Opinion
Spirituality



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Blessed Nunzio Sulprizio is pictured in this image provided by the Archdiocese of Pescara-Penne, Italy. Blessed Sulprizio, who died in 1836 at the age of 19 after facing physical suffering with patience and serenity, will be canonized Oct. 14 at the Vatican. (CNS photo/courtesy of Archdiocese of Pescara-Penne)

On Oct. 14, Pope Francis will canonize Pope Paul VI, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Francesco Spinelli, Vincenzo Romano, Maria Caterina Kasper, Nazaria Ignazia and an Italian youth named Nunzio Sulprizio. It seems fitting that while the Synod on the Youth is presently underway in Rome, a youth be canonized. Nunzio was 19 when he

died of bone cancer in 1836. More on him in a moment.

I'd like to begin by asking, or perhaps meditating, on two questions. First, what kind of holy and royal priesthood is needed for the church and the world, and secondly, how are your shoulders? Both questions are timely given the synod and the precarious position of the (institutional) church. Both questions also stem from *Priesthood Imperiled* (1996) by Redemptorist Fr. Bernard Häring.

While Häring's book is centered on the vocational crises of the ministerial a.k.a. ordained/hierarchical priesthood, it's quite easy to extrapolate his questions and observations to the holy and royal priesthood to which all of us, having put on Christ in our baptism, belong.

In the book, Häring states, "We [holy and royal] priests today are deeply marked by the wounds that date not only from the present time. On our weak shoulders, we also bear the heavy weight of Church history."

I believe that observation is relevant and true of both ministerial priests, and of all the baptized faithful, we holy and royal priests. And so I ask, how are your shoulders?

Keeping up-to-date with the Synod of the Youth in official and unofficial reports do we recall that it is Christ alone who bore and bears the weight of the world? And it is Christ, aware of our weak shoulders, who promised to give us rest if we take his yoke upon us, learn from him, for he is meek and humble of heart, "for my yoke is easy, and my burden light (Matthew 11:30)."

But, what burdens do we place on ourselves and perhaps more importantly, what burdens do we put on even weaker shoulders, shoulders of children and youth? Both in allegory and literal interpretation, I hope we have paid sufficient attention to our weak shoulders and the burdens we place on them, individually and communally.

In his 19 years, Nunzio Sulprizio knew well literal and spiritual ailments and physical weakness. "To do and to suffer. And whoever has done these two things best, has made himself [or herself] most saintly," said Francis de Sales. To do and to suffer, Nunzio did, so do others, and so must we if we are to choose sainthood over bland mediocrity.

Turning now to the former question for meditation, when I think of the royal priesthood, when I think of you and me, being for the church and the world today, three images come to mind. Images of a parrot, a lark or nightingale, and a caterpillar. Much like the Bible where the "do nots" of the Ten Commandments come before the "dos" of the Beatitudes, I am reminded of an admonition of Christian parrots from Pope Francis in January 2017:

> "If I say I'm Catholic and every Sunday I go to mass but then I don't talk to my parents, I don't help my grandparents, the poor, I don't visit the sick, then there's no point … In that way, we're nothing but a Christian parrot: words, words, words."

This is at least the second time Francis has made an example of the parrot. A few years earlier, he spoke of ensuring our words in prayer are not like those mindless, repeated words of a parrot.

I agree with the image of the parrot being an example of what not to be. Empty and rote words, words and more words are not needed.

Curiously, there are very few words of Nunzio recorded. What we do have of Nunzio is a credible, even happy witness borne of pain, suffering and difficulty.

Both his parents died while he was a child, and so his uncle took charge of him. Unfortunately, his uncle mistreated him in many ways, including forced labor in a blacksmith shop where on Nunzio's shoulders enormous weights had to be carried over vast expanses.

Nunzio eventually contracted gangrene and was sent to a hospital in Naples. He suffered immensely, but found sustenance in the Eucharist. He eventually recovered, and then dedicated himself to be of service to other patients before cancer took his life just before his 20th birthday.

Another aviary image for the royal priesthood comes from *Priesthood Imperiled* by Häring, and this positive image is that of a nightingale. Personally, I would choose the related lark — more associated with the dawning of a new day.

Häring writes,

> "In an artful way, the nightingale both shields himself from the human eye and reveals himself in his nocturnal trilling of joyous praise… can remind us of how important it is to develop an authentic priestly life that attracts people to the blissful message and praise of God, but does not draw attention to the messenger. The nightingale reminds us that there is no room for inflated egos… the authentic priest is one who reveals their true self, by pointing others, not to themselves, but to God. The authentic priest-messenger never stands in the way of the message."

This aspect of self-concealment, of praise, of being a messenger who is outstanding but does not standout, not only resonates with me, I think gives credence to Nunzio's canonization.

The last image I have is that of a caterpillar —not any caterpillar, but the one Lewis Carroll created in *Alice in Wonderland*, and recounted by Fr. Michael J. Himes in his book *Doing the Truth in Love*. This caterpillar is a mixed-bag, both brash and inquisitive, asking a most profound question of Alice: Who are *you*?

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As Himes points out, the caterpillar's question does not ask for a description but for a definition, and it's problematic because we don't know who we are, and we cannot answer it alone.

God knows who we are — unbiased, and in our totality. So, if we can examine who we are, and look to Christ who knows us better than we know ourselves, that would be a good starting place for all of us.

Again, Nunzio, or at least his name, comes into play here. In both Italian and Latin the word *nunzio* means "messenger." True to his name Nunzio Sulprizio himself was a messenger, a credible witness to suffering, accompaniment and the joy of the Gospel.

In the beginning, I asked the question, How are your shoulders? I think I have sufficiently examined that question. I also asked, and attempted a partial answer at the question, What holy and royal priesthood is needed for the church and the world?

In essence, what we need to be communally, and what I need to be responsible for individually, is to be a messenger like Nunzio. Neither the church nor the world needs any more Christian parrots. If we're birds of a feather, let us flock together and sing praises in the night or dawning hours like nightingales or larks. May it be melodic and message-bearing about God and not about ourselves.

I close this reflection, first, by invoking our-soon-to-be-official messenger-saint: Nunzio, pray for us.

> And, second, by quoting Paul VI, who beatified Nunzio and whose description of Nunzio comes as close to a description of the royal priesthood that the church and the world needs right now:
>
> Nunzio Sulprizio will tell you that the period of youth should not be considered the age of free passions, of inevitable falls, of invincible crises, of decadent pessimism, of harmful selfishness. Rather, he will tell you how being young is a grace … St. Philip used to repeat: Blessed are you, young people, who have the time to do good. It is a grace, it is a blessing to be innocent, to be pure, to be happy, to be strong, to be full of ardor and life — just like those who receive the gift of fresh and new existence should be, regenerated and sanctified by baptism. They receive a treasure that should not be foolishly wasted, but should be known, guarded, educated, developed, and used to produce fruit for their own benefit and that of others. He will tell you that no other age than yours, young people, is as suitable for great ideals, for generous heroism, for the coherent demands of thought and action. He will teach you how you young people can regenerate the world in which Providence has called you to live, and how it is up to you first to consecrate yourselves for the salvation of a society that needs strong and fearless souls. He will teach you that the supreme word of Christ is to be the sacrifice, the cross, for our own salvation and that of the world. Young people [and all those with child-like faith] understand this supreme vocation.

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