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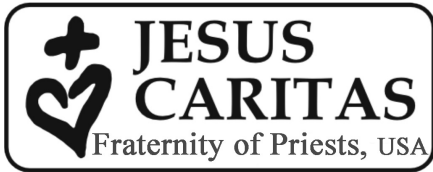
What the Church Needs the Priest to Be

by Msgr. Phillip Murnion

"The priest needs to be one who can help the parish to be, in the words of John Paul II, 'a school of prayer. He is the church minister who is the primary theologian in the church, for if, as David Tracy proposes, theology is the relationship between revelation and experience, no one is more consistently called to do this than the priest as preacher and teacher," Msgr. Philip Murnion, president of the National Pastoral Life Center in New York, said Sept. 9 when he spoke in Washington to a symposium at The Catholic University of America's Life Cycle Institute. The symposium explored findings of recent national studies of priests. Murnion said the priest "is the minister whose engagement in the life of the local community helps to signal the sacred character of time and space." But, said Murnion, priests often recoil from descriptions of themselves as set aside to mediate the relationship of sacred and secular, fearing "reversion to special claims of privilege" and wanting "to avoid the situation in which the grace of charism devolved into the entitlements of clericalism." If the priest is to be different without "reverting to differences of status and privilege, ... it will be because we will foster a priesthood whose theology and spirituality, whose sense of shared priesthood with the people, and shared ministry with the women and men in parish ministry enable him to help people be aware of the presence of Jesus in sacrament and their community, in family and work." Murnion said that to fulfill such a role, "the priest needs a continually maturing and theologically grounded spirituality. Unfortunately, the life and culture of the priest do little to foster that." Murnion reflected on priesthood under three headings: pastor, presbyter (the relationship of priests with one another and with the bishop "is at stake here") and priest. Murnion said, "Important as it is to enable priests to be effective pastors... and to be united in a presbyterate..., the church needs the priest to be the minister of the sacred, not an employee of the organization." Murnion's text follows.

At the outset I have to confess that I am a full member of the cohort of priests who stand out from the rest in the Dean Hoge research, those ordained between 1962 and 1972 We may be called the "conciliar cadre," a group for whom liturgy and social ministry were part of the one fabric - the liturgy as the work of the people, and work as the liturgy of the people. Ordained in 1963, I recall the years when solidarity and creativity were the character of the priesthood, when the council and the civil rights and anti-poverty movements of the 60s inspired us to believe that we could reshape church and world so that both would better fulfill their missions.

Ordination was for mystery and service - for serving as an instrument of God's grace and the community's care. Thus it took me on the March on Washington two months after arriving at a black Harlem parish, and it directed me to work with my second pastor to engage the parish in the renewal of the liturgy It was a time when laity, bishops, clergy and religious were proud of what we had accomplished as a church in the United States, and no less committed to the pope and the universal church. We were a generation deeply rooted in a church whose



devotions touched the heart, whose sacraments interwove mystery and humanity, and whose ministry was to equip its members for responsibility in the world.

I was ordained at a time when Cardinal Francis Spellman not only defended the U.S. Scripture scholars under attack from Rome and the right, brought John Courtney Murray to the council and gave the newly burgeoning Hispanic population of New York the creative leadership of the truly radical Ivan Illich, but even defended a group of us seminarians whose new journal had come under criticism from Cunal offices. Creativity and solidarity were not enemies.

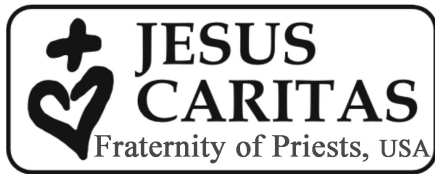
From the beginning I felt I was a respected member of a local presbyterate in a church that enjoyed a clear and challenging mission as a community of faith that wedded personal conversion with social transformation.

Things have changed. But, as John Paul II said to a group of French bishops, "it is not a question of cherishing nostalgic memories of a past which has sometimes been idealized nor of blaming anyone." Perhaps the current crisis in the church is one more sign of the times (should we say one last chance?), urging us to confront squarely and candidly what has been happening in the church. It is time to take responsibility for the present and leadership for the future. In recent years solidarity and creativity have too often become unrewarded, undernourished and unhooked from each other. Solidarity is too often distorted into bureaucratic or integralist claims of some that they represent "orthodoxy." Creativity became too often "do your own thing" and endemically in tension with institute.

