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Symposium on the Priesthood
Why Priests are Happy

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I am deeply grateful and indeed personally quite honored to have been invited as a diocesan bishop to participate in this symposium that intends to reflect principally on the lives of diocesan parish priests. These men, along with those religious priests who minister in our local Churches are the very heart and soul of pastoral service in any given community. The theme for today's conference focuses on the factors of why parish priests are and remain happy, nevertheless in my presentation I will frequently touch upon issues that must also include the wonderful religious priests who may be pastors, teachers, chaplains, or ministers in any given community and whose generous presence graces the lives of people in those communities where they serve. Nonetheless, our theme is primarily on the ministry and life of diocesan priests and the sources and the reasons for their personal happiness and ministerial fulfillment.

Most diocesan priests that I have known customarily spend their entire lives ministering within the same local Church. While religious priests regularly may be moved about according to the charisms and commitments of their religious families, diocesan priests are pretty much identified with a specific territory called a diocese. Even those diocesan priests who might engage in a special assignment to a mission appointment, or military service, or a teaching assignment, or an extraordinary job outside of the diocese still consider themselves identified with a local Church and its mission. Diocesan priests are for the most part "*land-locked*." They consequently tend to pursue their entire spiritual journey of faith within a well-defined and generally circumscribed territorial region.

This framework offers them many particular advantages and a few obvious disadvantages. One great advantage is that diocesan priests become well

acquainted with the people, the traditions, the customs, and the perspectives of their region. They literally are grounded in the very lives of their people.

When I was about to leave the Archdiocese of Chicago at the end of 1993 to become the Bishop of the Diocese of Belleville, a Chicago priest friend of mine told me: "*the toughest part of leaving for him would be going into a new community and not knowing any one there or not being known by any one.*" Parish priests discover much of their spiritual strength from within the familiar world that defines their lives. They actually journey toward the Lord Jesus alongside and in the company of the very people that they serve and love and they experience the reciprocal love of the people that they serve.

This blessing, like so many others in life, does however come with a shadow side; occasionally diocesan priests may become to some extent quite narrow in their vision of the world that lies just beyond the confines of the territory of the local Church or perhaps even that of their particular assignment. They become parochial in the precise negative sense of that term.

Our Church must be *Catholic* in so far as it is always open to embrace and call to conversion the world beyond any specific territory, age, culture, or ethnic context. Catholics are to be concerned about the world that lies beyond our comfort zone. This has been our charge since apostolic times when the proclamation of the Gospel constantly required the Church to embrace peoples who were different than the prevalent or dominant culture or ethnic or language groups.

A priest must always be willing to extend his pastoral concern to those beyond his parish and even beyond the diocese where he might serve. While a parish priest finds support, strength and comfort within a specific pastoral context, he is also called to connect with a world that lies perhaps just beyond the confines of his own assignment. I have occasionally heard some priests say perhaps out of frustration that because of a particular church issue or a new diocesan regulation that henceforth they will focus only on the needs of *their* people or they will only be engaged with *their* part of the diocese and ignore or avoid as far as possible any contact with the wider diocesan or universal community.

Some priests under those circumstances may seek the solace that is to be found in ministering only to the folks that they know and a few avoid trying to serve a world that is beyond their comfort zones or dealing with Church issues that belong to the broader community of faith. Admittedly, one might understand such an attitude, especially in light of the challenges that the Church faces with increasing frequency in today's world – hunkering down can be an understandable posture. But such an approach to pastoral ministry is never sufficient nor reflective of the way that the Church has chosen to respond to the world around it during any specific moment of her history.

Still consistent research clearly suggests that people genuinely do love the local priests who serve them and this oft expressed affirmation is in itself a great source of spiritual strength and happiness for our priests. Parish priests apparently enjoy the same type and level of support that is often ascribed to local elected officials while all others in government are often looked upon with distain if not disapproval.

In all candor, I do not know of a greater joy for any bishop than to hear that parishioners really do love a priest – or to receive a note that simply says: *thanks bishop for sending us such a wonderful pastor!* Those notes that come into our offices telling us of the tremendous things that a young priest is already managing to accomplish in his still youthful ministry fill our hearts with pride. These impromptu expressions of gratitude that our people offer to their priests are sources of joy for the bishop that are at least equal to the happiness that they may bring to the individual cleric. I have made it a personal tradition of sending those original written expressions of support to the individual priest himself. They need to know when they are being recognized for their effective ministry. When our priests are honored and loved, we bishops share in that happiness beyond our ability to express. And in this sense what makes our priests happy by way of affirmation also makes his bishop happy as well.

