

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of the Priesthood

Part 11: Imitate the Mystery You Celebrate¹

In American society today, there seems to be an aversion to thinking about death. Most people spend the majority of their lives desperately trying to ignore the reality of death. Then, around midlife, the crisis happens and most people take their first long, realistic look at the reality of the shortness of their lives. This often entails facing their regrets and disappointments regarding what they had hoped to accomplish in life.

One of the greatest blessings of priesthood is that it requires a person to think often about death. The reason priesthood (and this could be said about every authentic vocation) requires us to think about death is because it's about love, which entails our dying to self, which is a foreshadowing of our physical death.

Reverend Mark O'Keefe, a Benedictine priest, in his book, In Persona Christi, offers an image from the monastic life to explain how even our religious ceremonies are invitations to reflect on death. He writes—

During the vow ceremony, just at the point at which the people sing the “Litany of the Saints,” the monk lies prostrate. The cantor sings, “Now I am dead, and my life is hidden with Christ in God.” The death toll sounds. (Formerly, just in case the dying symbolism wasn't strong enough, a funeral pall was laid over the prostrate monk.) Then, the paschal candle is placed at the head of the prostrate monk and the cantor sings, “Sleeper, awake, and Christ will enlighten you,” and the bells ring.²

There are moments in the rite of ordination that are similar to what Fr. O'Keefe described—moments when the man being ordained is reminded that love is about daily martyrdom, which prepares us for the end of our earthly lives. There was one particular sentence in the rite of ordination that I spent a lot of time reflecting on; it is spoken by the bishop to the newly ordained priests—“Imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross.” I understand these words to be an invitation into dying. Just as Christ was willing to give His life for the sake of all others, every priest is called to lay down his life in love. To believe this and to meditate on it also prepares a person for his or her eventual physical death.

There's a tradition in the Catholic Church that priest's first chalice and paten are given to him by his parents. My parents had their gift engraved for me with my date of ordination and the quote that I mentioned a moment ago. At every Mass, then, I am given an opportunity to remember the importance of death—Christ's death and my own. Every time I elevate the chalice and paten during the Eucharistic prayer, I am aware of those profound words, “Imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross.” What a wonderful blessing! At every Mass, my priesthood reminds me that I am to love, and that to love I must die, and dying daily helps transform my fears and anxiety about physical death into longing, peace, and hope!

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

² Mark O'Keefe, OSB. In Persona Christi, Abbey Press, St. Meinrad, IN. 1998, pg. 23-24.