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Identity and Spirituality of Priests & Bishops—U.S. Bishops Meeting

Archbishop Rigali

Concentrating on the identity of priests and bishops "will, I believe, lead us to reaffirm and understand more fully our spirituality. It will not, however, remove the immense challenges we face. It will not make easy all the numerous tasks that weigh upon us, except in the profoundly supernatural sense intended by Jesus when he says, 'My yoke is easy and my burden light,'" Archbishop Justin Rigali said in an address June 20 during the U.S. bishops' meeting in St. Louis. (Rigali, who spoke as archbishop of St. Louis, was named archbishop of Philadelphia July 15.) The archbishop was one of three bishops who spoke during a day of reflection at the bishops' meeting on critical issues faced by the church in the United States. The day was part of the U.S. bishops' preparations for the decision they are expected to make next June on whether to convene a plenary council of the church in the United States. Asked to prioritize 11 issues raised in discussions during their November 2002 meeting, the U.S. bishops ranked the identity and spiritual life. Mentioning in particular "Vatican II's 'Presbyterorum Ordinis,' the post-synodal apostolic exhortation 'Pastores Dabo Vobis' by Pope John Paul II. Rigali recalled how the pope once quoted from a pastoral letter in which Archbishop John Quinn said that while "the priesthood does not consist exclusively in the celebration of the eucharist," the church's faith regarding "the essential link between the sacrament of holy orders and the eucharist" means "that the celebration of the eucharist is at the heart of what it means to a priest." Rigali discussed numerous other factors in the identity and spirituality of priests and bishops such as the ministry of reconciliation, prayer, ministry to the sick and dying, and to those in pain and sorrow, or the "total gift of oneself to (the) church." The archbishop also listed a number of factors spelled out in Pope John Paul II that are specific to the identity of the bishop and his spiritual life.

Everything we stand for, everything we have tried to be - our own experience means a great deal to us. Yet we want to take a fresh look at the Scriptures and the teaching of the church to be confirmed in our convictions and to understand more deeply who we are and how we are to live. Right away I would suggest that in treating the identity and spirituality of priests and bishops we are not talking about everything that a priest or bishop is expected to do in the church today I do not believe that we are trying to spell out every aspect of our multifaceted ministry, every obligation that we have, every need of our people that affects us or every burden of our people that we strive to have.

I believe we are speaking about who priests and bishops are and who they are meant to be as ministers of God's word, set apart like St. Paul "to proclaim the Gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1). Our whole view of the human person, our Christian anthropology, is not readily accepted by a world that exalts action over being and embraces pragmatism, functionalism and utilitarianism. What the church may consider simple, the world may certainly judge simplistic. As we reflect on our identity and spirituality, I am reminded of the story of Naaman, as



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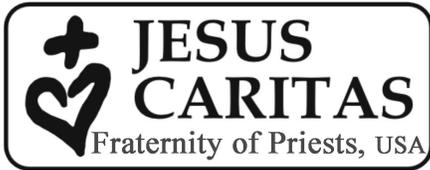
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recorded in the second Book of Kings. He was the army commander of the king of Aram in Syria and had leprosy. Word came that there was a prophet in Israel who could make him clean. The king of Aram sent letters with Naaman to the king of Israel, who in turn spoke to the prophet Elisha. Elisha's message to Naaman was simple and direct. "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan and your flesh will heal, and you will be clean." We are told that Naaman reacted angrily: "I thought that he would surely come out and stand there and invoke the Lord his God, and would move his hand over the spot, and thus cure the leprosy. Are not the rivers of Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be cleansed? We are told: "With this he turned about in anger and left." It was his servants who reasoned with him: "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it? All the more now, since he said &- to you, 'Wash and be clean,' should you do as he said." We know the rest, how Naaman obeyed, was made clean and confessed: "Now I know ..." (2 Kings. 5:1-5). The parallel between the case of Naaman and our own challenge is perhaps the need to recognize the simplicity of the divine plan. Concentrating on our identity will, I believe, lead us to reaffirm and understand more fully our spirituality. It will not, however, remove the immense challenges we face. It will not make easy all the numerous tasks that weigh upon us.

There are many documents of the magisterium that can enlighten us. I am thinking in particular at this moment of Vatican II's *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and various *ad limina* addresses of the Holy Father to the bishops of the United States.

To both priests and bishops the church consistently offers as the exemplar of their identity the Good Shepherd. John Paul II, concluding his own reflections in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, says: "Dear brother priests, ... Our Lord himself, with strength of his Spirit, has called you to incarnate in the earthen vessels of your simple lives the priceless treasure of his good shepherd's love" (No. 82). Earlier the Holy Father spoke about "the ontological bond which unites the priesthood to Christ the High Priest and Good Shepherd" (No. 11).

In an *ad limina* address to bishops of the United States (Sept. 9, 1983), the Holy Father outlined various elements that make up the priest's Good Shepherd ministry. I would like to cite this at some length. "Even after years of experiencing the joys attached to a vast number of apostolic activities, we can look back and say that our greatest strength and the deepest source of gladness for our hearts has been daily celebration of the Mass, beginning with those early days after our priestly ordination. And we have always been convinced that the Eucharist is our most outstanding contribution to the church, our greatest priestly service to the people, the deepest meaning of that splendid vocation which we share with our brother priests." The pope went on to add: "Only the priesthood can furnish the Eucharist to God's people. And only priests have the wonderful opportunity to serve God's people by supplying them with the bread of life.



