

## HOLY THURSDAY 2010

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

1 April 2010

Tonight, we commemorate the institution of the great sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist by Christ in the Upper Room during the Last Supper. That is why, the somber mood and sorrow that we may find in our hearts as we approach the commemoration of Our Lord's Passion and Death is tempered on this evening. Most Catholics, however, forget about the other sacrament that Christ instituted on that same evening, a sacrament without which we would not have the Eucharist, namely the sacrament of Holy Orders, the sacrament of the priesthood.

Few Catholics ever witness the conferral of Holy Orders with all of its solemnity, when the profound significance of the priesthood is seen in the richness of its ceremonies. And perhaps, that in part is why so many don't fully understand it. Especially today, there are so many misconceptions and misunderstandings about who a priest is, what a priest is and what he should be doing—even among some priests themselves. In the years following the Second Vatican Council when change was sweeping through the Church like a tsunami, I can remember how some Catholics demanded that priests would have to finally get down out of their pulpit and come down to their level. The way they talked about priests sounded more like the communist rhetoric of post-revolutionary Russia than Catholics.

Too many priests, however, got swept up with those cultural changes and began to see themselves as something different than what Christ intended in the Upper Room when He made those twelve men the first Catholic priests. There were those, who felt that they had to flow with the tide of the times and they willingly came down out of their pulpits to embrace the ways of that brave new world thrust upon us in that strange era called the "60s". But it was, unfortunately, that desire to embrace the culture of the times, which gave us the pain and horror of that horrible sexual scandal, which actually began at that time and only later suddenly burst upon us 40 years later like an ugly boil.

Those, who had been the source of this disgrace, had to be purged from our midst so that we could cleanse the priesthood of this filth but it had so wounded the priesthood that it will be a very long time before we will be able to fully recover from its effects. And most of all, it has caused unspeakable pain among the many, many good and faithful priests, who have been true and faithful to their call. Few stop to think that "Christ suffers more than us by the humiliation of his priests and the affliction of his Church" [and] "if he permits it, it is because he knows the good that can come from it, in view of a greater purity of the Church."<sup>1</sup>

All of this is, in part, why last June, Pope Benedict declared the "Year for Priests." Not the "Year of the Priest" but "for the priest." Declaring a year "for priests", he wished to give them a deeply graced period during which they could, in his words, "deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today's world. ... I think of all those priests who quietly present Christ's words and actions each day to the faithful and to the whole world, striving to be one with the Lord in their thoughts and their will, their sentiments and their

style of life. How can I not pay tribute to their apostolic labors, their tireless and hidden service, their universal charity? And how can I not praise the courageous fidelity of so many priests who, even amid difficulties and incomprehension, remain faithful to their vocation as “friends of Christ”, whom he has called by name, chosen and sent?”<sup>2</sup> Benedict, our chief priest, proclaimed this special year for priests in order to help foster the yearning of good priests “for spiritual perfection, upon which the effectiveness of their ministry principally depends.”<sup>3</sup>

But perhaps, Pope Benedict called this Year for Priests also as a source of consolation and support for a category of people, who have been the object of unrelenting criticism, scorn, hatred, defamation, attack and denigration by many people in our country and the world. Although this phenomenon has been growing for many years, it broke out with a vengeance several years ago when the sexual scandal rocked the Church. And since that time, the forces of Satan, aided and abated by his all too willing accomplices inside and outside the Church, have struck blow after blow, hoping to destroy the priesthood, and with it the Church. We see this all too clearly in the recent attacks against the Holy Father himself. It is evident that by flinging mud at him, they hope to bring down the entire Church.

It is a source of grave embarrassment and sorrow for priests, but one of the saddest and most shameful manifestations of our perverse culture is the manner in which so many Catholics treat their priests. They expect their priests to give them the sacraments at their bidding and under their conditions. They expect Mass to be convenient for them, not too challenging and ever entertaining. They think that the priest is there to do their bidding because “isn’t that what priests are for?” And when this doesn’t happen, they get angry. They hang on everything you do at Mass and label you too “liberal” or too “traditional.” They argue with you about their “rights”, like the man, who argued with me at the Communion Rail about how he had a “right” to receive Communion in the hand at a Tridentine Mass, when in fact, the rubrics for that form of the liturgy prescribe Communion only on the tongue and kneeling at the Communion Rail. The priest is only following the rules. He is damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. He has to serve the people but first and foremost he has to serve the Church, his Bride, and remain always faithful to Her in the smallest detail. That’s why the unfaithfulness of other priests hurts so much.

