

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of the Priesthood

Part 9: Priestly Spirituality¹

There has been a lot of material written about the spirituality of diocesan priests in recent years. The reason for all of the writing is because of a crisis in diocesan priesthood. As the number of priests has dwindled and the workload of priests has dramatically increased, the spirituality and purpose of diocesan priesthood has become obscured and lost in many places. Father George Aschenbrenner, a Jesuit priest, understood the importance of helping diocesan priests recapture their unique spirituality. This is why he wrote the book, Quickening the Fire in Our Midst.²

Father Aschenbrenner's book serves as a way of renewing the spirituality of diocesan priests today. The glue that holds the priestly spirituality of diocesan priests together is the reality that they have been ordained to call down fire from heaven for the sanctification of the world. This idea came from a Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin, who, in one of his prayers, explained how God had ordained him to "call down the Fire."

Diocesan priests call down fire from heaven in numerous different ways, which create a very unique spirituality, which is always apostolic, meaning that they must be committed to being involved in the ordinariness of daily life in our world. Diocesan priests are not monastic or cloistered; rather, they are in the world and even in the messiness of the world. The old saying that we must be "*in* the world, but not *of* the world," applies to diocesan priesthood. Some of the characteristics of the apostolic nature of diocesan priesthood that Fr. Aschenbrenner points out include—

- Ministry is the primary focus,
- Flexibility, mobility, and apostolic availability are nonnegotiable,
- Prayer must influence ministry and ministry must influence prayer
- There is a solidarity with the community the priest serves.

While diocesan priests don't live in monasteries, they are called to live a "monasticism of the heart." This means that, in the midst of daily busyness, the center of a priest's life must be the love of God alive in his heart, not the identity of the world. Father Aschenbrenner points out several important aspects of such monasticism of the heart. First, it requires priests to be men of prayer, constantly discerning the movements of their heart. They also need daily Eucharist, "celebrated reverently and in deep faith."³ Monasticism of the heart also requires regular periods of quiet solitude; time alone with God. These three things are so important to diocesan spirituality that "without a genuine monasticism of the heart... apostolic vision, enthusiastic freedom, unquenchable fire, and irrepressibly joyous hope are simply not possible."⁴

As we continue our celebration of the Year of the Priesthood, I encourage all of you to spend some time thinking about the life of your own parish priest. What aspects of the spirituality of diocesan priesthood does he seem to exemplify? Tell him. What aspects of the spirituality of diocesan priesthood does he seem struggle with? Pray specifically that God will strengthen those particular spiritual aspects in him.

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

² Quickening the Fire in Our Midst, George A. Aschenbrenner, S.J., Loyola Press, Chicago, 2002.

³ Ibid, pg. 23

⁴ Ibid, pg. 25