

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the Commencement Exercises, Immaculate Conception Seminary, Darlington, New Jersey, September 11, 1983)

REFLECTIONS ON PRIESTHOOD

It has been suggested that I speak today of priesthood, since I celebrated last June my fortieth anniversary of Ordination. If you will forgive me some personal observations, I would be glad to reflect with you on this subject.

My first word must be one of thanksgiving to the good Lord and priest, Jesus, and His Mother, who is also the mother of all priests. She has to be closer to the reality of priesthood than any other human being, since she brought the Saviour into the world and gave Him for all in sacrifice. For Her motherly care, to which I commend all of you, I am indeed grateful.

I never wanted to be anything but a priest, which is in itself a great and unearned grace. I hope to live and die a priest, nothing more, but nothing less either. I would not trade my priesthood for any other position one might imagine, not the power of the U. S. Presidency, not the millions of the wealthiest, not the fantasies that anyone might imagine.

In a simple way, I best imagine the priestly role as one of mediation. The priest stands between God and humankind and brings the blessing and graces of God to humans while also, in the other direction, bringing their hopes and needs and desires to God,

hopefully, bringing them to God, too, by praying with and for them all, by trying to inspire them by God's words in faith, hope, and charity, which virtues also bring them to God.

The priest is a man in the middle and, as a mediator, he bridges the gap between the human and the divine, between time and eternity. To be a good mediator, he has to be close to both God and humans. None of us are ever as close as we ought to be to God, even though He is always close to us. Our prayer reflects this all too little and too seldom for which we can only say mea culpa and try harder to be more conscious of the all-pervading presence of God, especially to His priests who are in a very real sense His ambassadors on earth. We are not here to present ourselves, but Him.

It is much easier to be closer to humans. We see them; we are always with them; it requires no deep abiding faith to sense their presence and their needs, as it does to sense the abiding presence of God and our deep need for grace.

The good Lord has made all this easier for us by telling us that when we do something needful for others, especially our least brothers and sisters, we are loving and serving Him in them. It still is the easiest way of finding Him and serving Him in those who are spiritually and materially hungry and thirsty, naked and homeless, sick and in prison.

I do not want to make it sound too easy because the least brothers and sisters are not the most attractive humans we meet.

They are often old and smelly, ugly and uncaring, twisted and ungrateful. How much easier to mediate God and His blessings to attractive, successful, caring, fun-filled young men and women. Besides, they respect us, love us, lionize us, and massage our egos. Well, a priest has some of each, but must take care that the poor, the powerless, the outcast, and the lost souls get his prime attention whenever possible. They need God most of all and we need to find and serve God in them most of all.

The greatest priestly act of mediation is, of course, the Mass. There is really only one true priest and mediator, Christ the God-man, fons et origo totius sacerdotii, the fount and origin of all priesthood, as St. Thomas put it, and it is His one eternal human-divine sacrifice at Calvary that bridged the total chasm of all past, present, and future human evil, called sin, and made it possible for all of us to possess God and His eternal life.

Our greatest privilege is to share His priesthood and to renew His sacrifice daily for our people and our age. When you stand at the altar and hold wide your arms in supplication, you are embracing the whole world, East and West, North and South, men, women, and children, good and evil, Christian and non-Christian, believers and unbelievers. The Eternal Priest died for all of them and we show forth His death and His gift for all every time we offer Mass.

If you will excuse the personal allusion, I cite it only to make the point, I have only missed offering Mass one day in my priestly life during all the days, except Good Friday, when Mass is possible. This is not to brag, but to thank God for the greatest priestly possibility. I remember offering Mass at the South Pole, at the Faculty House at the University of Moscow, at great cities like Chung-du, Taskent, and Sammerkand where millions live their lives with never a Mass in their midst. At least that day they were all remembered in a special way.

I think of the Mass offered in times of great sorrow and great joy, at funerals and marriages, in the midst of war and violence -- and in the peace of Christian families at home. It is always the greatest and the best that a priest can offer -- God Himself for the salvation of the world. I have been greedy to exercise this great privilege and you should be, too. Nothing else we do will be more priestly.

We have so many other wonderful priestly ways of mediating grace which is to say giving divine life. I love baptisms, infants certainly, but adults even more. Confirmation now and then is a special joy because I wrote my theological thesis on it and believe so deeply in the apostolate of the laity in the Church, for which confirmation qualifies and deposes them.

Care of the dying is a special grace for us when we boost the worried soul into eternity in peace. Confessions are fewer

today, but I would say better, more soul-searching and less routine. They also call for more priestly counsel and that, too, is good for us, as well as them. I used to think before first hearing confessions that I would be disillusioned with fellow human beings. Quite the opposite. I soon learned that they were inspiring me by their honesty and humility. I have never spoken a harsh word to any penitent and never will. One of the greatest joys of priesthood is to mediate the compassion, the understanding, and the eternal forgiveness of God, especially since we all need it so much ourselves.

Preaching the Word of God is another joy, but we preach it badly if we do not meditate on it often. The Word of God has its own power and light. Again we are mediating this power and light of Christ, not creating it. I confess to liking John's Gospel best of all because of his recurring emphasis on the trilogy of light, life, and love. I also try to read St. Paul's letters on retreat each year. Somehow, the current theological controversies about Christology seem a bit shallow and shrill alongside the strong words of Paul whenever he speaks so personally of Christ whose Apostle he is in every time and place. No attachment is more important for a priest who is quintessentially an apostle. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ," Paul asks. If it ever occurs, this separation, the heart has gone out of our priesthood.

With Christ, the priest has all he needs, all the courage, all the love, all the fidelity, all the compassion, all the

consecration, all the faith and hope, all the perseverance. Not that any of us have anything eternally valuable in and of ourselves, to make us dare to share Christ's priesthood, but with Him as our nearest companion and friend, all will go well, despite our weaknesses, inadequacies, faults, and sins.

