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## The Gift of Jesus Caritas

How Priestly Fraternity can renew the religious life of America

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The Jesus Caritas Fraternity of Priests is a blessing to the diocesan priesthood in one very real sense: it accepts, affirms, and strengthens the fundamental identity of the diocesan priesthood as a fraternity. It does not try to remake the diocesan priesthood into a pseudo religious community or religious order of priests; in fact, it distinctly rejects such efforts as false attempts to change the fundamental character of the diocesan priesthood. Rather, it strengthens the fraternity of diocesan priests so that they can live fruitful lives caring for souls in the secular world of their parishes. Jesus Caritas is truly a gift to the diocesan priesthood.

The Jesus Caritas Fraternity of Priests issues a strong call to practice the virtues of the gospel in the midst of the people. The membership of Jesus Caritas is made up of diocesan priests who are already "in the world" and who already struggle to live the gospel message in their lives and ministry. Anyone who lives this lifestyle knows how difficult and even dangerous it can be to try to live this heroic calling on one's own, and often the circumstances of parish life lead to an isolation of the priest from other priests rather than to a solidarity. The gift that Jesus Caritas offers to the diocesan priesthood is that it gives its members a way to live fraternity in the midst of their apostolic lifestyles without having to try to convert themselves into a religious order.

Fraternity is the middle way between the "lone ranger" priest and the religious community.

The elements of the Jesus Caritas charism and fraternity are nothing other than those of the gospel itself: prayer, the Eucharist, review of life in the context of faith, and a regular experience of the desert, the biblical place of encounter with God. Nothing could be simpler, yet nothing more challenging to the busy diocesan priest-apostle of Christ. However, the monthly meeting with the one's brothers, when prioritized, becomes one of the pillars of the priest's spirituality. It brings him all of the fraternal support, insight, and challenge that he needs to live a healthy apostolic life caring for the souls of God's people.

The Jesus Caritas Fraternity by its very nature runs counter to the temptation to worldliness which afflicts the priesthood in all ages. The Fraternity challenges the tendencies toward gossip, competition, ambition, laziness or arbitrariness by emphasizing the spirit of authentic fraternal love of other priests as an integral dimension of the priestly lifestyle. It takes the charism of fraternal charity and applies it first of all to the brotherhood of priests! In an age when the priesthood in general and priests in particular are so beleaguered by criticism and derision, a message of encouragement and solidarity is welcome indeed.



The uniqueness of the Jesus Caritas experience for the diocesan priest is, I believe, a four-fold gift: in a word, Jesus Caritas brings together

1. men who are fathers.
2. living a sacrificial calling and lifestyle
3. bound together in a common search for God
4. and who sincerely care for each other as brothers.

Let us examine each of these four elements.

### **Men who are fathers**

*You can base your Review of Life on this article by using these questions: When I am called "Father", what feelings come immediately to the front? Has my attitude changed on the use of this ancient term for the Christian minister?*

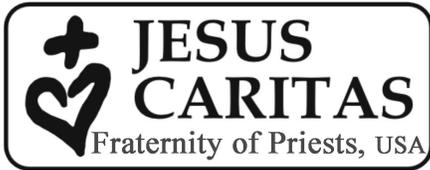
It takes not even a minimal amount of insight into the plight of modern society to realize that there is a massive crisis of fatherhood at the root of so many social ills. It is not the only cause of society's problems, but it is a major cause of these problems precisely because fatherhood, good or bad, holds together the basic unit of society, the family. When fatherhood is weak, society is weak. Likewise, When spiritual fatherhood is weak, the family of God is weak!

Jesus Caritas strengthens the spiritual fatherhood of the priests. These men are not bachelors nor single men living out a career. No, these men who come together are fundamentally committed and generous as fathers must be, and to them has already been entrusted the fatherly task of the cura animarum, the care of souls. The discerning environment of the monthly priestly fraternity meeting has the very distinct advantage of helping them to objectify and to receive feedback from other men who are fathers and intimately involved in the same family issues as a way of life. What an environment in which to discern God's will!

The fraternity meetings are not social meetings, business meetings nor even prayer meetings per se. Rather, they are gatherings of fathers-who-are-brothers discerning God's Will directly for their own lives and indirectly for their people. Their common discernment recognizes their dependence upon the gifts of others in order for them to be truly balanced and fit for the work of sustaining God's family.

### **Living a sacrificial calling and lifestyle**

*What degree of comfort do I have when I consider my life, my priesthood, my inner being, as sacrifice?*



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It is important to emphasize the word sacrificial in this phrase because the commitment to the priesthood both as a calling and as a lifestyle is essentially sacrificial. Jesus Caritas gathers together those who understand and endorse the sacrificial nature of the priesthood, who wish to live it out faithfully in their day-to-day existence, and who desire to bring it to its ultimate conclusion, that of "laying down one's life" for the brothers, as Our Lord. The intuition that the priest is a representation of the sacrificial lamb, in imitation of Christ, generally lies at the center of the theology of the priest who becomes a member of Jesus Caritas. Far from his mind is any desire to be self-indulgent or to live out the priestly commitment half way.