In this context, attentive to the research just presented and drawing on the work of the National Pastoral Life Center with priests, pastoral ministers and bishops, I would like to offer reflection on priests under three aspects: pastor, presbyter and priest.

Pastor

As the research by Dean Hoge defines, and reports by pastors at our programs confirm, pastors find their greatest satisfaction in their sacramental ministry and their greatest challenges in organizational demands - administration, personnel management, finances. (They suffer from the killer Bs: buildings, budgets, boilers, bulletins and bingo and one bishop admitted he could be another B.) Typically, they have no training for their role as pastors as distinct from their role as priests. Increasingly they have little time to learn from older pastors. They live "over the store" in rectories that had once been clerical preserves and are now organizational offices. One of the most rewarding projects of the National Pastoral Life Center are our two weeklong training workshops for pastors each year. Since we began we have had almost 1,000 pastors, most coming voluntarily, some sent by their bishops or provincials. They range from young men ordained but a year or two and pastoring two parishes in a rural area to great grandfathers ordained in their 60s after their wives had died (one even



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remaining the sheriff of a small town in Texas). They included newly arrived Nigerians whose U.S. bishops want them socialized into our customs and styles, and deacons and women who are responsible for pastoral ministry in parishes without resident priest pastors. These sessions are personally rewarding because in a context of prayer and fellowship the pastors are so heartened by the sessions that help them look at themselves, learn ways to enhance the basic ministries of the parish and are given good advice on how to make administration an exercise of leadership engaging the whole parish. In other words, they are helped to be pastors. Having been trained to be officials, they are trying to be leaders and community organizers.

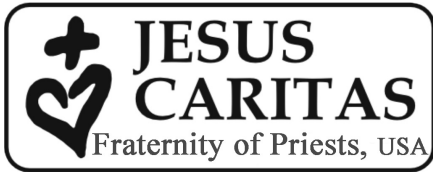
It is pastors who have been primarily responsible for welcoming lay people and religious into pastoral ministry (and, I dare say, the conciliar cadre are primarily responsible for this flowering of parish lay ministry). As our research for the conference of bishops found, these lay parish ministers paid at least for half-time now number more than 30,000 - more than the number of parish priests. The motivation of the pastors is pastoral, not ideological, i.e., they carry on the great U.S. parish tradition of pastoral pragmatism, employing every rite, movement or minister to do the work of the parish and serve the people of the community. The creativity of pastors regarding both the ministers and the ministries of parishes, mostly on their own initiative, is remarkable. We now need to be concerned about the fact that half the younger priests see no need for more lay ministers, for expanding the ministry roles of women or for empowering of lay people.

The point I want to make here is that the diversity of parishioners, the diversity of parish ministers and the increasingly complex role of pastoring even one parish, never mind two or three, call for careful selection of pastors and much more support and training for all who will pastor parishes. It requires diocesan offices to be much more helpful in providing training, services and resources to pastors and parish leaders.

Presbyter

This has become a popular term among liberals for ordained priests, wanting to underscore the uniqueness of the priesthood of Jesus and to share in that priesthood of all the baptized. They may be right, and eventually that may take hold. I want to use the term as expression of the fact that the ordained priest is part of a body of ministers sharing the responsibility of the bishop. It is the relationship of priests with one another and with the bishop that is at stake here. Both relationships are being renegotiated.

First the relationship between priests and the bishop. The greatest danger was voiced by Cardinal Dulles just before the vote in Dallas on the charter for protecting children. He warned that the charter would create "an adversarial relationship" between priests and bishops. I know that many bishops are making every effort possible to minimize this danger. Yet the danger is widespread.



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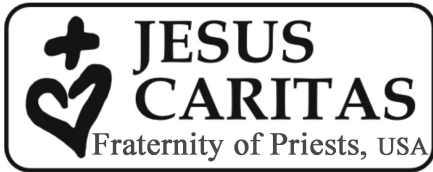
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A still more pervasive danger is that the bond of mutual respect and responsibility between priest and bishop, ritualized in the ordination rite, is being eroded by a whole series of developments. Once priests began to retire and were enrolled in Social Security, the lifelong responsibility of church for priest in return for the priest's lifelong commitment to the ministry of his presbyterate began to fray.

