

## **“The Priest’s Relationship to His Brother Priests: Priestly Fraternity and Solidarity in the Communion of the Presbyterate”**

*Rector’s Conference Given to Students at St. Patrick’s Seminary*

*October 26, 2015*

In the two rector’s conferences I am giving this year I will be completing the themes I had hoped to address last year. It’s been my intention to address the priest’s three-fold network of relationships as described in the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*: the priest’s relationship to his bishop, to his brother priests, and to the lay faithful. Last year, after giving an introductory talk on cultivating a healthy priestly spirituality, I gave a second talk on the relationship of the priest to his bishop. In this conference I would like to reflect with you on the relationship of an individual priest with the other members of the presbyterate, and – with the help of God! – I will finish off this series of talks next semester in addressing the question of the priest’s relationship to the lay faithful.

Let us begin with the very title of that Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests: *Presbyterorum ordinis*, “the order of priests” (or, “of presbyters”). That title is already, in itself, very instructive. The document makes it very explicit that ordination unites a priest to the *presbyterium*, the body of priests in the local Church. Subsection 8 of *Presbyterorum ordinis* states:

All priests, being constituted in the order of priesthood through the sacrament of Order, are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood; but in a special way they form one priestly body in the diocese to which they are attached under their own bishop. For even though they may be assigned different duties, yet they fulfill the one priestly service for the people.

The word *presbyterium* has a venerable history. In 1 Tim 4:14 we read: “Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders (*presbyterium*).” St. Ignatius of Antioch uses the term 13 times, and he commends the Ephesians because their *presbyterium* is in harmony with its bishop as the strings are to a harp (Eph 4). I would suggest that the reality is even more ancient: a collegial understanding of priesthood has its roots in the Old Testament, as the Prayer of Ordination suggests when it speaks of the seventy elders chosen to assist Moses in governing the people and the sons of Aaron who help their father sanctify God’s people.

According to the teaching of the Council, this corporate view of priestly ministry is demonstrated sacramentally in concelebration and in the Rite of Ordination, when all priests present lay on hands after the bishop. Next, *Presbyterorum ordinis* draws out the implications of this in practical terms: priests should seek to understand each other; they should extend hospitality, they should come together for spiritual, intellectual and social purposes and should show care for those who are ill, troubled or in danger.

St. John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation on priestly formation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, develops the theological basis for this practical advice. Indeed, it teaches that the priest continues to grow in his ongoing formation "in and with his own presbyterate in union with his bishop" (n. 74). It goes on to call the presbyterate a "mystery", a *mysterium*, because it is rooted in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which is the presbyterate's source of origin and growth. It then cites the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* (n. 28) on this point: "priests by means of the sacrament of orders are tied with a personal and indissoluble bond to Christ the one priest. The sacrament of holy orders is conferred upon each of them as individuals, but they are inserted into the communion of the presbyterate united with the bishop." It is thus that the *mysterium* becomes a *ministerium*, for, as the Apostolic Exhortation teaches, "Unity among the priests with the bishop and among themselves is not something added from the outside to the nature of their service, but expresses its essence inasmuch as it is the care of Christ the priest for the people gathered in the unity of the Blessed Trinity."

In other words, we are all in this together! Priestly life and ministry is not a "solo flight," or something to be lived out as a "lone ranger," as one bishop I know would put it with regard to how some priests operate. Not only are there priests who like to run their parishes independently (except for when they run into some need that only the chancery office can fulfill!), even more worrisome – to me, anyway – are those who absent themselves from the priest fraternity. These are the priests whom you just never see, who never come to gatherings of priests in the diocese, and this is always a source of concern for me, for it is a sign that something is wrong, that one's Priesthood is going off on the wrong track. So please, do not absent yourself from the priestly fraternity! At and ever since the Council the Church in her teaching has underscored the importance of priestly fraternity: since Priesthood is a sacramental reality, which pervades our whole being, it is to be lived out on all of those levels mentioned in *Presbyterorum ordinis*, which I referenced a moment ago.

What such asocial behavior indicates – at least with regard to priestly solidarity – is the struggle some priests have in dealing with the problem of loneliness. Everyone, of course, has to deal with this issue, not just priests. I remember speaking about this to my parish priest when I was going through my own discernment about whether or not to enter the seminary. He told me that he had the opposite problem: he *wished* he had time to be alone! Of course, being alone and loneliness are not the same thing: someone can be around lots of people all the time and still be lonely, and people who spend lots of time in solitude, such as those with a contemplative vocation, are often not lonely at all. (In the case of my parish priest, he was someone who understood this distinction and also someone blessed with deep friendships – so, his point was that it was sufficient solitude that he lacked in his life, not companionship.)

