

Priests for a New Era provides a thorough presentation of the historical and theological dimensions of the Catholic priesthood and is a welcome and valuable resource for anyone interested in understanding more profoundly what it means to be a priest. It provides a reflection of the wisdom of spiritual guides, particularly Saint Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and, of course, Pope Francis.

In this book, Monsignor Francis Kelly clearly exhibits not only his expertise on the subject but also his devotion to the formation of priests from his many years as a seminary rector and later as superior of the Casa Santa Maria.

HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL DONALD WUERL, *Archbishop of Washington*

In *Priests for a New Era*, Msgr. Francis Kelly offers an inspiring reflection on priesthood that will encourage any clergy—both young and old—to exercise their ministry as servants who accompany others on their pilgrimage of faith. He also offers them practical advice on how to empower the laity through their pastoral ministry and to celebrate the Church’s liturgy in such a way that they help others experience the mystery of Christ.

DONNA ORSUTO, *Professor, Institute of Spirituality, Pontifical Gregorian University, Director, The Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas, Rome*

This book blends devotion for the priestly vocation with sensitivity to modern challenges every priest faces in carrying out his irreplaceable ministry. A holy symbiosis of pastor and parishioners, illustrated here by Venerable Father Michael McGivney’s founding of the Knights of Columbus, is much needed, and might not only shape lives for eternity but also begin to build “on earth as it is in heaven.”

CARL A. ANDERSON, *Supreme Knight, Knights of Columbus*

PRIESTS FOR A NEW ERA

A Ministry of Service and Hope

FRANCIS D. KELLY



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INTRODUCTION

It has been this author's privilege for a quarter of a century to be involved with the ministry of priestly formation—first as the rector of Pope Saint John XXIII Seminary in Weston, Massachusetts, and then as superior of the Casa Santa Maria in Rome (the graduate house of the Pontifical North American College for priests sent to do graduate studies in the Eternal City).

These experiences have matured my convictions about priestly ministry; and my engagement with, and the example of, so many good men who have been called to the ministry at a challenging time have certainly made me a much better priest.

I am happy now to share these experiences and convictions in the following pages. I propose especially in the first chapter to reflect on the special challenges our moment of history presents for ministry. As companions of our people on their faith journey, we need to deeply understand the human

and historical situation of our times and the great challenges they present for a faithful believer.

In subsequent chapters, I aim to address some specific issues of living the priesthood today in the light of these challenges.

At the start, however, let me affirm strongly my experience and conviction about what an extraordinarily beautiful and fulfilling life priestly ministry offers to one who is called and who then generously gives himself to it.

Sociological studies have proven this assertion. In one confidential study, ninety-two percent of priests profess great personal happiness in their vocation. Compared to other professions, this is an exceptionally high response, and it was confirmed by other independent studies of priests in different parts of the United States of America!

This personal fulfillment and happiness is, of course, an overflow of the joy of the Christian faith itself. At ordinations, it often occurs that the gospel chosen is from John 15—Jesus' words to his disciples as he is about to send them on their mission:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love...All this I tell you that my joy be yours and your joy may be complete. » **John 15:10-11**

As a seminary rector, I used to alert the men in conferences to the experiential joy of priestly ministry: "You will be caught between God's love for his people and their grateful love for

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God—not a bad space to be in!” This helps explain the warm affection our people have for a truly good and generous priest.

A 2006 Nation Opinion Research Center study found that clergy are number one in job satisfaction and life satisfaction, more so than in any other job or vocation.² Lack of happiness or fulfillment can come from lack of self-esteem, poor self-image, or lack of inner peace. It is the crucial task of priestly formation to target such symptoms and help a candidate to find assistance or decide to not pursue ministry.

A second overarching conviction that dominates this book is the unique nature of priestly ministry as one of “service and hope” as the subtitle of the book suggests.

