

Who can weigh adequately the importance of a seemingly casual encounter with a priest in God's plan for a soul?

## **Letter to a newly ordained priest.**

**By Donald Haggerty**

Dear Father C.,

Congratulations on your ordination! I have one memory from the morning of my ordination that comes back most often in my thoughts of that day, and indeed haunts my prayer at times. It was a brief encounter with an older priest on the sidewalk outside St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York after the Mass. I was only mildly acquainted with this priest, which perhaps made his words that much more effective. I was on the sidewalk looking for my ride back to the seminary when he saw me and came right over with a big Irish smile. We shook hands and before anything was said, he pulled me closer to him with a thick handshake and in an almost gruff manner whispered loudly: "You've just given yourself entirely away to God. Now don't spend the rest of your life taking it back."

I find myself remembering that old priest and his words once again as I sit down to send you a few reflections for your own beginning days as a priest. No doubt I could as well simply pass on his words, and leave it at that. But I will accompany them with some other thoughts as well. "Know what you are doing. Imitate the mystery you celebrate. Model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross."

Do you remember these words at the ordination Mass as you knelt before your bishop and together with him held a chalice and a paten? At that point in the Mass you were already a newly ordained priest. Those words are worth some meditation at times. Three commands are pronounced that identify concisely the spiritual challenge facing every priest. The first command—"know what you are doing." The stress of this first imperative statement is on knowing, before any doing, and it will always be necessary to recall for a priest who wants to live more fully the mystery of his vocation. There is an important command here, the first, by the way, which you received from your bishop, and it is simply this: pay attention and be aware.

And of what, you ask? I wonder, in these days since you were ordained, do you comprehend what you have become? What priest does, even after many years? Yet even now, after you have once offered a single Mass, you know well enough there are actions in your new priestly life that do not belong to you—they are God's. It would be good to realize soon that in fact nothing of your life belongs now exclusively to you. No choice you make, especially regarding people, can be simply your own, for your life no longer belongs to you. You have given it away in order that it may bear fruit—in response to a privileged invitation. "You have not chosen me; I have chosen you—to go and bear fruit." If you are attentive you will discover in many mysterious ways how true these words are.

I speak here first, then, of what you will do with souls. Know that by your ordination you are entering hidden chambers, as it were, where you will be given an occasional glimpse of the mystery of divine predilection for souls. If you are receptive in your inner spirit, your soul will brush up at times against the incomprehensible nature of divine love and mercy. Please be aware the grace of God is bigger than you are, and that God has more intelligence than you do. You must make yourself very open and accessible to being used in ways you cannot foresee. Your choices with people, whom to see, whom to give more or less time, whom to pursue without

letting go, whom to wait on patiently, all these choices cannot be managed as though they were under your exclusive control, as your possession, to do with as you please by your own lights.

The true priest is at the disposal of a divine purpose that is often concealed in the immediate moment and sometimes for a good while. It is not good in fact to presume a clear awareness of God's workings. The only sure knowledge you have is that Our Lord gave himself for every soul you will encounter as a priest for the rest of your life. Be alert, then, and open to the unexpected possibilities in contact with people wherever you are. Who can weigh adequately the importance of a seemingly casual encounter with a priest in God's plan for a soul?

So I leave you with this first challenge—stay awake and be aware interiorly—because it will lead in time to a great spiritual happiness only a priest can really know. If a young priest sustains his attention, if he is not forgetful, I think it is true he will experience over time, strangely at first, and then more expectedly, that his attractions toward souls sometimes are not simply his own, that the coincidences accompanying his choices, the chance encounters, are not so random and unplanned as they at first appear. A priest should begin soon enough to see he lives his small life within the active presence of an unfathomable Love that will remain always outside his comprehension. Even what seems at first to pass aimlessly through your mind may not be so haphazard. What is the reason, for example, behind the unexplainable, urgent thought to seek out or pray for a particular soul but an influence beyond the priest himself?

