

Priesthood:

Attracting Stronger/Weaker Candidates

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It is a privilege for me to be present here this morning to open this Upper Midwest Conference of Bishops, Vocation Director and Seminary personnel with a presentation on the question of readiness of candidates in the Church today for priesthood. The subject of this presentation is an intriguing one, where two extremes are proposed which might describe the candidates presently preparing for priesthood in our seminaries today. In so many ways, the very title of this presentation is disarming and unrealistic. To accept either thesis is to reach a bottom line conclusion almost immediately. For if the Church is attracting stronger candidates for priesthood than ever before, instead of having a conference on this subject, we should congratulate one another profusely and begin the social hour and dinner sooner than scheduled. If we are attracting weaker candidates, we might do well to commiserate with one another, bite the bullet, and just bring everyone to a halt in their preparation for priesthood because of the shared conviction that is predominant in many parts of the Church today that in most cases, no ministry is better than poor ministry.

However, this subject of weaker or stronger candidates for priesthood has received a great deal of attention these past few months. If some people are worried over the impact of the Catholic press, they might look to the strong reaction given to a simple news release from the National Catholic News Service regarding a workshop on vocations that was held at the November 1978 meeting of the United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The headline which accompanied the story had a built-in guaranteed reaction factor. Everyone was

was aware of the shortage of priests in our country and in the world today for many reasons. But suddenly a headline announced that not only is there a problem with the quantity of priests, but there is a question of quality.

The former President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops would be quoted in the following way. Archbishop Bernadin said:

"We're getting weaker candidates for priesthood. Part of it is unavoidable because candidates for priesthood, like many other people in today's society, come from broken homes or homes with some strong family tensions. Even if we get the best people, they still come from different backgrounds than we came from and I'm not sure the seminaries can cope with them."

The Archbishop went on to say in further remarks:

"We're not getting the best people in terms of intelligence, commitment, or generosity."

The Archbishop then asked two priests who were official observers at the meeting to elaborate on comments which they had made in the Workshop on "weak" candidates for the priesthood and problems in attracting vocations. One priest maintained that today the Church attracts "a certain type of men who don't want to make choices any more." Furthermore, he said many young men who might otherwise consider the priesthood stay away because they do not believe they will be listened to in the Church.

A second priest added further comments. He said that seminaries are attracting "pre-Vatican II types" and "very dependent people looking for a secure kind of life." He said he was concerned that many "mature vocations" - men who came to the priesthood from other careers later in life - are also dependent personalities who have not found themselves. He went on to say that stronger candidates for the priesthood either do not enter the seminary or drop out because they fear dependent personalities and see them succeeding in the Church.

One might well appreciate the reaction to this story that was found in many of the Catholic newspapers in our country as well as on the religion pages

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of metropolitan newspapers from New York to Los Angeles.

As a former seminary rector, my own reaction was one of initial surprise because of the experience I was fortunate enough to have to deal with and relate to many young men preparing for priesthood who did not match the description given in the news release. I believe my reaction was accompanied by some anger, confusion, and even sorrow.

As a Bishop now in a Diocese which is struggling for the development of vocations among our young people, I quickly reviewed the present candidates we have in seminaries, as well as potential applicants, and I wondered whether the description found in the news release reflected these young men preparing for priesthood in Eastern Montana. As a faculty member at any level of seminary education, the news release could well have been another source of frustration in the unique world of serving on a seminary faculty. Perhaps, the most intense reaction came from, and rightfully so, the young men presently involved in seminary formation and education, as well as young priests recently ordained. An overall description of today's candidates for priesthood as "weaker" people than in the past is a severe indictment, and there should have been an anger, a sense of disagreement with the statements that were ascribed to the various people in the interview. If there was not, then we might well ask "WHY?" and if answers were not given, perhaps the thesis proposed is really true.

But what does one say in the light of such a news release? How does one respond? Was the news report complete? Were the quotations accurate? What was the basis for such remarks? These and a thousand and one other questions might well be asked, but still the news report was there in bold, black print.