In my forty years of priesthood, I have successively spent two years in advanced study of theology, four years teaching and thirty-four years in administrative posts. I probably have spent much more time with non-Catholics than Catholics when away from Notre Dame on public and private assignments. The work has been mostly secular, but always with a spiritual and moral dimension, days on end, hundreds or thousands of miles away from the nearest church, thousands and thousands of casual encounters with strangers passing like ships in the night, and yet through the millions of miles and more than a hundred countries, I never felt less than a priest. The days and nights were almost always too busy, the claims on my time next to impossible, and yet there was always time for Mass and Breviary, rosary and other daily prayers, never enough for lengthy meditation, probably my fault.

Three religious vows were essential to such a life, at least in my case. Poverty was a great relief, not to have material worries, especially for myself. Enough for living, nothing for amassing, simplicity rather than fine-tuned concerns about room, clothes, cars, or luxuries. The key to poverty is not so much being poor -- my

life has been far from that -- but being unattached to material things that concern most people so much. Freedom of spirit is of the essence of the spirit of poverty. As a priest, freedom is essential. You cannot ever be bought or chained down by possessions.

Chastity or celibacy is another strength of a priest, if he understands it as belonging to no one human so he can belong to and serve all. If we belong to no one so we need not be bothered and can live a life of our own convenience, then we are simply selfish bachelors. Chastity is no big deal if one works at it daily, not fearfully, but resolutely, believing in the commitment we made for one reason only: to give ourselves more fully to Him and His people in priesthood. Without this, I would never make the commitment to celibacy. But as an adjunct to a giving, loving priestly life, celibacy is a great strength and indeed a fulfillment -- because of so many thousands of wonderful people, young and old, men and women, who instinctively call you "Father" and mean it.

Obedience is probably the hardest commitment of all because we are all so wedded to our own desires, especially as to where we will live and where we will work. I was asked three times in the first ten years after Ordination what I preferred to do. Each time I expressed my preference and was given another quite different assignment. It did not maim or kill me. As an old Jesuit friend of mine once said, "Success in life is getting what you want and

happiness is wanting what you get." I can only say, try to do the best you can to contribute as a priest whenever and wherever need is indicated and you are assigned. You will be at peace and happier, too.

I realize that I have just been speaking about the religious vows and you are becoming diocesan priests. Even so, you will pledge celibacy, practice the poverty of detachment, and obey when the call comes -- if you want to be a good priest. Speaking of that, a great priest friend of mine, Jack Egan of Chicago, asked a Jewish social organizer, Saul Alinsky, for his advice on being a good priest. Saul said, "You just said it, just work at being a good priest and don't worry about becoming a Monsignor, a Bishop or Archbishop, or Cardinal." Clerical ambition has ruined many a great young priest.

I have one given in religious life -- community -- which somehow you will have to provide for. It is very important to maintain a circle of friends who are like-minded and like-committed. Other friends will help, mainly by what they expect of you. A great percentage of my oldest and best lay friends -- because of the particular life I have led -- are not Catholic, some not even believers. But they all respect deeply what I am as a priest and they expect more of me -- even as a friend. I must say they give more, too, maybe they think I need it, which may explain why we are such good friends. Many of them are women, too. In some ways, I think they actually feel less inhibited with me because they instinctively understand and appreciate celibacy -- the fact that by choice we priests are out of circulation. This can,

of course, all be a pitfall, but so can almost everything in life -- money, pleasure, power, position -- if one is not honest with oneself and one's commitment. Incidentally, and parenthetically, I have always found it enormously helpful to wear clerical garb when in public. It also attracts a lot of priestly business that otherwise would be missed.

Perhaps my university habitat is showing, but I must insist that there is at least a presumption that as a professional man -- one in service to others -- a priest will remain intellectually alive by reading good books and having some hobbies more intelligent than cribbage or golf -- even though he needs his normal recreation and exercise, too. Too many priests, and other professionals, simply go to seed after a fine education. They thereby become less competent, less informed, less alive, yes, less attractive, too -- all of which makes us less apostolic.

By now, I am sure you will agree that I have done enough ruminating -- maybe too much. I wish you all the love, all the joy, all the inspiration, all the excitement, all the fulfillment that I have had, as a priest, through no great virtue of my own, I must add. It has been all I expected as a priest, and much more. I am sure that with greater effort on my part, I would have been a better priest, but as Paul says, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." I am glad I am a priest, and you should thank God if He is calling you to share His priesthood.

One final word, perhaps the most important of all. Given the sweep of the priestly mission, to be and to act as Christ Himself in the difficult secular, hedonistic, unspiritual world of today, is it not a bit preposterous that any person really aspires to being a priest? The answer is simply, yes, it is preposterous, if you think you can make it on your own. But our Master said He was not going to leave us orphans, alone. First, He said He would be with us all days, but particularly, He said that He was sending us the Holy Spirit who would tell us what to say and what to do. Was it not preposterous to send twelve fearful and ignorant men, one a traitor as well, out to save and redeem a world as bad as ours -- in fact, probably worse. They never would have made it without the transformation of Pentecost. I pity any man, however talented, endowed, intelligent, even handsome, who tries to be a priest today without constantly saying that simplest and most efficacious of all prayers: "Come Holy Spirit." I can testify that I have seen it change darkness into light, death into life, hatred into love. Those simple three words call upon the promise of Jesus to give us all days the light and strength of His Spirit. With that key to such enormous power, we can really understand what Jesus said to all priests. "In the world you will have difficulty, but do not fear. I have overcome the world." And St. Paul, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me." Come Holy Spirit. Come Lord Jesus.