Be alert, then, with your eyes open, and listen for the concealed poverty in souls. Every soul in need of grace suffers a poverty only God can assuage, and he may want you to be the lifeline back to grace for the soul in front of you at any particular moment. So be energetic in getting out in the midst of these souls in need, and gain a quick love for the confessional, which can be anywhere there is a priest willing to take the time. Know what you are, an intercessor and an instrument, and you will more often do what you are meant to do as a priest for the souls God sends you in your lifetime. A book review I read last year treated an autobiography of a Jewish man who converted from agnosticism to an orthodox practice of his faith. The reviewer commented that the author "did not come to his Jewish identity easily. Nor does any man come to the mystery of a priestly identity easily. Every priest is well aware that his ordination does not displace a former self with its weakness and its natural gifts. And these weaknesses and gifts of nature cling to a man in a way that might make him forget the awareness he must foster if he is to realize the new identity that has been struck in his soul.

You remember, of course, at your ordination, prostrating yourself on the cathedral floor in acknowledgement of your unworthiness. It is a dramatic moment. But we prostrate there also in the knowledge that our former identity as a man is soon to be buried in a past that can never be returned intact. From that day onward, the mystery of a personal identity will converge with a divine purpose that overwhelms the limitations of the man in himself. Over a long time, with grace, and with steady faithfulness, the gradual recognition may arrive that your identity as a man cannot be separated from the Christ who acts within you. A limited personal biography will be very secondary to this wonderful reality of having become, by actions you are never worthy of, an alter Christus in the lives of souls.

We should make no mistake what kind of demand on our natural pride this cooperation with Christ's action requires concretely. It is remarkable that Our Lord could say of himself that "I can do nothing on my own." Even after hearing these words we turn about and possess such confidence in ideas and plans that have been forged independently of a profound need for divine intervention. To his priests, indeed to every Christian soul, Our Lord said: "Apart from me, you can do nothing." It will seem sometimes, in fact, that with him

as well we can do nothing, and indeed this is very much the truth. From the beginning of your priesthood, make no mistake: this is an identity rooted in powerlessness and self-emptying, in self-renouncing death, and in an ultimate self-offering without promise of visible reward. Like every priest you are bound to know the dry taste of impotent frustration, and at times the darkness of defeat. Isaiah prophesied of Our Lord: “He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, one from whom men hide their faces; he was despised, and we held him of no account.” Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. Should we look for a career of pleasant successes?

Yes, know what you are doing, and what road you have embarked upon, and you will know more and more what you are likely to become over time. Everything, in one sense, is tied to a certain striving for awareness. Our Lord went often to deserted places to pray. A priest must be a man of prayer, he must have a profound commitment here, or else he lives with an emptiness that cannot be compared to the inner restlessness of the layperson who does not pray. The priest with little prayer life risks becoming a sad caricature of the sacred actions he still performs, one who can instrumentally cause divine action upon a piece of bread, or upon a soul lost from grace, and yet be distracted himself, unaffected, without wonder at divine interventions in personal lives, untransformed himself because the mystery of his identity is covered over with busy activity and its contrary the excessive need for diversion. And this is if there are no greater moral collapses. A divine companionship marks his life whether he wants to have it or not. When he has no silence, no reflective hours, he forgets his true identity and becomes false to himself, leaving his soul exiled from its true identity. St. John of the Cross wrote the following words over four hundred years ago, and they are apt now as much as ever.

Let those who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer . . . . They would certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand . . . . Without prayer, they will do a great deal of hammering, but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm . . . . However much they may appear to achieve externally, they will in substance be accomplishing nothing; it is beyond doubt that good works can be performed only by the power of God.

You heard, of course, in the seminary (at least I hope so) that the need for prayer is the essential preparation for a man aspiring to the priesthood. The admonition is even more important now that you are a priest. Nonetheless I venture to say it is an uncommon blessing whenever we find a priest to be really a man of prayer. Make up your mind and heart to be one, no matter what kind of circumstances in which you find yourself. Surely you will hear it said there are struggles enough sufficient for the day outside the proximity of the tabernacle. Must we add one more? And yet without an intent of striving for greater interior life well beyond simply fulfilling a perfunctory duty of praying the breviary, all is likely to become hollow at the core. Make no mistake that a priestly life without extended times of silent prayer and meditation leads to a predictable conclusion at best. You have only to look at some priests in their later years, anxious to retire after their busy years running parishes. What priest who seriously prays would relinquish the chance to keep serving Our Lord in some capacity? The fact is the ones who pray do not stop until they are knocked off their feet. It is good to decide this right now before you get any older as a priest.