Sure, we have priests, who don’t understand their own priesthood, but we also have so many Catholics in the pews, who also don’t understand what the priesthood is all about. And the result is that one of the greatest pastimes of Catholics is criticizing priests. But how many of them, in turn, pray for their priests? How many of them support their priests? How many of them offer to help their priests, who have given up careers, marriages and families to serve you?

Yes, we priests have faults and most will be the first to admit that we are as human as you are. And we all know that there are, unfortunately, priests who are not quite on the right track. But honestly speaking, most priests are good priests, sincere priests, self-sacrificing priests, who want nothing more than to get all of you to heaven. Perhaps, the style of this or that priest is not what you think it should be but have you even given him the benefit of the doubt? Maybe his Mass is a little too casual or sloppy. But do you realize that there is a whole generation of priests, who were never really taught how to properly offer Mass and had to learn it all themselves. Is it really all their

fault? We have bad days once in a while like all of you. We make mistakes. We get tired, frustrated, overworked just like all of you. We have to deal with hundreds of people each week, all with myriads of different personalities, needs, moods, etc. We try to serve you the best we can but we are still only human and suffer from the same shortcomings that all of you do.

And sometimes, priests have to be firm and even a little harsh. But just look at how you parent your own children. Trying to reason with them doesn't always work and from time to time you have to lay down the law. The priest is the shepherd and the laity is his flock, whom he is trying to protect and lead into the heavenly kingdom in the way that he knows best. Some priests are better at it than others but not everyone can be a Fulton Sheen. Sometimes, the shepherd has to strike the sheep to stop them from straying, not because he just wants to show them who's boss but because he doesn't want to lose any of them. He doesn't want any of them to be eaten by the wolves.

St. John Vianney once stated that "when people want to destroy religion, they begin by attacking the priest; for when there is no priest, there is no sacrifice; and when there is no sacrifice, there is no religion." And this is precisely what is happening now. Priests are the most vulnerable segment of our population today, open game for criticism and defamation of character, treated by many as one of the least respected classes of people in our society.

Priests have given up everything with no thought of reward for themselves. Through ordination their souls have been changed for all eternity to be configured to Christ in a life of self-sacrifice. They have allowed themselves to be used as Christ's instruments so that He can do His work among you here on earth. And although any good and authentic priest will tell you the great joy it is to be a priest, he will probably not tell you that his life is also a life of constant immolation in so many small ways in imitation of the One, of whom he is an image. He is called to be "another Christ" and that is why, at the moment of his death, he will be called to an accountability far greater and more terrible than anyone else can imagine because he will be called to account for every single soul that was in his care. Did he lose any? Did he try hard enough? Did he do all he could to get his flock to heaven? He was both Christ among you but also so very human and frail.

Recently, a Catholic journalist wrote: "It's tough times to be a Catholic priest. Between rabid media and increasingly fickle laypeople, anyone who listens to God's call certainly isn't doing it for temporal glory. The relentless spotlight on a few sinful priests has obscured the tireless good that the overwhelming majority do in their quiet ministries: celebrating Mass, hearing confessions and praying for their flock."<sup>4</sup>

Don't judge them but leave them to the justice of God. And remember they will be judged far more severely than you. Remember—they absolve your sins, renewing God's divine life within you, returning you to His friendship when you have imposed your own will over His. They bring you Christ in the Eucharist, without which you would not be able to spiritually sustain yourselves, for as St. Pio of Pietrelcina once said, the world can more easily live without the sun than without the Eucharist. Priests baptized your children making them children of God and opening heaven to them. They join you in marriage, so that you can draw from the font of nuptial graces to sustain you in that often difficult task of wedded life. They leave the comfort of their homes at sometimes

the most inconvenient times to anoint you and impart upon you the Apostolic Blessing, to help you pass through the veil into eternity.

Pray for your priests. Not that they do your will but that they be holy and faithful to the end.

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<sup>1</sup> “Clergy Tepidity Is Worse Than Scandal” (<http://www.zenit.org/article-28764?l=english>).

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, “Letter to Clergy for the Year for Priests,” 16 June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI announcing the Year for Priests,” 16 March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Lev, Elizabeth, “Art’s Homage to Priests; Tricking the Eye,” *Zenit*, 18 March 2010 (<http://www.zenit.org/article-28680?l=english>).