I have established the long-standing custom of setting aside a couple of hours each week in my public calendar to allow priests who want to come in to see me to do so without appointment during those hours. These times belong exclusively to my priests and no other events or meetings ordinarily can trump those times. I also send a personal birthday card greeting to each priest to tell them that I rejoice that God has given them a new year of life and how

grateful I am for the ministry that they provide for the people of our Archdiocese. I try to visit or at least to call them when I know that they are sick or especially when they are undergoing professional treatment for personal issues. There are so many ways that a bishop can and should tell his brothers that their health, their happiness and personal care are important to him. I urge my priests to take time off, to make an annual retreat, to make time for friends and to take better care of their health and physical well-being. I also try to give them a good example by doing those things myself so that my admonitions are not simply unwelcome authoritative badgering but a genuine concern that I try to embrace myself.

When stories of great scandal do happen to touch Catholic priests in the media and public forum, local priests are often bolstered by their parishioners with words of reassurance, understanding, and encouragement. This personal support is a great source of the contentment and satisfaction that local priests enjoy even in the midst of the most awful circumstances. Such generous confidence is also the reason that when a parish priest may be accused of a misdeed, the immediate general local reaction is disbelief and denial on the part of many parishioners.

This immediate and unfortunately occasional unqualified support can become a barrier to the acceptance of the fact that something inappropriate indeed may have been done by a known and revered cleric. This type of unquestioning support can and frequently does result in a rash of letters and e-mails to the bishop denouncing the accusation, the accuser, and most often the bishop himself for even believing that something inappropriate might have occurred. From the position of a diocesan bishop, this dynamic is often the most painful episode in these situations because it means that eventually the confirmation of the truth will become another source of pain for a community and their affection and trust in a cleric will have been betrayed.

Still it is the very personal support that our parish priests find in the midst of their people that regularly sustains them and manages to bring them a level of satisfaction that many other occupations simply may never achieve. Parish priests have the benefit of immediate and frequently expressed affirmation and as such they enjoy the gratification of direct *customer* satisfaction. Such encouragement is one reason that priests seemingly can withstand the onslaught of many highly disheartening events in life.

Parishioners say thanks and express gratitude directly to them and this endorsement of their ministry becomes for most priests a reason to continue and to devote themselves even more generously to their ministry. I leave to others with more empirical knowledge of comparative job satisfaction studies to make scientific or more professional assessments of how other professions compare with Catholic priests, but repeatedly priests rank quite high on such comparative analysis of job satisfaction. I believe that Monsignor Stephen Rossetti's work confirms and validates these observations.

Priests encourage a unique relationship between Christ the Lord and their people – a relationship upon which they themselves must also depend – coming to know and to love the Lord Jesus. Priests do not impart a mundane service or deliver a product that they themselves do not use and in which they do not believe. Priests help to bring people into a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ and that same relationship with the Lord is the very bedrock of their own faith and happiness. Priests literally market a spiritual joy that they themselves depend upon and in which they find spiritual strength in their love for the Lord Jesus.

My earliest memories of those priests that I came in time to admire and to love always included the image of them at prayer – not merely saying prayers – but being swept up in prayer. Whether it was their praying the breviary, the rosary, spiritual reading, or quiet reflective prayer – those men who inspired me to consider being a priest were men of prayer – a prayer life that I now recall was always reflected in their ministry and through their apostolic zeal.

Prayer quite simply is an indispensable component of and a reason for a priest's happiness and ministerial fulfillment. Prayer is so intimately tied to a priest's job satisfaction that without a genuine life of prayer, a man soon withers and may even lose his desire to be a priest. A priest who does not regularly encounter and come to know the Lord Jesus in prayer cannot possibly mediate the mystery that remains absent in his own life.

The classic occasions and opportunities for prayer and spiritual growth are only the start of a priest's journey toward Christ Jesus. That is what I hinted at when I recalled those priests from my youth who inspired me. They did not merely say prayers – they were caught up in prayer – it was more than an activity it was a way of living. As I came to know them as an adult, they openly

shared with me the secrets of their spiritual depth and the reasons that they were always so happy and content in their Priesthood. They also told me that without their relationship to Christ in prayer and in their Sacramental life that they didn't know if they would have been able to endure the many challenges that they faced and over which they triumphed. Both of them lived into their 90's and I stayed close to them until the end of their long and generous priestly lives. And I still want to be like them when I grow up!

The essence of priestly service is to be found in its relational energy that seeks to draw people together in a loving bond with Jesus Christ. We draw people together through the celebration of the Sacraments, in the announcement of and by our faithful illumination of God's Word, and by the promotion of community life within the Church. This relational energy fills our hearts with a deep satisfaction because it comes from a personal knowledge of the Christ that priests discover in their prayer, in their ministerial service to others, and as the ultimate response to their configuration with the Lord in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

Every bishop is called to further and to deepen the ministerial relationship between Christ and his priests and among all the priests of a diocese. A presbyterate ultimately must be more than a mere ministerial association or a casual alliance of religious professionals but a fraternal bond that unites bishops and priests together and to Christ.