We have to distinguish, then, between different kinds of loneliness. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* also treats this question in the life of the priest, and views it within the context of the communion of the Church and of the presbyterate in particular. It states: "There is a loneliness which all priests experience and which is completely normal. But there is another loneliness which is the product of various difficulties and which in turn creates

further difficulties” (n. 74). That is the loneliness that is the deprivation of all meaningful human affect, and it is the most dreaded and most psychologically devastating of all human conditions. The solution *Pastores Dabo Vobis* proposes to this threat in the life of the priest is – you guessed it – fraternity among priests and communion with the Church, in very concrete, practical ways. It goes on to say: “active participation in the diocesan presbyterate, regular contact with the bishop and with the other priests, mutual cooperation, common life or fraternal dealings between priests, as also friendship and good relations with the lay faithful who are active in parish life are very useful means to overcome the negative effects of loneliness which the priest can sometimes experience.”

At the same time, the priest must also cultivate in his life that “aloneness” which is solitude with the Lord. Indeed, such solitude, in which one sets aside time, energy and attention to seek intimacy with the Lord, is indispensable for developing the capacity for true, deep, authentic intimacy with others – above all for diocesan priests, who are called to a vocation of religious-motivated celibacy but without the explicit commitment to common life with others who share the same vocation. Without this capacity for depth of communion, relationships with others become quite superficial, leaving the priest yearning for something deeper which, unfortunately, he can easily seek to satisfy in ways that are destructive of his priestly identity.

Hopefully you are all cultivating this commitment to personal prayer, your solitude with the Lord, during this time of your initial priestly formation. It is crucial that you do so now, for it will be too late to *develop* the habit later, after ordination. On the contrary, the challenge will be to continue it, amidst all the demands of the priestly office. I would like to point out to you what *Pastores Dabo Vobis* has to say about this:

It should be added that a certain type of solitude is a necessary element in ongoing formation. Jesus often went off alone to pray (cf. Mt. 14:23). The ability to handle a healthy solitude is indispensable for caring for one’s interior life. Here we are speaking of a solitude filled with the presence of the Lord who puts us in contact with the Father, in the light of the Spirit. In this regard, concern for silence and looking for places and times of ‘desert’ are necessary for the priest’s permanent formation, whether in the intellectual, spiritual or pastoral areas. In this regard too, it can be said that those unable to have a positive experience of their own solitude are incapable of genuine and fraternal fellowship. [n. 74]

That last point is key: a genuine, balanced effort to cultivate solitude with the Lord will have a positive effect in relations with others, and especially brother priests. I say “genuine” and “balanced,” because taken to an extreme or approached immaturely, this can also become an excuse to be lazy. While we all have to set aside time for prayer every day – and if you are not already doing so, I strongly urge you to develop the habit of making a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament every day, and to persevere in that habit without exception – still, we do not have the contemplative vocation, and most of our time must be spent in attending to the people of God. The principle of solitude making us capable of genuine and fraternal friendship, though, is essential to our

common priestly ministry, for the bond of priestly fraternity has particular import with regard to the other priests that one is together with in ministry. Most commonly this means a parish, at least, in those parishes where there is one or more associate with the pastor. Generational, cultural and personality differences, not to mention differences of opinion, can often make common life quite difficult for priests. Seminarians and young priests have sometimes asked me what they can do to get along with their brother priests in such a situation. That is certainly a good question, and one to which there is no answer that is the “silver bullet.” However, at the level of practical advice, there are a few things I would suggest to you to keep in mind.

First of all, we all have our pet peeves, those little details which occupy a very high place on our list of priorities. Learn what those are for the priests with whom you are most closely serving. I can recall a situation when I was still in San Diego where a long-time pastor had – undeservedly, as it turns out – a terrible reputation for going through associates; that is, until he was assigned one from outside the diocese. The young man figured out the two pastoral practices his pastor was most emphatic about observing: greeting the people outside of church before Mass, and visiting the sick and then recording it in the parish’s register. He faithfully observed these practices, developed a great relationship with the man, and remained there very many years before becoming a pastor himself.

