search of just such a calling.

To my brother priests currently on the road up Calvary, take courage. Your sacrifice is part of your conformity to Jesus' life, and a necessary part of living your life with integrity. March on. . . .