Pope Francis recently expressed this vision strongly:

We must never see our ministry as a source of self-gain; rather our sacred ministry has to be the means of our self-giving. And yet, it is so easy for us to choose the flock we want to be with rather than love the flock entrusted to us, choose the ministry we think we are best at or most interested in, rather than the one the Church has asked us to do. Whenever we are tempted to choose our flock or form of our ministry around our own personal preferences or prejudices then we risk no longer following the example of the Good Shepherd. Rather, we have rendered our ministry the means of our self-preservation rather than the ministry of our self-giving.³

Also, while one easily associates the priesthood with the sacramental rituals of the Church, one needs to hear the admoni-

tion of an effective pastor in the American Church, Cardinal Sean O'Malley:

In the life of a priest and deacon there can be no dichotomy between our cultic role and the humble service we must give as in washing the feet of our brothers and sisters. The towel should be as emblematic as the stole for our priests and deacons, where humble service must reflect the humble and loving service of the Good Shepherd. Part of our task is to connect the works of mercy with the Eucharist. It is not by accident that the washing of the feet of the Apostles takes place in the context of the first Eucharist.⁴

In this book, I have joined to each chapter the real-life historic witness of a priest who exemplifies some aspect of priestly life. The wonderful reality is that there are so many priests who in a humble and hidden way prolong the ministry of Christ in our parishes, and it is to them that I would like to dedicate this book.

A constant attitude of "service" must inspire not only our interaction with our own parishioners but our interaction with all who turn to us. It is startling the manner or the times that this service may be requested. Recently, a taxi driver here in Rome asked me to hear his confession!

Priests must also serve today in the wider community, being part of efforts for the betterment of people's lives and confronting the real-life problems they face in discrimination or education for their children, etc. This will often require ecumenical and interfaith involvement. Priests must minister

to every shopkeeper whose store we enter, to strangers who accost us (as on airplanes), and to “beggars” and the needy.

A pagan philosopher said that “nothing human was alien” to him. That broad vista needs to be ours—the world is God’s creation, and everyone and everything in it, therefore, deserves our respectful concern. Priestly ministry can and should be a really rewarding service to the human community.

A ministry of hope! If there is one quality needed in our fractured and insecure world today, it is hope.

Saint Paul, in listing the qualities of a believer, said he or she must “rejoice in hope.” He was no utopian dreamer—he catalogues all the persecution, hostility, and suffering he endured in the pagan Roman Empire (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23–33), and yet he told his favorite community at Philippi to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4).

At the center of Saint Peter’s Square is a giant obelisk brought from Egypt. Carved into it in large letters are the words: “*Christus vincit; Christus regnat; Christus imperat*”—Christ conquers; Christ reigns; Christ triumphs. This is the spirit of the Christian Church in its march through history.

At this moment, we may not have all the answers or clearly see the divine project of salvation fully realized, but we know we are on the right team! Our people look to us to radiate this confidence and to assure them that God is close to them in all their trials and challenges.

The sober reality is that many of the people whom priests serve have, for a variety of reasons, not really had what we could call the “Christian experience.” They see the Church as an institution that provides moral guidance—welcome

or unwelcome—and that provides rituals to celebrate major events in their life journey—baptisms, marriages, and funerals.

Our pastoral challenge is to facilitate for those we serve the basic Christian religious experience: the merciful love of God, the salvation richly provided by his Son, Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

Happily, many “movements” have helped people have these experiences—Cursillo, Charismatic, Neo-Catechuminate. The challenge remains—perhaps our parishes need to consider small group sessions where study of Scripture and personal prayer can be fostered. These efforts may be among the most important forms of “service” and “hope” the Church can provide and priests can facilitate.

CHAPTER ONE

Priesthood in a New Era

Just as “Jesus Christ is the same—yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8)—so the priesthood, which has its source in him, has a certain timeless and perennial dimension. Yet it is exercised in the context of human history and for people who are very much conditioned by the world around them.

There is little doubt that the world in which priests are called to serve today is vastly different from that of only a few generations ago, sociologically, culturally, and religiously.