“Know what you are doing. Imitate the mystery you celebrate. Model your life on the mystery of the Lord’s cross.” The mystery you celebrate is of course the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the renewal of Calvary in our midst. The sacrifice is hidden, the victim invisible to our

eyes, participated in under the appearance of food and drink. But for the priest the Mass and all time spent in the presence of the Eucharist ought each day to forge a renewed self-offering of his life in union with the offering of Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, on the cross at Calvary. If you pray before the Eucharist an hour a day in silence and in a way that empties you of your self, you will offer the Mass as Our Lord desires. Remember, please, that the Church properly speaks of the priest offering Mass, not simply of praying it, or of saying it as one might say other good prayers. Even as it becomes a daily reality of your life, the Mass is too extraordinary an event for routine. At every Mass the priest is at Calvary once again; this is not a pious trapping for the imagination to consider occasionally. You are offering again and again Jesus Christ at the cross in Jerusalem. Remember it well, because at the same time you yourself are being offered by Our Lord to an unbloody sacrifice that, if you become holy, will be the most apt description of your own life.

Try to allow your daily Mass to carve a deep, very sacred orientation in the hidden recesses of your soul. And in what way? Primarily by animating in you a desire for sacrifice, a readiness for costly, exacting, repeated rhythms of self-giving, a willingness to die to your own needs whenever you can be an instrument of grace for another. This is a sublime ideal; yes, and only the Sacrifice of the Mass united to your priestly soul each day and a search for a deeper interior life can sustain it. Since my first days offering Mass I have always thought the words of St. John the Baptist describe what the Mass will do for a priest's soul if we are docile enough, and desirous enough: "He must increase, I must decrease." St. John the Baptist, the forerunner announcing the coming of Christ, prophesies in these words the Catholic priesthood nailed to the cross of every generation for the salvation and sanctification of souls. He prophesies your own life in these words—"He will become more, you will become less"—if you are willing to become holy.

There has been much said about the crisis of faith that the Church has suffered in the last decades of the past century. I know you enough as a man to trust your fidelity to the Pope and the Church. The alternative, I might add, is to become emasculated. With no particular individual in mind, I offer you a pattern to observe. The men who cannot stand with the Church in the public arena of a pulpit and rectory office are invariably complaining, peevish spirits in the privacy of their bottled-up resentments against the Church. Be careful with your clerical associations, and don't lose your manhood as a priest.

But there is another crisis far less regretted in our time, but one which has had its own corrosive effect on the Church. You have to know it so that you reverse the pressure of its ill effects in your own life. I speak of the crisis of sacrifice in the Church. Somewhere along the way in these last forty years, the central importance of sacrifice began to crack and splinter off from personal lives—in priestly and religious and family life. It became a more peripheral notion because its reality began to fade until its value was submerged by other slogans of our time. You remember what the old priest said to me on my ordination day—"you have given yourself entirely away to God; don't spend the rest of your life taking it back." Let's be serious, an indulgent life is readily possible despite all the talk of heroism in a priesthood with less newcomers each year to fill the ranks. Comfort is enticing, and very hard to refuse when available. Try to resist it if you would retain a manly spirit in your priesthood.

So much will reduce itself in your life to a question of faith and will. The will is indeed a very hard thing to give up once you discover it is up to you now to decide how you want to live. But you don't in fact give up your will at all when you are responding to God generously. You

rather give it away to choices pleasing to God, refusing to take it back for yourself. You forget yourself and actively choose with grace and increasing strength in order to become the man God would have you become. I will give you one small test that will determine a measure of your character as a priest in the coming years. An alarm clock set early every morning can be a painful experience. But what is the alternative—living without a serious pursuit of prayer?

