



Exploring the *Ratio Fundamentalis*: CONFIGURATION TO THE HEART OF CHRIST

The Gift of the Priesthood: The Priest We Want

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March 31, 2019

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you on the question “*What Kind of Priest You Hope the Church Would be Forming for Your Parish?*”

I want to begin by pointing out that there is another, easier question we could have been asked to address, namely, “What is it that we don’t want to see in a new priest assigned to our parish?” That would only require a few moments of thought, a quick glance at news reports and the social media, and maybe the addition of some insights from my Catholic friends. I am not convinced that looking at the flip side of what we don’t want gives us what we do want. It is certainly difficult to move forward guided by negative observations. The question we are asked—“What kind of priest you hope the church would be forming for your parish?”—requires an answer that rejoices in the amazing gift of a new priest, come to my parish eager to begin to flesh out his priesthood, eager to show us what the love of God looks like in the particularities of his life as it is configured by the grace of ordination. Here are three things I would like to see in a new priest assigned to my parish.

First, we should know he is a man who prays. Parishioners should sense in who he is that a well-established life of prayer has begun. And, though I am sure the euphoria of ordination and the many refinements necessary as a new priest begins his parish life will bring some struggles in prayer, I, as a parishioner, should have confidence that his seeking to know the will of God will endure. Aided by the grace of ordination, a new priest should become “more submissive to the impulses and guidance of the Holy Spirit” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, paragraph 25). I am certain, from my Catholic experience, that the person who lives by prayer offers to those who know them a chance to see something mysterious and inexplicable in this rationalistic, relativistic, individualistic, and atheistic world that seems to swallow up everything else. I have to thank Bishop John Michael D’Arcy for recommending Jean-Baptiste Chautard, OCSD’s *The Soul of the Apostolate* (first published in 1946). Chautard points out that “the overflow from the inner life of prayer” roots all activity in the will of God. If a new priest has a well-established prayer life, his parishioners will have confidence that his service will be rooted in the will of God.

Second, I would love to find the serious beginnings of a good homilist in a new priest. This is an obvious hope of any parishioner, and a good parishioner will pray that that hope will bear fruit. As I have promised to remain positive in my presentation, I can assure you that many years in Purgatory were erased by the suffering of parishioners who have listened to mediocre and disappointing homilies. A homily is such an incredible opportunity! There the parishioners are, a captive audience, but an audience who seriously need their faith nourished. Please give us priests who will feed us and make us hunger for more, who will give homilies that evidence their fruitful prayer life and that evidence an awareness of parishioners lives. Parishioners are hungry for Catholic food. It is an incredible opportunity to teach the Catholic faith. I would hope a new priest would know how deliver a homily that ties the scriptures to the Virgin Mary, to the saints, and to the dogmas of the Church. Such a homily would feed parishioners, and would be more interesting than personal anecdotes from childhood. **New** priests have a very particular gift they give to a parish, in that though they come to a parish formed, they are relatively inexperienced in being a priest. As they begin their priestly life of service, parishioners actually see a new priest struggle and grow, and so a new priest indirectly teaches that faith always struggles and grows.

This struggle gives parishioners hope, as well, that there will be excellent homilies in the future.

Third, I hope that a new priest assigned to my parish would (have the heart of a shepherd) be a leader. Maybe this is an unexpected item on a list of what a parishioner would like to see in a new priest, but let me explain. By his ordination the new priest is set apart but he is not separated from the common priesthood. He is placed “at the head.” He is ordained to preside at the Eucharist, to proclaim the gospel, to preach, to pardon sinners. He does these *in persona Christi*. In exercising his authority, he fulfills his service. In the United States, and since my childhood, it is almost as if the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood are set against each other. Imagine, if you will, a lay group exploring their layness asking a priest to come and tell them what he wants to see in the laity. (There is a humility in the question we have been asked. I thank you for that.) This tension between the ordained and the lay is still playing out. De Lubac (in a wonderful piece on the priesthood in his book *The Motherhood of the Church*) says this tension between ordained and lay is “a giddiness of dissociation,” a “mark of thinking that is overly facile, ready-made, uncritical or of a way of thinking by reaction, by feeling, deliberately impassioned.” He goes on to say that “In every order of things, and particularly in the things of the spiritual life, when reality is thus dissociated, one of the terms is caricatured to solve a difficulty; then one necessarily misunderstands what one wishes to retain and exalt.”

This thirst for lay and ordained identity, which is part of the contemporary Church, is answered, I think, by a priest who has the authority of a servant, who has the heart of a Shepherd. This is difficult to articulate, but we, as a Church, know it when we see it. We are a Eucharistic people. In the Catholic economy, there is no substitute for the priesthood. We are configured, as long as this world exists, around the Eucharistic Christ. It is an existence that requires an ordained priest “set before” us. If you have a Shepherd, du Lubac simply points out, then you have sheep. The unclear vision that sets the ordained priesthood against the common priesthood can begin to be healed when the ordained lead with a priesthood defined by service. This is something we know when we see it. We recognize what we were looking for, and so we recognize who we are—we are the sheep who are loved by the Shepherd, the sheep for whom the Shepherd is willing to lay down his life. This conflict, of course, is also healed when parishioners grow as a Eucharistic community, in their witness to the love of God in this world, and a priest recognizes who he is—their Shepherd. So I would hope that a new priest would be a good leader, a strong leader, that he would have the heart of a servant, the heart of a Shepherd. (St. Augustine says, in Sermon 47, that the flock should feel secure in the care of their Shepherd. Secure, fastened so as not to become loose or lost, bound together in the communion in His Blood.)

I would like to close with a true story that our oldest daughter, Julia, told us. She has two children in our parish school, and the school annually holds an outdoor fair near the end of the school year. Our pastor was there, of course, in the dunk tank. From his seat, he greeted every student as they came by, calling them each by name. “Hello, Keegan Quinn!” “Hello, Luke Zircher!” A student asked, “Father, how do you know everyone’s name?” And the answer he gave? “How else will I be able to pray for you?” I may not have the precise details correct, and the details really don’t matter. This story circulates, not as an urban legend, but, let’s say, as an ecclesial legend. I love this memory of our former pastor, because I see it as a great teaching moment for those students, and one I hope they will also remember and ponder. It seems an excellent example of a Shepherd’s care for his sheep. Young students curious about why their pastor does what he does, and a pastor who wants them to know he is their priest who prays for them. Shall we think on John 10:27, “I know my sheep, and my sheep know me”?