In one Archdiocese, there was an unfortunate placement of this news release next to and above a story on a group of men from that Archdiocese receiving Candidacy. The contrast was startling! One news article announces that the Church is getting weaker candidates for priesthood, and on the same page there is the joyous announcement that twenty six young men are taking a step closer to priesthood. In many ways this placement of the two articles next to one another might be an editorial nightmare, but it prompted two of the twenty six men who were accepted as Candidates for priesthood to object and provide a forum for discussion of the questions involved that has proved to be a healthy and good experience.

The two young men in Second Theology admitted certain confusion and anger which leads only to discouragement on the part of many readers of the news articles in question. They stated that the unfortunate placement of the articles next to one another reflected poor judgment, but most of all they believed that the number of unsubstantiated comments in the news release ~~was~~<sup>was</sup> mind-boggling. And they went on to comment in a subdued and mature manner on each of the important points raised, admitting that some of the observations might be true in some cases, but that, in general, they are simply unjustified and should not be presented as true everywhere. (1)

No event in the ongoing dialogue regarding the strength or weakness of candidates for priesthood brought me personally such tremendous joy and a renewed sense of hope. I happen to know well the young men who responded to the news report, and from all human judgment available, any parish, any diocese, any bishop in the country would be blessed to have two such men preparing for priesthood on their behalf. But the question might well be asked if these two young men represent a minority or are they representative of the majority.

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This exchange of opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of candidates for the priesthood, however, is a much deeper issue. When the terms of "weaker" or "stronger" are used, they must have a point of contrast. These terms need a reference point. The reference point in question, of course, is priesthood itself. But the view of priesthood and ministry today is far different in the minds and the experience of people than it was twenty five years ago, and most likely the view of priesthood and ministry in the year 2000 will be quite different than it is now. Before any comments are able to be offered on whether candidates for priesthood today are "weaker" or "stronger," there must be a point of comparison, an ecclesial compass which points to an understanding of priesthood in the Church today and its development for the Church of tomorrow.

Priesthood as sacrament and reality exists and is experienced in the context of a Pilgrim Church. We are a Church in transition under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who assists us in coming to a better self-understanding of who we are in relationship to the Lord. Priesthood has remained a constant in the gradual process of our emerging self-understanding, but the lived experience of priesthood has shifted and changed in the course of centuries. And with the accelerated experiences of changes in our own lifetime, the lived experience of priesthood also undergoes an accelerated dynamic. Expectations and the reality of priesthood even are different at the same time within our own country today. My own experience of moving from a large urban area to a rural diocese helps me to be aware that the experience and expectations of priesthood are different in Montana than they are in Chicago.

Any assessment of candidates for priesthood in terms of being "weaker" or "stronger" must be seen in the wider context of an understanding of Church today. The question involved has to have an ecclesial foundation. Perhaps

a contrast between approaches taken in the past and at the present moment might prove helpful.

So often in the past, priesthood as experience and reality was isolated and disconnected from an understanding of the Church. Although readily admitting the relationship between priesthood and the Church, priesthood was presented as a goal in itself. Today, seminary education and formation, as well as a better self-understanding of Church, views the goal of priesthood as a response to the needs of people by means of priestly ministry in the Church. The reality and experience of priesthood have wider parameters and more demanding expectations. Candidates for priesthood need new strengths today that might well have been overlooked previously.

My own experience of Rector of a theologate over a period of five years made me far more demanding in the latter years than I was at the beginning of my term of office. I became far more sensitive with higher expectations to what I believed to be necessary qualities of a candidate for priesthood. People who might have received a positive endorsement from me in the beginning of my experience of being Rector might well have received a qualified endorsement or even a negative vote five years later.

Likewise, successful priestly ministry in the past, and to some degree still operative today, would be determined primarily in terms of structures and programs initiated and sustained by the priest minister. Today, it would seem that success is far better measured in terms of the ordained minister's ability to facilitate relationships on a spiritual, human, and pastoral basis. Again, new insights into weaknesses and strengths of candidates for priesthood must be examined.

