

“What has been your experience of living Religious Life in contemporary society?”

**Religious Life & Priesthood – The Sacrifice of Our Lives**

I was ordained a priest two months ago and, in that time, the greatest thing about priesthood that has struck me has been the way in which we sacrifice our lives for the people we serve. Following in the footsteps of our saviour, Jesus Christ, we truly empty ourselves each day in our ministry of priesthood. In saying that, all vocations lead to this. All vocations lead an individual to empty themselves for the sake of another. But all vocations do this in a particular way and the particularity of the priestly and religious vocation is the one I have experienced and which I share with you.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.”

Philippians 2:5-8

When we consider Christ’s sacrificial and saving action on the Cross, we notice an outpouring of himself, a complete self-emptying, which in theological terms is referred to as *kenosis*. In fact, Jesus’ whole persona is connected to *kenosis*, to this outpouring of self. As the Son, he is firstly poured out by God in the Incarnation. Here begins the sacrifice, Christ becoming human, God emptying a part of him into earthly creation, to live with us our human existence, to humble himself and endure the suffering of human life. Next comes his life of ministry and service. The manner in which Jesus of Nazareth lived his life, caring for the poor, the downtrodden, the sinners. He worked to heal, to forgive, always living his life in service to others and providing for us the first example of priestly ministry.

Then we come to his passion and death; the ultimate priestly sacrifice, where he offered his own body and blood as expiation for the sins of the world, reconciling humanity with God through the whole and complete self-emptying of himself. Here is the second example of priesthood that Christ offers to us. It is because of this divine outpouring that we have received the grace to know the power of God’s love and mercy. This self-emptying of Christ opened the way of salvation for us and our work as disciples is to follow our saviour in the pattern of his life. This is where each Christian is called to empty themselves in life-giving sacrifice for the sake of others. Priests and religious do this in a very particular way.

As religious brothers and sisters, we lay ourselves down to follow Christ Jesus through the consecrated and vowed life. After a period of discernment and formation, all religious brothers and sisters make the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to God, promising an unbreakable oath to remain poor, chaste and always obedient to God’s will. Through these vows, the religious align themselves more closely to the life that Jesus lived. These vows may sound self-referential at times, but actually the vowed life, if lived well, is actually more about what we do for others rather than what we do to ourselves. The vow of poverty is not only about reducing the possessions in one’s own life, but also

about being generous with what little we have for the sake of others. Chastity is not only about dedicating one's love to God alone and refraining from sexual relationships with others, but also about discovering the many various forms of intimacy that can be shared between one another and allowing a deep love of God to permeate you and be a comfort to those whom you serve. Obedience is not merely forgoing one's own desires and wants and bowing to the authority of one's superiors, but it is also a deep desire to always do God's will and to listen deeply to the movement of the Spirit and allow oneself to always be at the service of the community. Through the living of a vowed life, a consecrated life, the religious empty themselves out of love in service to others. This self-emptying, in a paradoxical way, fulfills one's life. For we know that by emptying ourselves, as Christ our Saviour did, we are following in his path and journeying towards the same end, salvation, not just our own but for all.

In addition to the kenosis of religious life, I also wish to speak of the kenosis of priesthood and this tied intricately to the celebration of the Eucharist, the life-giving sacrament which in itself embodies the self-emptying sacrifice of Jesus and is brought about in our lives through the ministry of our priests. In the Eucharist, we see the very sacrifice of Jesus Christ made real in the lowly gifts of bread and wine. Celebrating this meal on an altar and with a priest echoes the sacrifice of the Lamb in the holy Temple. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is the ultimate sacrifice that has been made for our salvation. The priest who offers this sacrifice partakes in the same life-giving offering and lays his own life on the altar with Jesus his Saviour. The actions of our Eucharistic celebration speak to us of this sacrifice that the priest makes, not just in the celebration of Mass but through his whole life.

A priest makes a huge amount of sacrifices in his life to follow the path of Jesus and to fulfil the will of God. If the priest is also a consecrated religious, then the vowed life further reinforces the life of sacrifice to which he is called. It is noteworthy, the world over, that a Catholic priest forgoes a wife, children, a sexual relationship, a home, a career, a salary, holidays, even his weekend for the service of God's people. This sacrifice is not to be dismissed as merely a part of the job description. But the sacrifice a priest makes is all a part of the journey on which he has been led. The priest, by his vocation, takes joy in this sacrifice. He has been called to this vocation because God knows he can make this sacrifice and he does so out of love. Firstly, a love of God, a love for Jesus Christ who first and foremost he holds as his saviour and redeemer. Secondly, a love for the Church, the body of Christ, the sacrament of God's love to the world. Thirdly, a love for the poor, for all those who have not known the love and mercy of God as he himself has experienced. The priest lives his life, emptying himself, out of love, because that is what he was created to do. It is his vocation; to imitate the self-emptying love of Christ by sacrificing his own life in many ways for the sake of God's people.

As a young priest, I feel the pressure of this sacrifice, but I also find immense joy in being able to offer it. I have noticed the immense level of respect that people have for their priests because they are fully aware of the sacrifice we make for them. Catholics and non-Catholics alike sometimes marvel at how the priest is able to give so much away. But in knowing that we give it all away for them is something which brings them comfort and solace. They feel comforted by the love of their shepherds who are willing to lay down their lives for their flock. But in a spirit of mutuality, it is not only the faithful who honour their priest for their commitment, but the priest likewise should bow down in respect of the faithful, who sustain him with their own self-emptying love. The priest is only strong enough to make his sacrifice because of the support of the faithful. The words of the mass "look not on our sins, but on the faith of your church" are some of the most enlightening words of liturgy for the priest. It is the faith of God's people which strengthens us and together, as one Church, it is through this mutual and sacrificial love that together we journey to become more and more like Jesus Christ, true God and true man, our Saviour and our Redeemer.