That is why unity among priests and with their bishops is so central to the Sacrament of Orders and to the happiness of the priests – and might I also add fundamental to the bishop's happiness as well. We bishops are challenged to build and to strengthen the fraternal bond that must unite our priests. This is the reason why it is such a source of anxiety and disappointment for any bishop to have a couple of priests – and we all have a few – who never join their brothers at moments of common life. They do not attend retreats, ordinations, convocations, clergy study days, the annual Chrism Mass, the funerals of other priests, or fraternal gatherings of any type. We bishops are often stymied to understand why. And we bishops are often urged by the other priests to do more to bring those brothers back into closer union with the entire Presbyterate. To command these reluctant brothers to attend priestly gatherings however often only introduces such a negative energy and a toxic attitude into the environment that many bishops simply cease

compelling their presence – but we can never forget them – as the solitary missing sheep, the lost coin, the lone ranger, or the prodigal son and brother whose place at the table always seems to be empty. They must remain a challenge for us as we continue to reach out to them and invite them to rejoin the fraternity of the presbyterate.

Fortunately, most of our brother priests continue to appreciate and to yearn to engage in the life of the presbyterate and welcome the invitation to be a part of the unity of the Priestly office. Most priests love being together and the occasions that bring them together generally are punctuated by much laughter and jovial repartee. It is the relational nature of the Priesthood that makes these opportunities for unity so significant and so vital to the health of individual priests as well as for the presbyterate of a diocese as a whole.

Given the increasing international composition of presbyterates everywhere, the occasions and reasons for coming together have become even more essential. In many ways the assimilation of our international priests within the local Presbyterate can only be achieved by inviting all of the priests to share in moments together. When priests have the opportunity to encounter each other in prayer, in study, in conversation, and in camaraderie, the possibility of deepening mutual understanding and respect are vastly enhanced and indeed augmented. The experience of isolation and loneliness in a priest's life has proven time and again to be a primary contributing factor to unfortunate, scandalous, and damaging behavior and frequently has led to the complete loss of vocational commitment. And the isolation that cultural differences and attitudes might pose can only be overcome by the interactive exchanges that being with each other can provide.

Priestly fraternity must also include more than mere physical proximity – just being in the same place at the same time – it must invite and allow sincere and honest sharing across age, cultural, ethnic, and ideological differences that may at first seem frightening if not impossible to transcend.

Each presbyterate that I have had the privilege of serving and to which I have been equally privileged to belong has had its own unique temperament and history. Chicago, Belleville, and now Atlanta each have their own stories, heroes, and legends. The luminaries that belong to each fraternal community of priests are sacred to those men. The early diocesan pioneers, the

institutional builders, the spiritual visionaries, the comic personalities that helped to establish each local presbyterate live on in those stories and fables that keep their memories alive. In a real sense, you cannot know a presbyterate without knowing its history and heritage. One cannot become a true part of a presbyterate without listening to its stories and coming to appreciate its legends.

There are also moments of great sorrow that each local Presbyterate has shared – moments that defined them as ministers of a particular local Church. In the telling of those stories, there is a healing and a strengthening and a bonding that helps the younger clergy come to know, admire and appreciate the generations that preceded them. Each new generation of priests should also give hope to their older brothers and remind them that the Church has a future and that the mission of Christ Jesus will continue into tomorrow – perhaps in ways that may differ from the past but always continuing the Priestly Office of Jesus Christ who chooses and uses each one of us for His purpose and plan.

Generational differences have always distinguished clerics of varying ages yet even when these differences are sharp and may not seem to be easily reconcilable, there is still the possibility that all of the various groups can learn from one another, each perspective can offer some insight, and the presbyterate can be enriched by those who share the same Priesthood but may see things through different prisms. It has always been thus and I can only image that it will always be so.

The opportunities of bringing the entire presbyterate together must include viewpoints that challenge each generation and every perspective. I have been amazed over the years that when the proper issue is honestly and openly addressed and a prudent and informed presenter is invited to speak to a given presbyterate, even those with differing opinions are inspired and often say so – and even to one another! Whether it be a retreat director, a theological symposium, or a dialogue on practical pastoral concerns, when the presbyterate listens to and engages in honest exchange, minds and hearts can be and often are opened and inspired. Since coming to Atlanta, I have invited a number of presenters to address the presbyterate. Some of them have been recommended by my committee for on-going formation or proposed by an individual cleric of a given perspective and I have been amazed to discover

that others have deeply appreciated and applauded the insights of the presenter – even some who perhaps may have come to the event with less than enthusiastic expectations. There is an openness that can be exploited to bring priests together without highlighting the differences that may continue to exist. I believe that this openness is the spiritual need to belong to the joint effort of serving God’s People and it is the work of God’s Spirit in a local Church.

Ultimately the factors that I have discovered that directly and greatly influence the happiness of priests are a vibrant and deep prayer life, a sense of belonging both to the people that they serve and to the community of priests to which they belong, and the experience of being valued, loved, and cared for by others and perhaps most especially by their bishop – I have also discovered that those same factors are necessary components of what makes a bishop happy as well – but that may be the topic of a different seminar.