

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of the Priesthood

Part 8: Mary and Her Priests¹

There is a special relationship between Catholic priests and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Last year, Pope Benedict XVI explained at a general audience how this special relationship is prefigured in Scripture when Christ, from the cross, gave Mary to John and John to Mary. The Pope also said, “The Second Vatican Council invites priests to see Mary as the perfect model of their existence.” Our continued celebration of the “Year of the Priesthood,” is a wonderful opportunity for us to look at this beautiful relationship between Mary and her priests.

The relationship between Mary and priests is a relationship rooted in *identity*—the identity of priests and the identity of Mary. The Church teaches that each priest is an *alter Christus*—another Christ. The Church also teaches that Mary is the Mother of the Church. These aspects of identity create a very beautiful and special relationship.

Father Paul Philippe expressed how a priest's identity as an *alter Christus* is seen and appreciated by the Blessed Virgin Mary, writing, “For [Mary], a priest is always a priest, a living image of her Son, and if that image is disfigured by sin, she only has a more ardent desire to give him back that resemblance to Christ, for she sees him as God sees him...”² Because of who the priest is through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, Mary has a special affection for him and a particular desire for him to perfectly reflect her Son, Jesus Christ.

Not only does the priest's identity draw him into a special relationship with Mary, but her identity as the Mother of the Church does, also. The Book of Revelation 12:17 states that, “The dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus.” All Christians are Mary's “offspring,” and she is their mother. Mary gives birth spiritually to all Christians as she gave birth physically to Jesus Christ. This creates a unique relationship between Mary and priests since each priest is called to be a “father” for the Church.

As a “father,” the priest is called to imitate Mary's example of spiritual fecundity in bringing to birth new spiritual life in the Church. He does this by falling in love with the Church just as Mary loves the Church. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, in his book, The Priest Is Not His Own, writes, “As Mary ‘mothered’ all men at the Cross, so the priest ‘fathers’ them.... There comes a moment in the priest's life when he recognizes that he does not belong to his family, his parish, his diocese, his country.... He belongs to humanity.... Every soul is either a potential convert or a potential saint” (pgs. 275-276). Mary provides a wonderful example and encouragement for priests to passionately love all people. The extent that a priest does this is directly proportionate to the degree he unites himself with Mary and accepts her intercession, example, and encouragement.

One beautiful way that Catholics can participate in the “Year of the Priesthood” is to pray specifically for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary for priests. This can be done by offering up a weekly or monthly rosary for particular priests or just priests in general. It can also be done by praying novenas or chaplets that ask for the intercession of Mary. Regardless of the form one's prayer takes, the “Year of the Priesthood” would not be complete without Christians praying for deeper union between Mary and her priests.

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

² Magnificat Year of the Priest Companion, pg. 51