

Open Letter to the Faithful of Montreal On Respect For Priests

The first point is that this letter is motivated only by love for God, for his Church, for you, and for his priests. It has been sudden in the writing, but long in the formulation; as I have observed much and pondered for many years on how we live out our Christian life and how we treat our priests. Clergy are a favorite target these days in the media, but our topic is not about that kind of abuse. In any event, serious corroborated research shows that the proportion of priests engaging in abusive behavior is no greater than comparable groups of men at other levels of society.

I would like to draw attention to a different kind of abuse, which you may at first view consider unimportant. There are in our Church individuals, families, groups, movements, and communities who, without realizing what they are doing, make constant demands for special, exclusive Masses for special occasions. Over the years, to those who have come to me with such demands, I have offered to include them in one of the regularly scheduled parish Masses, but for the most part, they turned down my offer and went searching for a priest who would give them what they wanted. Some people have an uncanny “radar” ability to seek out and find priests unable or unwilling to say no.

Let me make one thing quite clear. I take no exception to the myriad initiatives taken by you, the laity, to gather people together for a great variety of purposes – usually including prayer, Scripture, faith sharing, personal and spiritual growth, community building, works of charity, meaningful mourning and living out the grieving process, and many other worthy projects. My objection is to the mentality that seeks to get “my Mass, or our Mass” for some special occasion; as though the regularly scheduled parish Masses were somehow inferior or insufficiently focused on “my situation, our needs, or the beloved person who is the object of our prayers.” Is it not the very same Jesus, our Savior, Son of God and Risen King who is offering Himself at every parish Mass? It is an unhealthy and unholy attitude to think of this holy sacrifice of Jesus as somehow “mine” or “ours”, simply because there is attached to it an offering of money for the welfare of the local parish and of the priest.

In some countries to this day the only revenue priests receive in order to keep body and soul together is on the occasion of “stole fees” for every Mass or sacrament they celebrate. I can see how some priest would have to multiply the number of “stole rituals” they celebrate in order simply to survive. Is this the use Jesus intended for us to make of the mysteries He has given us to celebrate? There is also a practical problem. We priest cannot continue putting out the same number of Masses and ritual celebrations with fewer priests in action. We are very rapidly approaching the point, and in some places are already there, where we simply can no longer say yes to your every request for a special Mass. The time and energy are simply not in us. Thirty or more years ago, priests were formed to consider it normal to celebrate 2 or more Masses a day, but today’s priests feel that one Mass a day is quite enough – keeping in mind that Jesus Himself only did it once – putting his whole Self into it. It is not at all a bias against older priests to say that younger priests invest more of themselves in each Mass, and can actually feel quite exhausted afterwards – they can’t just “churn them out.”

Fr. Gilles A. Surprenant, Pastor - St. Thomas à Becket Parish - 11.05.03

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So, as the age of our priests increases but our numbers decrease, while the demands made by the faithful remain the same or even increase, allow me to ask each of the faithful, each group and movement, each community that wants to cling to having “my/our Mass” as always, without change, the following question: “Have you, your family, your movement, your group, your community ever produced a priestly vocation? If so, when was the last priest who came from you? Vocations are given by God, and man must hear and respond to God’s call. Priests are often God’s instruments to stir up the desire to follow Jesus, but it is the community that most often nurtures the person being called, encouraging him to declare openly the impulse/call or desire happening within them. Are we honoring God and doing the Father’s will by maintaining practices that don’t take account of the reality we are all facing? Consider special Masses for a special occasion or intention, apart from regularly scheduled parish Masses, which are followed by a sumptuous repast, which everyone enjoys in a relaxed setting and joyful, even exuberant atmosphere. All are joyous – even in grief – all, that is, except the priest; who often is running from one demand to another.

How is it possible for us to sustain a truly loving Christian community – how can we go on being the Body of Christ together – if we allow to go unchanged what too often feels like callous disregard for the well-being, health, and even life itself of our priests? Must we wait until every last priest has died before the whole people wake up and ask themselves, “What happened?” I for one do not want to wait until we priests are no more – that is why I am choosing to write this letter at this time. It has been composing itself in the depths of my soul since before I was ordained – for about 25 years. Would you agree that we have been sufficiently patient, generous, and available? Brothers and Sisters in Christ, what are you going to do to better manage the resource of priesthood that, for now, you still can enjoy from the heart and hands of Christ Jesus, our lord and only Savior?

What will you do to share the responsibility for the use we are making of the priests we still have, and who will become fewer until a new wave of vocations rolls in? What will you do to change your approach, which looks for a priest to act as a personal chaplain for your family or movement or group, without regard for his increasing workload? When will you take steps to integrate yourself, your family, your movement, your group into the regular life of the Parish; so that your needs and desires can be satisfied by the regular Parish Mass. Is it not the same Jesus who is present there? Is He not your Lord, Savior, and Good Shepherd.

If your movement or group has members from several parishes, what prevents you from rotating from need for Masses from one Parish to another? Whenever I’ve questioned people along these lines in response to requests for special Masses, I’ve often been rebuffed with the somewhat arrogant response: “Well you’re a priest, you’re supposed to be serving the Church; so what’s your problem?” Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, when Jesus tells us that no one takes his life, but He gives it freely. He didn’t allow people to do whatever they wanted with Him, but when the time came, He gave his life. I think we priests must follow the example of our Lord and Master and not allow people to make unlimited demands for special interest rituals that actually separate them from the principle Sunday assembly.

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