Another key point to keep in mind: never underestimate the effectiveness of generosity. Be generous with your time and energy, help out your brother priests without being asked and without expecting anything in return, offer to step in and substitute for him on something *he* was assigned to but you know would cause him inconvenience. To be honest, a common complaint I hear about priests nowadays is a poor work ethic, in the sense that they are not responsible in the day-to-day work of parish life, and are selfish with their time. Often it is a matter of that negative habit of moral absence, doing what one likes and where one finds affirmation, and leaving the rest aside. It is easy to slip into, because often the priest really is doing good work; the problem is, it is just in that one area, which might not even necessarily be immediately related to the work he is assigned to.

To use a worn out cliché, this means that you have to “step out of your comfort zone.” Your comfort zone might be your room, and there are too many priests who hibernate there. A fellow bishop recently mentioned to me that he now has to figure out what to do with a young priest in his diocese who has told him that he does not want to preach and he doesn’t like meeting people! Please: don’t hibernate in your room! The Church, the people of God, are counting on you not to do it. You also need to develop a certain versatility in your ministry: inter-cultural competency, ability to relate and work with people of different spiritualities and preferences in styles of liturgy. There *are* legitimate variations in these areas, all in keeping with orthodox faith and fidelity to the norms. Ministry in the Church today has become much more complex, but that also means much more interesting. You need to know how to help foster people’s growth in holiness, which means the ability to relate to them in their own particular life situation, and guide them and inspire them to ever greater fidelity in living the call of Christian

discipleship. This sort of a healthy and robust work ethic goes a long way in building up good will among priests who are assigned to work together, regardless of their own particular perspectives on Church issues.

Finally, one general guideline which applies to all of life, but perhaps which we priests find difficult to live with regard to each other, is that no one can argue with kindness. Your kindness may not always yield the results you would like, or as quickly as you would like. Sometimes you find yourself in situations that you just cannot change, and all you can do is just simply bear with it. Still, it is difficult to hold anything against someone who is truly kind. That means, then: don't be that unbearable situation to someone else! Common life requires lots of give and take, and often much more give than take. Be careful not to be unreasonable in insisting on doing things your own way, and always be ready to go the extra mile to accommodate the preferences – and yes, sometimes the quirks – of others.

What I have suggested are human approaches to human difficulties, the kind of advice that might be helpful in any organization. But we are dealing with *holy* orders, so it would be good to reflect a little on how your relationship with your brother priests can deepen your spiritual life. The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* offers a keen insight in this regard. Speaking of priestly obedience, it makes reference to it being lived out within the presbyterate:

This aspect of the priest's obedience demands a marked spirit of asceticism, both in the sense of a tendency not to become too bound up in one's own preferences or points of view and in the sense of giving brother priests the opportunity to make good use of their talents, and abilities, setting aside all forms of jealousy, envy and rivalry. Priestly obedience should be one of solidarity, based on belonging to a single presbyterate. Within the presbyterate, this obedience is expressed in co-responsibility regarding directions to be taken and choices to be made. [PDV 28]

In connection with warning against the tendency to become too bound up to one's own point of view, I would appeal to you to avoid the tendency to form a "clique" of like-minded people. We naturally gravitate toward other people who share our priorities and perspectives, and we all have a right to good friendships. But if our associates form an "us" versus "them" mentality, this is deleterious both to one's ministry and to the health of the presbyterate. You may be very right in what you espouse, but even if you are right that doesn't mean that people with other perspectives are necessarily wrong. And, if you are in fact wrong (wrong in the sense that your priorities need some tweaking), and you are only talking with others who agree with you, you may miss an important area in which you need to grow.

In a sense, the Church sets before us a vision of the presbyterate as a family. That spirit of give-and-take that we have to develop is in relation to the other members of our family, and we cannot (or should not) simply "opt out" of our family. In fact, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* makes this point explicitly:

The presbyterate thus appears as a true family, as a fraternity whose ties do not arise from flesh and blood but from the grace of holy orders. This grace takes up and elevates the human and psychological bonds of affection and friendship, as well as the spiritual bonds which exist between priests. It is a grace that grows ever greater and finds expression in the most varied forms of mutual assistance, spiritual and material as well. Priestly fraternity excludes no one. However it can and should have its preferences, those of the Gospel, reserved for those who have greatest need of help and encouragement. This fraternity 'takes special care of the young priests, maintains a kind and fraternal dialogue with those of the middle and older age groups, and with those who for whatever reasons are facing difficulties; as for those priests who have given up this way of life or are not following it at this time, this brotherhood does not forget them but follows them all the more with fraternal solicitude. [PDV 74]