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At this point John Paul II quoted from a pastoral letter of one of our own American bishops, saying that this bishop "expressed so much of the church's understanding of the priesthood in the following terms: 'The priestly ministry requires us to do many things: to preach the word of God, to minister the other sacraments, to encourage, to console, to serve human need, to serve the church in administration, which the New Testament numbers among the charisms.

We reflect carefully on the church's faith about the essential link between the sacrament of holy orders and the Eucharist, it does mean that the celebration of the Eucharist is at the heart of what it means to be a priest. It means that somehow and in an ultimate way the priest finds his identity in this link between his priesthood and the Eucharist.'"

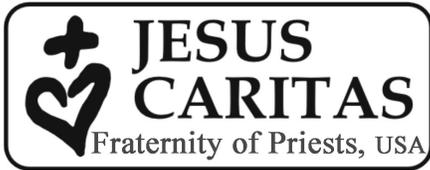
The Holy Father then identified his source as Archbishop John Quinn.

Continuing on, he told the bishops that "in moments of calm and in times of crisis, we must assert the priorities of the priesthood." He further affirmed: "If we read carefully the signs of the times as they relate to the priesthood, we will discern that the Eucharist determines the meaning of the priesthood and the identity of our priests. The council is clear and concise. Its testimony means so much to clarify the meaning of our priesthood, to shed light on postconciliar questionings and theological reflections.

Let us all listen again, together with our presbyterates. It is the Holy Spirit speaking through the council and saying 'Priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the eucharistic sacrifice. In it the work of our redemption continues to be carried out' (Presbyterorum Ordinis, 13). It is crystal clear today and for the future: the priesthood is forever linked to the eucharistic sacrifice and to the actuation of the redemption. "But the eucharist is also linked to the building of community. Here too all our priests can fulfill their divine vocation and their human aspirations. Through our priests, each local community is built up in faith and charity, and in an openness to the universal church "In the eucharistic sacrifice the priest finds the source of all his pastoral charity (cf. Presbyterorum Ordinis, 14). The spirituality of all diocesan and religious priests is linked to the eucharist. Here they obtain the strength to make the offering of their lives together with Jesus, high priest and victim of salvation. Through the eucharistic sacrifice, celibacy is confirmed and strengthened.

John Paul II then spoke about other identifying elements of the priesthood: "In every age of the church there are many meaningful actuations of the priestly ministry. But after the eucharist, what could be more important than the 'ministry of reconciliation' (2 Cor. 5:18) as exercised in the sacrament of penance.

Our priests must strive to serve in many relevant ways every day, but they alone can forgive sins in the name of the Lord Jesus. And connected with the forgiveness of sins is new life and hope and joy for the people of God. "With fidelity to Christ, in whose 'person' he acts, the priest realizes his identity and mission also through the Liturgy of the Hours, through different forms of prayer, through the reading of the word of God and through the oblation of his will,



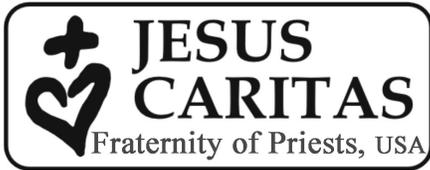
made in union with that of Christ. The priest's special love will always be with the sick and dying, with those in pain and sorrow, and with those in sin. For every bishop and priest there is but one ideal < The Holy Father characterizes this as the "first answer" and obviously not the "whole answer." He also adds the need for "total trust in God's unconditional faithfulness to his promise," the need for prayer and the work necessary to face the situation, (cf. No. 2).

In addition to the above reflections which concern the identity and spirituality of both priests and bishops, John Paul II has developed at some length, in another ad limina address (Sept. 5, 1983), his reflection - beginning with a reflection on the Good Shepherd - on the specific identity of the bishop and the elements of his spiritual life. Schematically he has described the bishop in this way:

- "A living sign of Jesus Christ." This requires personal conversion and holiness of life.
- "A sign of Christ's love of Jesus Christ." This involves the love of understanding and consolation.
- "A sign of the love of Jesus Christ." The bishop manifests to priests the love of friendship.
- "A sign of Christ's compassion."
- "A sign of Christ's truth." He must proclaim without fear or ambiguity the many controverted truths of our age. Called to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ and to lead the flock effectively to this goal, the bishop inculcates certainty in the people of God, who know that he will listen to them, accept their numerous insights into the truth of the faith and impose no unnecessary burdens on their lives. And yet they know that the church's teachings which he announces is much more than human wisdom. The church, through her bishops, rejects all triumphalism; she publicly denies that she has ready-made solutions to all particular problems, but she definitely claims to possess the light of revealed truth - which transcends all human consensus - and she works with all her strength so that this light of faith will illumine the experiences of humanity (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 33)."

The pope concludes, pointing out that the bishop is called to be:

- "A teacher of prayer and a living sign of the praying- Christ."
- "A sign of the unity of the universal church."
- "A sign of Catholic solidarity."
- "A sign of contradiction."



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- "A sign of hope for the people of God, as strong and unbreakable as the sign of the cross, becoming a living sign of the risen Christ."

At the end, the Holy Father returns yet again to the image of the Good Shepherd, speaking in encouraging words about "so many holy American bishops who live and die so that Jesus Christ, the good shepherd, may continue to lead his people to the newness of life and the fullness of salvation."