The transformation of senates of priests, which were admittedly sometimes adversarial toward their bishops, into presbyteral councils changed the body from the priests' council to the bishops' council. Many bishops have worked hard to develop a true sense of collegiality with their priests through careful consultation with the presbyteral councils and greater solidarity with their priests through annual convocations and other assemblies. Yet collegiality is too seldom the character of the relationship. It is not surprising that the vast majority of priests in the Hoge study have little confidence in the leadership of either their bishops or their presbyteral councils. Furthermore, only a quarter of priests in the Hoge study find strong support for their priestly ministry from their bishop. I also find widespread disappointment among priests that the bishops as a body do not seem prepared to represent and defend the pastoral wisdom of their priests in relating to the Vatican congregations. (Think of what I said about Cardinal Spellman.)

The solidarity among priests is an equal challenge. Priests are no more likely to experience strong support for their priestly ministry from their fellow priests than from their bishop, the data demonstrate. Priests feel more isolated because there are fewer priests in most dioceses; each priest has fewer classmates; more are serving on their own in parishes; and more are stretched thin by multiple ministries - more than one parish and/or parish ministry and work in a diocesan office. Furthermore, there are sharp differences among those who are being admitted to membership in the presbyterate - by ordination or incardination. This seems by default, i.e., it is not clear that the bishop with his priests has decided what kind of men they want in the seminary or the presbyterate, or that the increasing use of priests from other countries is part of a deliberate plan. (At the same time we are not recruiting Hispanic young men for the growing number of Hispanic Catholics.) As a result, it is very difficult to carry out a shared ecclesiology. The need for common ground begins at home. The challenge of solidarity among priests extends to the national level. The missing voice in Dallas was that of the priest - bishops and lay people examined how to govern the priests. The missing voice on the new commission is that of a priest - other than the resigned priest who was a victim of clergy abuse. The National Federation of Priests' Councils itself can't seem to get much of a hearing, unable to shake a reputation for confrontation that goes back about 30 years. The solidarity of the local presbyterate is also affected by the fact that everybody moves but the diocesan priest: Bishops come from outside the diocese and move from diocese to diocese, religious move according to the plans of their communities and the lay ministers move because of family obligations. The average tenure of a lay minister in the parish is six years.

If there is to be a strong sense of presbyterate, dioceses will have to be more intentional about who is to be part of a presbyterate, what it means to be part of a presbyterate, what it



will take to develop a true sense of collegiality between priests and their bishops - for both mutual support and mutual accountability, fostering a sense of shared ecclesiology while allowing for enormous latitude, with respectful dialogue among differences. And more is needed. The presbyterate must be seen as part of the larger community of ministry that the Diocese of Fort Worth calls the ministerium.

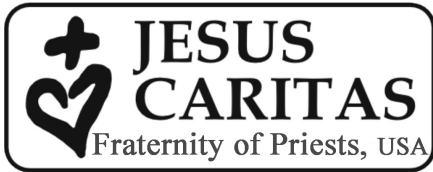
When I was ordained, the priesthood carried the priest, i.e., provided the authority and legitimacy of the priest's role in people's lives. There is still a strong remnant of this. Newly ordained are welcomed with considerable trust. Increasingly, however and especially in light of the current crisis, the priest must carry the priesthood, establish trust and restore the place of priests in people's lives. We must do this by taking responsibility for our own development and ministry, by caring for others in the presbyterate and by making deliberate efforts to strengthen the solidarity and collegiality of the priests with their bishop. This need not be at the expense of the relationships between priests and lay people, ministers and parishioners, for those who see their lives in relational terms tend to be consistent in this.

Priest

I turn now to what I regard as the deeper and more profound challenge how the ordained live out the specifically priestly character of their ministry. I use the term as it was used in the classic work by E.G. James, *The Nature and Function of Priesthood*, namely, one set aside to mediate the relationship between sacred and secular. This is the role described by English sociologist David Martin as "guardian of the sacred." For Andrew Greeley, the priest is sacrament of the parish. Another term is icon, priest as icon of the parish - an icon, not a direct representation. He is not a perfect representation of Christ or of the body of Christ, certainly not because he is male but one through whom the people should discover and be reminded of their relationship to Christ, their share in the mission of Christ in the world and their sacredness as a community, as the body of Christ.

Priests recoil from such talk when I raise it in lectures or workshops for good reasons - they fear reversion to special claims of privilege. They desperately want to avoid the situation in which the grace of charism devolved into the entitlements of clericalism. The greatest problem in the past wasn't even that priests claimed so much privilege; most lived simple, dutiful lives. No, the problem was the diminishment of priests to ceremonial and ritual leadership, rather than true spiritual leadership.

