

The Heart and the Head

On this World Day of Prayer for Vocations and Mother's Day, I am led to think about a special liturgical cloth called the manutergium. During the ordination of a priest, the bishop will anoint the hands of the one to be ordained. These hands will be consecrated to bless and offer sacrifice. However, there is a tradition in which the hands of the newly ordained were cleansed with a special cloth called the 'manutergium' or the binding cloth.

This cloth is saved and preserved for a special moment later. When the earthly life of the priest's mother is ended, the priest may take that cloth and place it in her hands so that when she comes before the throne of God she may present the fruit of her life's work—her son who is a priest.

This is not a get out of jail kinda deal, but it emphasizes that vocations do not come out of a vacuum. They come from the sacrifice of mothers who may not receive grandchildren, the sacrifice of fathers and families. Vocations come from schools and parish communities.

Therefore, the Church has set aside, this particular Sunday as the World Day of Prayer for vocations: specifically for vocations to the priesthood and vocations to the religious life for men and women. And so my message for you today, brothers and sisters is this: you have an integral role in supporting vocations so let us desire and pray for vocations.

Both types of vocations are so important in their different ways.

Some people may think that those men and women who enter religious life are wasting their life hiding away. From a human perspective, yes it may seem like that but from a supernatural perspective, the role of religious brothers and sisters are so important.

St. Therese of Lisieux understood this beautifully. St. Therese was a Carmelite nun in a cloistered environment. She had so many desires to help out the world in some way, she even desired to be an apostle, a martyr, a missionary but how could she be when she was in this confined area? She sought to find a place for herself in the body of Christ and although she could not be the hands and feet of the body of Christ like those in missionary activity, she came to special intuition:

I understood that the Church has a heart...[that]burns with Love. I understood that Love alone makes its members act, that if this Love were to be extinguished, the Apostles would no longer preach the Gospel, the Martyrs would refuse to shed their blood... I understood that *Love* embraces all vocations...Then in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: "O Jesus, my Love, at last I have found my vocation, my vocation is Love!... Yes, I have found my place in the Church... in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be Love!

If you feel called to the religious life, know that you are not called to waste away your life, but to be Love in the heart of the Church beating with your unique prayers and sacrifices that gives life to the rest of the body of Christ.

Now the body of Christ needs a heart but it also needs a head and that is where priests come in.

When Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd today we can easily think that it is just some nice imagery but it is so much more. Who was the first shepherd for Israel? It was David! David was a shepherd before he became a king but eventually the symbolism of shepherding was fused with what a good king was supposed to be like. So the shepherds represented the kings of Israel.

However, there was a time after King David where the kings of Israel were not so righteous, the shepherds were not true shepherds. They were so bad that God accused them of taking advantage of his sheep, not looking after the injured and allowing them to become prey and food for wild animals and scattered all over. And that is what happened to Israel. The Kingdom was divided and the people were scattered all over the world.

Therefore, God made this promise: I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured.

So when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd he is not just making some nice imagery, he is fulfilling God's promise he made 600 years before! Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will lead his sheep on right paths! And the priest is the one who makes Jesus' shepherding presence real and active in the here and now.

Mother Teresa understood this so well. She saw how awesome and beautiful her work was, but she knew in her heart one critical thing. When a journalist asked her what was the one major reason for her worldwide success, she said, "Every day, every morning, I receive Holy Communion." So she would emphasize again at another time: "Without priests, we have no Jesus, without priests we have no absolution, without priests, we cannot receive Holy Communion."

We can be tempted to just look at the human qualities of the priest (although important) we can forget that this man makes Christ's shepherding presence real, here and now. It is ultimately Jesus leading us through his priests, leading us in our times of trial when all seems lost, in our pain when we feel like we are so utterly broken. The priest can give us something that no one else can give: eternal life because it is Jesus bestowing eternal life through him.

That is why we have to pray for priests. It is a gift that God earnestly desires to give to us but we need to pray, we need to desire, we need to act. In the next five years in the diocese of Calgary, we are hoping to have six ordinations God willing including myself. There are some great guys coming up, guys who used to be lawyers, engineers, professional musicians, but the challenge is that within that same span of time, 14 priests are eligible to retire (age 70).

Essentially, we are losing numbers and that will put a strain on all parishes. Yet we do not have fewer vocations because God is not giving them. I know this for a fact because we have several vocations here in this parish. There is a boy who is debating whether he wants to be a soccer player or a priest, or another boy who wants to be a priest/botanist. The parents of one boy were talking about grandchildren to other people and their son said, "well you aint getting any from me! I am gonna be a priest!"

But what happens to all these vocations? If they are not supported, if they are not growing in their faith, they will forget, the desire will wane and they will deny the true desire of their hearts. Becoming a priest is not easy. Not a lot of people know this but I actually left my studies for the priesthood at one point. About halfway through I said, "nope I am outta here! I can't do it, it's not for me." So I left, worked in construction and I felt it wasn't for me, I worked at the bank for several years, I wasn't happy there either and so I got my education degree from the U of C to be a science and religion teacher but even then I felt it was not a perfect fit.

It wasn't until I was at a God Squad conference and the grace of God just hit me, and I saw myself sitting in a boat that was rocking on a sea and it was raining and it was dark at night. Out of the darkness I could see someone walking on the water, and it was Jesus! He looked at me and he put out his hand and I knew exactly what he was saying to my heart, "Troy, I want you to be a priest, and it's gonna feel like walking on water, but just keep your eyes on me and you will not fall." And now I am here and waiting to be ordained in less than two months. Praise God! And I am grateful to all the people, the priests who were searching for me, people praying for me and that is why we need to pray for vocations!

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, I want to leave you with this challenge: what are we doing as a community to foster vocations to the priesthood or to the religious life in our parish? Are we encouraging a love for all priests recognizing that Christ is present in them? Are we recognizing those vocations we already have and are we nurturing them? Truly we need to desire and to pray for vocations because Jesus wants his Church to beat with his Heart and he wants to be the head of the body, a shepherd among you leading you to springs of eternal life and wiping away the tears from your eyes, and he wants to do this through the hands of the priest.