Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of the Priesthood

Part 7: The Importance of the Priesthood[1]

A parishioner recently expressed her concern that I might become "burned-out" because of the many responsibilities I have as a pastor. This is a particularly common concern among the millions of Catholics around the world, especially as we celebrate the Year of the Priesthood. While I am humbled and touched by the woman's concern for me, I assured her that I am not near burnout. Burnout does not come from excessive work; it comes from a *lack of meaning* in one's work.

From September 27th through October 3rd of this year, there was an international spiritual retreat for priests held at the French shrine of Ars as part of the 150th anniversary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney. The theme of the retreat was "The joy of being a priest, consecrated for the salvation of the world." Via a video recording, Pope Benedict XVI offered the retreatants some thoughts about the *meaning* of the priesthood.

> The priest is called to serve human beings and to give them life in God…. He is a man of the divine Word and of all things holy and, today more than ever, he must be a man of joy and hope. To those who cannot conceive that God is pure Love, he will affirm that life is worthy to be lived and that Christ gives it its full meaning because He loves all humankind.

In addition to these words encouraging priests to be men of service, joy, hope, integrity, and love, the Holy Father also challenged the priests to *really think about* the amazing impact they are having on the world through their dedicated service. By doing so, the Pope said that priests will "perceive the infinite fruitfulness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders."

Such dedicated service brings forth the Kingdom of God and reflects eternity. The Holy Father explained this saying, "The priest is the man of the future…. What he does in this world is part of the order of things directed towards the final Goal. Mass is the only point of union between the means and the Goal because it enables us to contemplate, under the humble appearance of the bread and the wine, the Body and Blood of Him Whom we adore in eternity."

It is only when priests take the time in prayer to stay in touch with the eternal importance and meaning of their ministry that they are able to find joy and strength. In other words, it is not primarily *what the priest does*, but how *prayerfully he understands* what he is doing that brings joy and permanence to his priestly vocation. Without such prayerful meditation, a priest's service will quickly become social work and the "performance" of the Sacraments, and joy and strength will quickly fade from his demeanor. Burnout quickly follows.

Pope Benedict encouraged the retreatants, and all priests, to remember the eternal nature of their vocation and its importance, saying—

> Nothing will ever replace the ministry of priests in the heart of the Church…. You are the living witnesses of God's power at work in the weakness of human beings, consecrated for the salvation of the world, chosen by Christ Himself to be, thanks to Him, salt of the earth and light of the world.

As part of our celebration of the Year of the Priesthood, please pray for us priests. Pray that we might more clearly understand the eternal significance and meaning of our vocation and be reinvigorated to service selflessly and zealously!

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[1] In honor of the "Year of the Priesthood," announced by Pope Benedict, this is a twelve part series on the priesthood