The priest needs to be one who can help the parish to be, in the words of John Paul II, "a school of prayer." He is the church minister who is the primary theologian in the church, for if, as David Tracy proposes, theology is the relationship between revelation and experience, no one is more consistently called to do this than the priest as preacher and teacher. He is the theologian on his feet, as distinct from the theologian on his or her seat. This is the minister whose engagement in the life of the local community helps to signal the sacred character of



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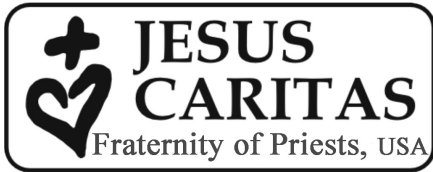
time and space. Again, let me invoke the words of the Holy Father in speaking about parishes: "If we are fully imbued with the grace of faith enlivened by hope and inspired by charity, there is no happy or sad aspect of village or neighborhood life which can fail to move us. Thus evangelization will take different forms in social solidarity, family life, work, neighborly relations."

To fulfill this role, the priest needs a continually maturing and theologically grounded spirituality. Unfortunately, the life and culture of the priest do little to foster that kind of spirituality. The problem was captured in the novels of J. P. Powers, who was widely respected for an ear well tuned to the life and culture of the parish priest. A recent reviewer of Powers' novels recalled his chilling characterization of priesthood: "leather Joe Hackett begins his seminary life determined to be saintly, but quickly squanders the impulse in parish life: The truth was he hadn't sacrificed his spiritual life - it had been done for him, by his appointment to Holy Faith'... What piety and spiritual alertness... [he] had has long softened amid the gluey fixtures and routines of daily parish life."

Looking back over my own life, I found the description cut too close to the bone. It is true that spirituality is not simply or even most importantly the quality of one's prayer life or interior life. As Ronald Rolheiser puts it in his article in the current issue of Church magazine, spirituality is where you put your ass. It is the way we live our lives in fulfillment of the two great commandments. At least half of the ministerial spirituality of the diocesan priest is faithful, reliable service to the sacramental and pastoral needs of the people. In these terms, priests have as a group displayed a solid spirituality.

And yet - that is no longer enough. That worked in a world where we all felt the presence of the mystical more readily and frequently. In a world which is perhaps more banal than secular, the more sacred, mystical and spiritual dimension[^] of life needs to be more evident - needs more evidence - as the source and summit, the character and criteria of who we are and what we are doing. It needs more prayer and study on the part of the priest. Yet in our study of parish ministers, we found that fewer than three out of five pastors reported a regular prayer life apart from their official duties of prayer. The priests in the Hoge study make help in their personal spiritual development their No.1 need.

When it comes to study, few of the pastors in our workshops report reading books in theology. Many read periodicals, and we're happy that Church magazine is their preferred pastoral periodical. The National Organization for Continuing Education of Priests reports that the majority have recently attended theology lectures, for the most part I'm sure in diocesan programs. But the culture of pastoral ministry and the demands on priests give little time or support for more serious reading. Central in all religious traditions to the role of the religious leader is the responsibility for handing on the tradition. To that we would add in the current context, making the linkages between the tradition and life in the world.



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There is renewed interest in discussing the "ontological change" brought about by ordination. As one theologian wrote, ontological means real. The person ordained to be priest is meant to be really different. If this is not to mean reverting to differences of status and privilege, to claims of prestige and acts of domination, it will be because we will foster a priesthood whose theology and spirituality, whose sense of shared priesthood with the people, and shared ministry with the women and men in parish ministry enable him to help people be aware of the presence of Jesus in sacrament and their community, in family and work. As important as it is to enable priests to be effective pastors - pastoral leaders serving with the women and men in parish ministry - and to be united in a presbyterate and ministerium with their bishops and fellow priests, the church needs the priest to be the minister of the sacred, not an employee of the organization.

A small illustration of how the priest can enable people to feel sacred: Where I live, at the Holy Name Centre for Homeless Men, we have had Mass for the men on the detox floor of the municipal shelter. One Sunday, as we began the communion rite in the tawdry lounge, I invited the men in their city-issue pajamas and bathrobes to come around the altar, a table covered with a sheet. I said this was like the apostles gathering around the table at the Last Supper. One of the men did a quick count and said with delight: "And we're 12 too!" Associated with the sacred, he was sacred also.

As he goes about his ministry, the priest should be convinced of what used to be said in the old marriage rite to the couple getting married: "The rest is in the hands of God nor will God be wanting to your needs. He pledges you the lifelong grace of the sacrament you are now about to receive."