The fraternity supports and strengthens this desire to live sacrificially by giving the priest other brothers who have also made the same commitment to a sacrificial lifestyle as the fundamental orientation of their lives and who are serious about living out that commitment well. The fraternity meetings are based upon the recognition that we need good, healthy and like minded (or should I say like-hearted) brothers to keep us strong for the Lord and His people.

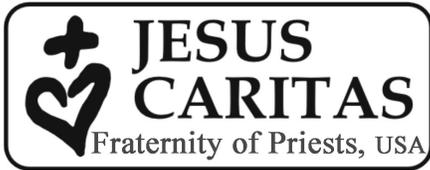
Since the Jesus Caritas Fraternities are based upon the spirituality of Brother Charles de Foucauld, they are necessarily oriented toward living a spirituality of gospel simplicity, something very healthy and necessary for the diocesan priest. Charles believed that the gospel message, lived and preached in the sacrificial lifestyle of the Christian, was meant to be a "seed" planted in the fertile soil of humanity for the salvation of souls. His apostolate among the Tuareg people of the Sahara desert in Algeria earlier this century consisted mostly in being available to all of their immediate and remote needs as a simple brother of Christ. While Charles' circumstances were quite different from what a diocesan priest in the late 20th century must contend with, he is nevertheless a witness to and an example of the priesthood lived out in a sacrificial way.

### **Bound together in a common search for God**

*What do I bring to my fraternity? Am I honest by neither over-selling - or under-selling-myself?*

In any fraternity group, all of the members will have already completed years of seminary formation training them for the task of the care of souls. Most will already have years of pastoral experience to bring to the group and a seasoned pastoral intuition born of suffering and perseverance in the ministry which makes them eminently qualified for spiritual direction or at least spiritual discernment. These men thus bring to their fraternity groups a mental fitness and a practical mind set which, when combined with their option for holiness, makes the group a formidable pool of priestly wisdom.

It is likely that the sacrifices of these men will be the raw material of their individual and collective discernment of God's Will. Many will have made all the common mistakes which all



ministers make and will have overcome all the inevitable obstacles of life in order to remain faithful to their calling. The sharing of personal stories in the group's review of life becomes a special gift to the other brothers and a strong witness to the vitality and resilience of the grace of Holy Orders. For the younger clergy it is especially helpful to have this tutorial of priestly experience laid at the doorstep of their early priesthood so that they can benefit from the example of others and avoid the innumerable pitfalls of priestly life and ministry. The opposite is also true: namely, that the goodness of other priests can become an endless source of inspiration for them to constantly strive for the best.

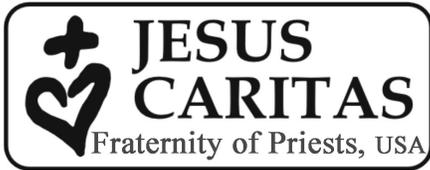
The advantage of the fraternity group is that the search for God is a common search of brothers who are bound together as a small informal community of faith to deepen their understanding of God's Will. The fact that the members of group are all intelligent and charitable men who are trained to assist others in following God's call in their lives makes the growth potential of a Jesus Caritas group enormous. Here they set their own personal and professional gifts at the service of their brothers for this most important of all projects. Indeed, the serious discernment of God's Will is an explicit tenet of the group, and constitutes the *raison d'être* of the fraternity.

As such, the group's discernment is meant to complement the work that the priest does in his one-on-one spiritual direction relationship, but it is not meant to supplant it. Rather, it is another way of clarifying and confirming God's Will in the circumstances of one's priestly life and ministry. The fraternity supports and strengthens priestly discernment so that the priest can live a fruitful ministerial and spiritual life for the entire length of his priestly career.

### **And who sincerely care for each other**

*Can I put names on the people who truly care for me?*

The last but by no means least important dimension of the Jesus Caritas Fraternity experience touches upon one of the most fundamental needs of the human heart, the need for someone to care for us! Priests in fraternity have the capacity of becoming the best of friends or the strongest of brothers because they are deeply attentive to each others' basic needs, and it is characteristic of these caring brothers that they manifest their commitment to each other in acts of tangible, deliberate care. Many times the fraternity brothers will be the first will be the first ones to turn to when a brother needs help in his parish or ministry, and his brothers will be the first and most reliable "resources" that he has. But the tangible and deliberate care of the brothers extends beyond just helping with priestly duties: it extends to the very life and well-being of the brother. It consists more often in the humble service of checking up on and doing favors for the brothers in one's fraternity and trying to practice the charity that we preach to others. Indeed, the very name of the fraternity fittingly describes the essence of the commitment that the brothers make toward one another: "caritas". It is with great joy and enthusiasm that the members of Jesus Caritas Fraternities gather each month to experience the "gift of Jesus Caritas" for them and for their brothers. For those of us who



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have already been given the gift, let us reaffirm our commitment to pray for each other and to be faithful stewards of this gift to one another. Let us also offer this same gift to many other brothers who are in need of its strength and vitality. For those who have yet to receive the gift of Jesus Caritas. . . there is no time like the present!