Even the traditional "signs of a vocation" are nuanced differently in light of the present understanding of Church and priesthood. These signs have been traditionally understood as possessing the right intention, a viable

and operative spirituality, mental ability, moral suitability, emotional stability and physical health. But once again here, the evolving and demanding expectations of priesthood in the Church today would make what was once considered a "strength" to become a "weakness."

The responsibility of the priest today as described in the Synodal document on "The Ministerial Priesthood," and committee reports from the NCCB would outline his mission as the ability to preach the Gospel, celebrate the Eucharist and other sacraments, and to gather together and build up the community in the world today, a world whose political, economic, and cultural climate is undergoing constant change. It would seem a different approach to what is meant by a viable and operative spirituality is needed today in the candidate for priesthood to live out these responsibilities than what was understood by spirituality in a previous era of the Church. The candidate for priesthood today is asked to be stronger in terms of understanding and living out priesthood today and in the year 2000 from a spiritual point of view previously not experienced.

The call for shared responsibility, collaboration, and pastoral leadership on the part of the priest today calls for a new understanding of what are the necessary "strengths" that should be evident in the candidate preparing for priesthood. A sensitivity to these dimensions of ecclesial life today could well have been considered a "weakness" in the past because of a lack of decisiveness.

To respond to the question of whether the Church today is attracting weaker or stronger candidates to the priesthood would seem to me to be determined by what the Church is asking the priest of today to be and to become.

Seminaries today are involved in the process of preparing ordained ministers for the next century, for the year 2000 and beyond. A sensitivity and awareness

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of the direction which the Church is taking are absolutely necessary for any determining factors which should characterize candidates for the priesthood.

What would be some of the expectations of the priest today and in the future which might become the focal point of reference in which the terms "stronger" and "weaker" would have some significance? There are many, but I believe they would include the following dimensions.

1. First and foremost, a spirituality must be integrated into the life of the priest of today and tomorrow which will not only be a sustaining force for himself, but also a source of strength and nourishment for others. That spirituality must not be contained in the confines of a sanctuary, but it must be an evident life style of the priest for himself and others. That spirituality will be obvious in the ways that he is able to interpret for himself and others the movement of God in human experience. It is a spirituality which is not dependent only on the resources of the priest himself, but one that is open to the direction, support, and challenge of others through spiritual direction, Jesu Caritas groupings of fellow priests, a willingness to act as Spiritual Director for others. And that spirituality must be rooted in the Gospel and the Eucharist. A new spiritual strength is asked of priests today to combat loneliness and to sustain relationships and to be a witness to Gospel values.

2. Secondly, the priest of today and especially the priest of tomorrow is ordained a minister, but he is also ordained to minister to other ministers within the Christian community. With the ever emerging roles, functions, and commitment of religious women and laity in the life of the Church community, the ordained priest is being asked and expected to fulfill an "episcopal"



role and life style of ministering to ministers, of calling others to ministry, of facilitating and articulating the tasks of ministry within the Christian community. These responsibilities call again for new strengths to be evident in the life of the candidate for priesthood. And once again, what may well have been a "weakness" in past understandings of the ordained person becomes a "strength" and vice-versa.

3. The existing discipline of the Church calls for a commitment to celibacy on the part of the ordained ministers of the Church as priests and Bishops in the Western rite. Such a commitment needs the strength of a person who does not suppress the reality of sexual identity, but rather calls for a perception of one's sexual identity in relationship to the charism of celibacy. A healthy, honest, and sensitive appreciation of sexuality as it is lived out in relationships to others calls for new perceived personal qualities or strengths that need to be developed as the priest-minister lives out his vocation in the context of other human beings. A seminary formation experience which helps openly and honestly the candidate to accept and respect his psycho-sexual identity challenges him to possess new strengths previously not discussed or identified.