It seems essential to reflect on that reality at the beginning of a book on priesthood. The Second Vatican Council introduced a new theological methodology in its *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, and many church documents since have followed that path: The Council reminds us that:

At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light

of the Gospel...In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come...We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live...Ours is a new age of history... critical and swift upheavals spreading gradually to all corners of the earth...a real social and cultural transformation....⁵

When the Council Fathers penned these words, they could hardly have imagined the political, social, and communications revolutions that have so changed the world! We in our time need to take their inspired words seriously and try to grasp the characteristics of our time, which is the realistic context in which priestly ministry today takes place.

Briefly, it may be beneficial to review some of the aspects of this new and more secular world. The "Sixties" seem to be seen as a major cultural turning point in the West. The Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal stirred anti-institutional feelings.

The sexual revolution that removed sexuality from its normal habitat of marriage and family life has had devastating consequences on American culture and families. It is premised on a denial of God as Creator who has ordained and designed sexuality for his creative purposes. In this view, human behavior is totally autonomous, and the only ethic is personal preference and satisfaction.

Socially, we live in a time of rapid change and, therefore, disorientation for many. It is a time marked by digita-

lization, instant communication, and information overload. People are affected by greater mobility, changing jobs, and less stability. Now drones and robots are beginning to do what humans used to do! Migration has come to be an international tidal wave. The challenge to accept and integrate people of different cultures and religions has unleashed a nativist backlash.

Politically, the Western liberal, democratic, capitalist world order that has dominated since World War II is challenged globally by other visions of social reality. Violent terrorism is a symptom of the clash of worldviews, and no country remains immune. In the United States, political polarization is at an all-time high. Our government cannot pursue the common good. Bitter partisanship casts a pall over the political process. Thoughtful Christians sometimes feel that the current system offers them no place to connect.

Religiously, secularism has advanced in Western society. The traditional world of faith where the Church shaped people's lives and behavior from cradle to grave has given way to a society of multiple alternatives, sometimes with a hostile attitude to the Church.

Yet secularism does not necessarily mean the death of religion—only a different climate in which it must be proclaimed and practiced. Charles Taylor, the Canadian Catholic philosopher, has made this point strongly in his interesting *A Secular Age*: “The human aspiration to religion will not flag. Religion remains powerful as a reserve fund of spiritual force or consolation.” He notes that young people who have not experienced an “oppressive” form of religion “have a more

relaxed response to religion.” Many of them are indeed open and searching.⁶

There is no doubt that secularism presents a significant challenge to priestly ministry. Many of its advocates want to push all consideration of God out of public discourse and policy. In the United States at this moment, true “freedom of religion” is under threat in legislation and courts.

In his insightful analysis of the practice of religion in America, *Bad Religion*, Ross Douhat chronicles the apogee of American public religion practiced from the post-World War II era. He speaks of a “Christian consensus” that dominated American culture in those years, which reflected a deep confidence in the centrality of faith and morals. It was symbolized by such figures as the evangelical preacher Billy Graham, who spoke to twenty thousand people a night for sixteen weeks in Madison Square Garden, or Bishop Fulton Sheen, dominating the Tuesday night TV ratings with thirty million viewers. Martin Luther King, Jr., built on that faith foundation to promote needed social change and reform.⁷

In that setting, religious institutions thrived, seminaries and novitiates were filled, and churches and schools were being built at a rapid pace.

That institutional era of triumph and power had its darker side. As we now know, a shocking hidden scandal of sexual abuse by priests was occurring, and bishops, wary of tarnishing the institutional luster of the Church, often did not address this behavior directly or forcefully. This scandal has caused immense damage to the mission and credibility of the Church.

The growth of secularism and concomitant individualism means that religious practice has changed. Parishioners are more autonomous and self-directed. As one priest commented, “Just look at the pews!” In his large urban parish, two thousand eight hundred people attended Easter Mass but on a regular Sunday, only about seven hundred appear. Yet people have not necessarily abandoned the Church or the faith. They still want their children initiated into the Church—they want baptism and First Communion. They want the important moments of their life—marriage and death—to be celebrated in church. For the priest, those events now become evangelizing and conversion opportunities rather than routine rituals.