One of the great contrived misperceptions among the diocesan clergy is the caveat “we are not religious.” Does this mean we are called to an easier life, as is so often assumed? On the contrary, I remind you of your bishop’s commands at your ordination to “imitate the mystery you celebrate and model your life on the mystery of the Lord’s cross.” You have a higher demand upon your life than the three vows the religious take. The mystery you are to imitate is a profound sacrificial dying, and it is meant to affect everything in your life. The religious have their vow of chastity, true, but purity of mind and body and respect for your dignity as a man of God must pervade your whole public and private life. Even the once very zealous have sometimes brought disgrace upon themselves and the Church by presumptuous lack of prudence in this regard. It seems to me a very safe assumption that no man who has left the priesthood to marry has ever had a truly happy life. How could they, realizing after a time what they gave away so cheaply?

The religious have their vow of poverty, but a true poverty ought to mark your life in a visible manner if you have any love for the real suffering and deprivation of the poor in this world, especially outside our own borders. I offer this caution: You will be affecting people’s spiritual lives by your material lifestyle; despise the vanities of clerical worldliness so scandalous to people. Do you know of the now deceased New York auxiliary Bishop Austin Vaughn, who became more well known in his later activist pro-life years? It was said after his death that all during his priesthood he had the practice of emptying his bank account periodically and giving the money to the poor. This was a man of prayer, of course, and that is a connection one cannot help noticing—between the amount of money that priests spend on themselves and the amount of time they spend in prayer. And yes, finally, the religious have their vow of obedience, but remember you are exercising an obedience to your bishop and the Church in courageous public teaching and in the confessional, in your faithful responsibility to schedules of ordinary duty within a parish, by the kind demeanor of your availability and by every cheerful acceptance of unexpected constraints on your time and energy.

The daily demand of self-giving involves much hidden sacrifice and a great spirit of detachment from self. Your priesthood must not be experienced as an accumulation of burdensome obligation, but rather joyfully embraced as the overflow of the mystery you celebrate each day at the altar. Intensive self-giving ought to become an almost natural expression of a priest’s interior desire for union with Christ over a lifetime. Priests can easily tire of giving; so do husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. And yet without the sacrificial tests that form your will you cannot be happy as a priest. Perhaps the greatest tests will always involve your becoming poorer in self, so be ready for them, because they are already on the way. It is a safe prediction to state you will be as generous to the gift you have received in the priesthood, as you are self-effacing and dismissive of your own importance when any such trials come.

One of the very disturbing experiences you, too, may unfortunately have is to see men you knew in the seminary walk away from the priesthood. Again, make no mistake: Every betrayal of a priestly vocation has a source in the refusal of sacrifice, an unwillingness after a point in time to embrace further demands to become less, to become

poorer in the service of Our Lord. In this sense the priesthood confronts the same dilemma as married spouses of protecting their first love, adjusting spiritually to the new requirements of divine demands upon the soul, and understanding the emptying of self out of love for another as the primary requirement for growth at all stages of a life's commitment. Let it be repeated: Every priestly life that has ever been abandoned amounts to a failure of a capacity for sacrifice. The devil is most certainly very active here in his whispering seductions. The beginnings of eventual betrayals happen in small ways initially, a simple forgetfulness at first, but the tear widens sometimes irremediably when a man at some fateful juncture refuses to surrender himself to a higher purpose than himself.

On the other hand, your life of sacrifice, as painful as it may sometimes be, will determine your happiness as a priest. It is a mystery of divine love that small acts of self-renunciation are used by God to filter grace to souls, and you should be alert to these patterns. I was once told by a cloistered Carmelite nun: "Father, we do not think our lives are fruitful because of our prayer, but rather because of our prayer combined with sacrifice." For a priest, the disposition to sacrificial living will be the safeguard of his priestly resilience and of his inner joy, for then his life is never directed to himself as much as to his fruitfulness with souls. Remember as well when you think about penance or sacrifice that there are hidden souls of sacrifice and prayer in this world who shed their blood drop by drop in concealed lives of self-immolation. You are witnessing their fruits on any given day in your contact with souls in need of grace. Why not strive to realize over a lifetime an increasing affinity with these hidden saints?