4. More and more, the ordained priest is accountable and responsible for being the public minister of the Christian community. At the same time, our society and our own Christian anthropology today calls for a respect for one's own person and personal life style. New understandings of "strengths" and "weaknesses" become obvious as the priest fulfills not only ecclesial functions and roles, but lives a life style that calls him to recognize and perceive the relationship between Church ministry and personal lifestyle. A new and more demanding honesty is a strength that must be evidenced in the life of the candidate for priesthood.

5. The ordained priest lives and exercises his ministry in a Church that today recognizes authority rooted not only in the Gospel message, but also in the structures which hopefully incarnate the continued presence of the Lord of history in time. A healthy and Spirit-filled appreciation of authority in the Church today is not slavish blind obedience at all times. Rather, authority is to be exercised and responded to so often in a dialogical fashion, in a process of discernment which recognizes and acknowledges the gifts and charisms of the Christian community. New strengths are once again obvious for the candidate for priesthood in the Church of today and tomorrow which in the past could well have been considered "undesirable."

6. Psychologically, the candidate for priesthood of today and tomorrow challenges us to look for men who recognize and appreciate the tensions of life and priesthood, and do not suppress them; men who see themselves not as completed finished products of a system, but men who are constantly open to new growth and maturity. Ordination to the priesthood marks not the end of a formational and educational experience, but rather the continuation of a growth pattern that should be part of one's life until death. Again, the question is raised regarding the focal point of reference for "strengths" and "weaknesses."

7. Finally, it would be impossible to list all the expectations of the priest today and tomorrow, but one last characteristic is of significance. More and more, as ministry becomes more demanding and peoples' expectations more obvious, and stress becomes the common experience of each day, the candidate for priesthood must be a man who is characterized by the strength of what is known as "gracious ministry." (2) Priestly ministry can no longer tolerate a "work ethic" or a Pelagian stance which stresses only the accomplishments of the minister himself. Priestly ministry calls more and more for a sense of

"gracious ministry" which recognizes and appreciates the primacy of grace, the giftedness of God in all that we are and in all that we do. And again, the focal point of reference for "strengths" and "weaknesses" shift.

We return to the original question of this paper. Is the seminary and the Church today attracting weaker or stronger candidates for priesthood? That response will be determined by Bishops, Vocation Directors, and seminaries only if they first envision the Church of today and tomorrow in which priesthood will be lived and experienced. It is an ecclesial question! The response must also be ecclesial. The answer to the question will only be given when the full Church becomes the focal point of determining the "strengths" and "weaknesses" of candidates for priesthood. This involvement of the full Church must be more than the thundering applause of parents, relatives and friends on the day of ordination when the Church is asked to give its assent to the ordination of a son, brother, relative or friend. Rather, the "strengths" and "weaknesses" will be determined by the invitation of Bishops, Vocation Directors, and seminaries to a Church of Bishops, priests and laity, men and women, to become involved in the process of determining the needs of a Pilgrim Church in a particular Diocese or Region, and to become also involved in the screening process for the admission of candidates for priesthood. The Church today is looking for candidates whose spirituality is evident and is open to growth, candidates who are willing to see their ministry as ordained priests in terms of other ministries in the Church today, men who recognize their humanity and their sexuality in a healthy and creative way that will make celibacy a truly lived out charism despite the tension, priests who will use the gift of authority in a manner that challenges the growth of the Christian community and does not suppress it, and priests who are willing to be used by God to exercise a gracious ministry

which acknowledges and appreciates not only one's own effort and work, but the giftedness of God himself.

There are new points of reference for determining the "strengths" and "weaknesses" of the candidates for priesthood today. But the constant still remains in the Church today as it existed when the first candidates for priesthood responded to the Lord's invitation. Candidates for priesthood must be willing to be disciples who walk with the Lord, who will be servants of the Lord and his people, who will facilitate the presence of the Lord in our midst.