Not only religious practice but moral attitudes have changed. Pope Benedict XVI in an *Ad Limina* Address to American bishops gave a trenchant analysis:

At the heart of every culture, whether perceived or not, is a consensus about the nature of reality and the moral good. In America,...that consensus has eroded significantly in the face of powerful new cultural currents which are not only directly opposed to core moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but increasingly hostile to Christianity as such...The Church’s defense of a moral reasoning based on the natural law is grounded on her conviction that this law is not a threat to our freedom, but rather a “language” which enables us to understand ourselves and the truth of our being, and so to shape a more just and humane world. She thus proposes her moral teaching as a message not of constraint but of liberation, and as the basis for building a secure future...The

legitimate separation of Church and State cannot be taken to mean that the Church must be silent on certain issues, nor that the State may choose not to engage, or be engaged by, the voices of committed believers in determining the values which will shape the future of the nation...a strong critical sense vis-à-vis the dominant culture and with the courage to counter a reductive secularism which would delegitimize the Church's participation in public debate about the issues which are determining the future of American society [are needed].⁸

Given some of the characteristics of Western culture described above, priestly leadership in the third millennium is not for the fainthearted! It is a truly prophetic role that is a service to modern persons who are seeking a path to meaning and happiness for their earthly journey. Yet the priest has to be deeply sensitive to the environment in which he ministers and aware that this new world is inundating his people with messages and signals through multiple means of communication. These messages are often in sharp contrast to the message of the gospel the priest is sent to proclaim.

Pastoral sensitivity to these developments and their impact on our people have led Church leaders such as Pope Francis to speak of priestly ministry in terms of “accompaniment”—humbly walking with our people as they make their faith journey challenged not only by the sinfulness of our human condition but also by all the new roadblocks our culture places on the way.

This sensitivity will require perhaps more from priests than in the past. It will not be adequate to merely reiterate legal censures. Rather, pastors will have to help the faithful develop personal, mature consciences. One of Pope Francis' favorite images for pastoring today is "working in a field hospital." This requires "pastoral discernment" and a recognition that people may be in a "gradual" process of living up to full Christian ideals.⁹

Priests or candidates for the priesthood will need great human maturity and generosity in fulfilling their special vocation in the Church. Perhaps here the prayer of Jesus for his disciples indicates the balance that modern priestly life requires. It is not one of accommodation to this world but of faithfulness to God and his truth:

Father—I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but to guard them from the evil one. They are not of the world, any more than I belong to the world. Consecrate them by means of the truth...As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. » **John 17:15-18**

The Scriptures remind us that "one does not take this honor on his own initiative, but only when called by God" (Hebrews 4:4). A combination of inner grace and attraction to the role of service and the Church's external discernment through the structures and processes of priestly formation provide the ultimate assurance of a true vocation from God. This discernment will have to determine if the candidate can confidently navigate the turbulent waters of this "new world."

One feeling called to the priesthood today needs especially two qualities: humility and trust in God. Humility comes from realizing that the outcome of our efforts will be from God's grace and will build on the ministry of others: "I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. This means that neither he who plants nor he who waters is of any special account, only God, who grants the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6–7). People are moved and attracted by a humble priest who is obviously not "full of himself" but intent on being God's instrument and truly being present to them.

Confidence and trust in God are the other great requirements. The obstacles and resistance one may sense from today's cultural context require a bold confidence. Walking around the ancient city of Rome, I am often struck by how daunting and hopeless it could have seemed to Paul and Peter—seeing the magnificence and power of imperial Rome and the glory of the great pagan temples—to bring the message of the crucified Savior! We know we are on the winning team and that "for God nothing is impossible" (Luke 1:37).

The following chapters outline some of the dimensions of priestly living that can enable one to cooperate with the grace of God to be of true service to our brothers and sisters on our common journey of faith even in very challenging times.