

CHAPTER ONE

PRIESTLY LIFE

- 14** Jesus once compared the Kingdom of God to a man sowing seed: “It is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how” (Mk 4:26-27). Seeds have a mysterious principle of life that causes them to grow and bear fruit as a matter of course, as long as they are planted in good soil that is rich in nutrients and are nourished with water and sunlight.
- 15** What Jesus attributed to the Kingdom of God is also present in the priesthood. The priestly vocation has an inner principle of life that—planted in good soil and nourished by grace—“sprouts and grows” in a fruitful way. Ongoing formation means making space for this inner principle of life to flourish.¹⁰ It is more than personal or professional development. It means providing the right environment for growth, tilling the soil, ensuring good nourishment, uprooting weeds, and clearing away rocks.¹¹ The seed of the priestly vocation, which is the gift of God, will take care of the rest.
- 16** To continue the analogy, farmers plant seeds with a goal in mind. They want seeds to flourish and become mature crops that bear a rich harvest. Growth, in other words, is ordered to an end; the desired end is how farmers gauge the quality of growth. This document begins its treatment of ongoing formation by examining the end to which priestly growth is directed. We describe the kind of priesthood that is fruitful, rich in meaning, integrated, and joyful. The features of such a

10 “Ongoing formation is intended to ensure fidelity to priestly ministry in a continuing journey of conversion, in order to rekindle the gift received at ordination.” *Ratio Fundamentalis*, no. 81.

11 “This necessity [of ongoing formation] is intrinsic to the divine gift itself which is continually ‘vivified’ so the priest may adequately respond to his vocation. In fact, as a man situated in history, he needs to perfect himself in all the aspects of his human and spiritual existence in order to attain that conformity with Christ, the unifying principle of all things.” DMLP, no. 87.

priestly life will be seen through the lens of a priest's Christian identity, his masculine identity, and his priestly identity. These three integral elements of his life together make up a holy, healthy priesthood.

- 17 Finally, good farmers want to identify anything that might hinder the growth of their crops, including imperfections in the soil and harmful factors in the environment. We address that topic in the latter half of this chapter, where we briefly consider some challenges facing priests in the United States today, such as shortcomings in priestly culture itself and harmful factors in the wider ecclesial and social environments. Although our intention is not to dwell on those obstacles or try to solve them, to acknowledge them is important. Becoming the kind of priest who can overcome those challenges is part of the very purpose of ongoing formation in the priesthood.

DESCRIPTION OF A HOLY, HEALTHY PRIESTHOOD

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

- 18 The most defining choice we make in life is to have a relationship with Jesus, who draws us into communion with his Father through the love of the Holy Spirit. That relationship began with our baptismal rebirth, when we were claimed by Christ and incorporated into his Body, the Church. For most of us, our spiritual birth in baptism occurred in infancy, and we had as little choice in the matter as we did in our natural birth.
- 19 At some point, though—early in our childhood, perhaps a bit later in our teenage years, or maybe later still with a “second conversion” or reversion to the faith—we began to take personal responsibility for that relationship. We began to see the primacy of our friendship with Christ and took steps to deepen our interior life. Fostering that friendship with Jesus, so important for all Christians, is doubly

important for the priest who is called to be among the Lord's closest collaborators, to love the Church as the Lord does, and to stand in his very place in shepherding souls, proclaiming the Word of God, and administering the sacraments.

20 At the core of our Christian identity is recognizing our status as beloved sons of God. “See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are” (1 Jn 3:1). It is the very reason for the Incarnation. “The Son of God became the Son of man,” St. Irenaeus wrote, so that “man . . . might become a son of God.”¹² Taking our divine filiation seriously means assuming both its responsibilities and its privileges. As loyal sons we want to be in intimate contact with God through prayer and sacraments. We strive to obey the Father and his will, keep the moral law, care for our brothers and sisters, and guard ourselves against the Evil One, who constantly seeks to rob us of our dignity and diminish the fruitfulness of our ministry. The privileges of our sonship in Christ include a confident awareness of God's love and mercy, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the joy and peace of being in communion with the Father, and the assurance of salvation for those who die in a state of grace.

21 Like natural sonship, divine filiation is not something that we lose through sin. Even if we abandon the Father's house, we do not forfeit his love or our sonship. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, even after the young man's selfish betrayal, the good father remains vigilant, waiting for his son to return, ready to forgive and restore him to his rightful place in the family home. That is the image of our heavenly Father that Jesus gives us. When we stray, he waits in vigilance to

12 St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3, 19, 1; PG 7/1, 939, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2016), no. 460. The *Catechism* is subsequently cited as CCC.

restore us to our rightful place in the family. When we do not resist such love, it draws out our own love and keeps alive our commitment to grow in holiness as sons of such a Father.

22 For priests, to be sons of God is to entrust ourselves under the provident care of the Father while striving to become a saint. Structuring the day around our interior growth, we beg for the grace to pursue the life of virtue, reject the temptation to settle for mediocrity, and wage battle against our evil inclinations. When weighed down by weakness or hurt by sin, we priests humbly confess our faults and joyfully return to the fight. Conforming our lives to that of Christ, we commit ourselves to daily prayer, personal sacrifice, and service to neighbor.¹³

23 As sons of God, we priests are also sons of the Church, faithful to it and grateful for its life-giving teachings. We honor and foster relationships with those brilliant examples of faith, the saintly sons and daughters of the Church through the ages. Priests nourish a special love for the Holy Mother of God¹⁴ and for St. Joseph. “In this context the ecclesiology of communion becomes decisive for understanding the identity of the priest, his essential dignity, and his vocation and mission among the People of God and in the world. Reference to the Church is therefore necessary, even if not primary, in defining the identity of the priest. As a mystery, the Church is essentially related to Jesus Christ. She is his fullness, his body, his

13 “Therefore, the priest must necessarily live this relationship [with the Holy Trinity] in an intimate and personal manner, in dialogue of adoration and love with the three divine Persons, conscious that the gift has been received and has been given for the service of all.” DMLP, no. 5.

14 “The priestly spirituality may not be considered complete if it does not take into serious consideration the testament of Christ crucified, when he willed to entrust his Mother to the beloved disciple, and through him to all the priests called to continue his work of redemption.” DMLP, no. 84. See also CIC, c. 276 §2, 5°.

spouse. She is the ‘sign’ and living ‘memorial’ of his permanent presence and activity in our midst and on our behalf.”¹⁵

- 24 Such are some features of our Christian identity. We priests hold them in common with all those who share the indescribable privilege of being children of God.

MASCULINE IDENTITY

- 25 Our identity as Christians is our greatest honor as priests. Yet this identity is not an abstract ideal. It depends upon and penetrates a prior reality, our human nature, which has a dignity all its own. In considering the elements of a holy and healthy priesthood, then, we must consider the characteristics of a fully human life. To be a thriving priest means to be a thriving man.
- 26 The Christian faith illuminates our humanity in important ways. It teaches, for example, that we find the highest human fulfillment in giving ourselves to the service of God and neighbor, that humility is the foundation of the virtuous life, and that our destiny lies beyond this world. As the Second Vatican Council taught, Christ “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”¹⁶ For Christians, human nature flourishes to the extent that we conform our lives to the life and teachings of Jesus.
- 27 To be humanly mature as priests means that our personal development is free and integrated. We are *free* when we take responsibility for our own growth, when we pursue a life of virtue not under coercion but out of love. Our conscience is formed to perceive the good, and our will grows strong enough to pursue it. We are *integrated* when growth

¹⁵ PDV, no. 12.

¹⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*, no. 22, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Corpus Books, 1966). Subsequently cited as GS.