Are the candidates in our seminaries today men who respond to the above description and possess the strengths that I have described? I believe that is a question not to be answered by me alone, but by all of us - Bishops, priests, students, men and women. It is a question to be answered by the Church. And the task of a Bishop, a Vocation Director, a seminary is to continue to seek out and challenge young men who want to walk with the Lord on the journey which the Pilgrim Church today is taking. It is also a challenge to all of us to have the courage and conviction to help others who do not possess these new strengths which respond to the focal points of reference in the Church today to discern alternate vocations.

I believe at times we expect too much from seminaries. Men preparing for priesthood spend approximately 32 weeks each year at the seminary. Twenty weeks remain. We should be aware of the classroom of our own diocese and our own parishes. We should develop the charisms and gifts of the "teachers" among us who are the priests, sisters and people of a diocese. The preparation of men for priesthood as well as the endorsement of their candidacy for diaconate and priesthood is a shared responsibility of a seminary and a Diocesan Church.

My two young friends who responded to the article from the NC News Service on the lack of quality in candidates for priesthood today were asked to write an article on their own sense of vocation and the qualities of candidates for priesthood today. Their response was but a reflection of their

own lived experience. Their article concludes with this paragraph:

"Perhaps in the end, the truth of seminary education is that it never produces the perfect priest. It produces only men, individuals with different talents and amounts of knowledge. Hopefully, though, it produces men of faith and love. That is what we see priesthood as being all about; that is why we are here." (3)

If such men are representative of the candidates for priesthood in the Church today, then we are a blessed group of people for recognizing and acknowledging such qualities of strength. But in the minds of many, the jury is still out on the question raised and Archbishop Bernadin's comments only brought to the attention of the Catholic community a deep concern for the priests of tomorrow.

Priests who will serve the Church today and tomorrow must be generous, self-starting individuals who are personally integrated and who possess relational abilities in a sensitive and compassionate manner. Their core strength will be a spirituality which is lived out in relationship to the Lord. The Church today cannot afford to ordain men for priesthood whose personal agenda dominates their lives and who still possess many unintegrated areas of their lives, because they will not be free to minister to others and to serve others in an authentic growth filled way.

Men ordained to the priesthood do not radically change on the day of ordination. Rather, they begin living out in a full time ministerial commitment the life style and the strengths and weaknesses which have been part of their lives during their seminary experiences. Bishops, Vocation Directors, and seminaries must know well the candidates for priesthood who will serve the Church for today and tomorrow. And just as the Church shouts out a resounding "Yes" to men whose strengths are obvious, so too the Church must shout out "No" to men whose limitations and weaknesses are obvious, even though they are open to growth. But so much growth is expected at times that it might never happen. Ordination to priesthood does not and should not happen by proxy, default, or by putting in time.

In the opinion of many, the jury is still out regarding the competence or lack thereof of candidates for priesthood in our seminaries today. However, I believe the evidence for the answer to our question is in our midst, in the lived experience of Church that occurs within our seminaries, our novitiates, our houses of formation. Are candidates for priesthood today weaker or stronger? The answer is found in the Church that exists in seminaries today and in the Church that men are ordained to serve. It is a time for honesty and integrity and justice, virtues that are not only to be practiced by candidates for priesthood, but virtues practiced by the Church on behalf of these same candidates as well as the Christian Catholic community itself.

A brief reflection on the reality of Church today and tomorrow will convey<sup>as</sup> only one message as far as priestly candidates are concerned. There is a need today for stronger candidates for priesthood than ever before. That strength will be found in an understanding of the challenge that the Church itself offers to all of us as it fulfills its mission. To compromise on the need for candidates of strength and integrity for priesthood would be to compromise the mission of the Church. And that would be tragic. Thanks Archbishop Bernadin for raising our consciousness on an issue of great importance for today and tomorrow.

- (1) Letter from Mr. Jerry Boland and Mr. John Hagerty in The Chicago Catholic
- (2) This theme is developed in an article by Rev. Louis Cameli entitled "Stress in Ministry," CHICAGO STUDIES, Spring, 1979
- (3) Conclusion of an article for the Dubuque Archdiocesan newspaper by Mr. Jerry Boland and Mr. John Hagerty.