The paragraph begins by speaking of how the grace of ordination "takes up and elevates the human and psychological bonds of affection and friendship." But it goes on to speak of the Gospel preference for those who have the greatest need of help and encouragement. It is said that you can choose your friends but you can't choose your family – and you can't choose the priests with whom you will minister. When you are assigned with brother priests with whom you "click," it's wonderful; but even when that is not the case, the rectory should serve as a model to other households in the parish. This requires patience, good will, a willingness to grow together, self-knowledge, and a sense of humor – all traits that are also needed for successful family life.

You don't learn about family life by reading books about families – you learn by living in a family. Similarly, you will not learn about priestly fraternity by reading the Fathers of the Church or the documents of the Magisterium – you learn about priestly fraternity by living in a seminary fraternity. Father Olier, the founder of the Sulpicians, described the seminary as a *communauté éducatrice* – a formational, educational community. Prayer, study, recreation, and pastoral service take place within the family of the seminary community. *Pastores dabo vobis* speaks of this as well:

The seminary is, in itself, an original experience of the Church's life. In it the bishop is present through the ministry of the rector and the service of co-responsibility and communion fostered by him with the other teachers, for the sake of the pastoral and apostolic growth of the students. The various members of the seminary community, gathered by the Spirit into a single brotherhood, cooperate, each according to his own gift in the growth of all in faith and charity so that they may prepare suitably for the priesthood and so prolong in the Church and in history the saving presence of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd. [PDV 60]

It is important that you begin to develop this good habit, this mentality of priestly brotherhood and the virtue of priestly solidarity, now in these precious years dedicated exclusively to your formation.

A friend of mine told me of an interesting insight into Catholic seminary life he received from a Protestant pastor. The minister was a biblical scholar who took groups on archeological and spiritual tours to the sites in the Holy Land. They were visiting the village of Capernaum, where it is possible to look at the foundations of homes from the time of Jesus. The Methodist minister described how Jesus and his disciples spent all their time together, even sleeping in the same rooms. He observed that this way of formation was more like a Catholic seminary than a Protestant one, because in our tradition we all live together in one community, whereas in most Protestant seminaries the students live off-campus. Of course, many of them are married, so it would not be feasible for them to live in one place together. As priests, it will be your responsibility to build up the Body of Christ; you learn how to nourish a community by living in one.

As anxious as seminarians are to get out into “the real world,” I would urge you to see that this is a privileged time for you to be with Our Lord, in company with his band of disciples. In a very literal sense, if you look at the floor plan of St. Patrick’s Seminary, you will see that your sleeping quarters and classrooms surround the chapel, which is the heart of the seminary. People are making great sacrifices to give you the freedom to spend this time of formation together with one another and with Christ.

In saying this, I do not want to paint an overly-idealized picture of seminary life. Living with other people makes demands on all of us (and we make demands on them!). As a corrective to an idyllic view of seminary or priestly fraternity, I would suggest you take time often to read through the Gospels and just watch how the disciples interact with one another and with Our Lord. All the foibles of the human condition are to be found there: misunderstood motives, petty jealousies, vanity, careerism – many of the clerical pitfalls the Holy Father often warns about. That motley crew of followers did not always find it easy to get along with one another, and that fact appears on almost every page of the New Testament. I wonder how Simon the Zealot felt the evening Jesus brought Matthew the tax collector home for dinner?

I return one last time to the comparison with a family. Msgr. Steven Rossetti has written insightfully about what he calls the “intentional presbyterate”. This means that we must work at building and sustaining a healthy priestly fraternity. This has always been true, but it is more so in our day, because many of the cultural structures that shaped a collegial priestly way of life are weak or absent. It is what we see in family life, too: our society no longer espouses some of the values necessary to healthy family life, and that is true for the family of the presbyterium as well. In the priestly fraternity, as in the family, relationships cannot be assumed, much less taken for granted. They must be nurtured.

In 1 John 4:20, the Beloved Disciple teaches: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love

God whom he has not seen.” For you who are discerning the call to Priesthood, the analogous question which you must always ask yourselves, which should form a part of your examination of conscience, and which you must constantly discern, is: “How can you love the members of the priestly fraternity whom you cannot see if you do not love the members of the seminary community you can see?”