I have found the following words of the 19th century Italian priest/philosopher Antonio Rosmini a good meditation for what should occur mysteriously within our inner life during a lifetime of priesthood. As Rosmini conveys so well, we must never stop in allowing the link between sacrifice and fruitfulness to deepen dynamically over the remaining years of our lives. There is nothing static about a vocation to the priesthood, not even on God's part, because, adapting Himself to our nature, He calls us in a progressive way. If we are faithful to His first invitation, others, increasingly pressing and definite, will follow, which will bind us more and more to our divine Master. Basically, there is but one call to the priesthood . . . but God, through the various circumstances of life, and especially, through new occasions for sacrifice, repeats this invitation more precisely, more definitely, each time letting the soul see how far the gift of self must be extended in order to reach the plenitude of its consecration. If the soul is faithful, and answers these progressive calls generously, God will continue to send new invitations, which will open up wider and more luminous horizons, until the soul lives its consecration in a perpetual renewal of fervour and love.

"Know what you are doing. Imitate the mystery you celebrate. Model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross. Our Lord died in great pain, in a profound silence while taunts and mockery rifled the air, with his concentration intent that no one should be lost, and perhaps suffering most interiorly in the awareness that souls would refuse his mercy. His last testimony, his last preaching, are not spoken words but the blood poured out in death from a pierced heart. The priest can model himself on the mystery of the Lord's cross by allowing himself to be overcome by the interior thirst for souls that consumed Our Lord on the cross. "Can you drink the chalice I drink? Indeed you shall." Our Lord says the same to you right now. It is no exaggeration to say that the holy priest will suffer the mystery of this thirst for souls residing in his own soul. As time goes on, there will be a crucifying familiarity in his own experience with the infinite desire of divine love for souls. He must bear witness to this largely concealed truth

by the entirety of his life. The thirst for souls of Jesus Christ dying on the cross becomes the ultimate reason for the sacrificial dimension of the priest's life. It demands that he pour himself out for others. The very nature of such a life will always imply an ongoing immolation of the natural self, a progressive mortification of self-interest in the service of a supernatural reason for living.

The priest's identity with Jesus Christ crucified requires lastly that he be a son to the Mother present at the cross. His acceptance of this Mother, the need to take her and her desires into his home, as John did at the cross, assures his special place in the Heart of the Son at the cross. The priest who is a son of Mary, who finds his rest in prayer and the Eucharist, and in the protection of the humble Mother of priests, who fears not to embrace the sacrificial call at the heart of his life, will indeed fulfill the gospel promise—you will bear much fruit.

And so, asking your prayer as a new priest, I will take leave of you with this prayer composed by Pope St. Pius X, that great parish priest: Lord, grant that I may realize what my Christian and priestly vocation demands of me, somewhat in the way in which I shall see it immediately after death. . . . In your mercy, grant me the grace to fulfill with love whatever You expect of me for the salvation of those souls whom I ought to help, and to suffer with generosity whatever sorrow You have permitted from eternity for my Sanctification before I eventually reach You in heaven. I ask, in particular, that I may work with zeal for the salvation of all those souls whom, in accordance with Your will, I ought to help. For that purpose I join the personal sacrifice of my life with the unbloody sacrifice of Your Son, superabundant and of infinite value, and with the immense merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Amen.

My own prayer is that Our Lord may bless you in great hidden ways. I have every hope you will be a man of God as a priest because you have been humbled and awed by Our Lord's personal choice of you for His priesthood. God was good to you in your own time of need; you must return that love in a generous manner for a lifetime. Be a man for others, for their salvation and sanctification. And pray often the words Mother Teresa taught her Sisters for times of difficulty and struggle: "Mary, Mother of Jesus, be a mother to me now and always."

Sincerely in Christ,

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