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Guest Voices



Priests put their hands on the heads of newly ordained priests during an ordination Mass celebrated by Pope Francis May 12, 2019, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/Yara Nardi)



by Louis J. Cameli

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Editor's Note: *This essay is adapted from a recent letter to the priests of the Archdiocese of Chicago, which was also shared with the priests of the Archdiocese of Washington.*

On Dec. 19, 1969, I prostrated myself for the Litany of the Saints in front of the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter's Basilica before my ordination. Shivering from the cold of the unheated church, I had no idea what would transpire over the next 52 years. Despite my own failures — and there were more than enough of them — my time of priestly ministry has been an incalculable blessing. I can readily say a great "Amen" to it all.

When I fast-forward to 2021, I experience a church and priesthood facing enormous challenges. Although comparisons are always tricky, I think it is safe to say that today's priests stand before many unprecedented challenges. These challenges stem from our culture and internal issues of church life. Whatever their causes, these challenges play out in priests' lives.

The church is far more than an institution or an organization. It is, of course, the body of Christ and the people of God gathered by the Holy Spirit. Still, the church is *also* an institution, and that is the face the world first sees. Priests are more than institutional representatives. We are proclaimers of God's word and stewards of the mysteries of God. Still, we are *also* representatives and leaders of the church as an institutional reality. And that one fact becomes an immense challenge for our ministry.

In our culture, all institutions (such as government, banking and education) fall under suspicion for failing to provide what they are supposed to provide and for regularly damaging the common good. In the public mind, the church falls under an especially harsh negative institutional assessment. Because of some bias but also because of some sad missteps the church itself has taken, the public presentation of the church in the media is most often negative.

The church is often described as racist in its history, as complicit in the colonial exploitation of Indigenous peoples, as misogynistic, as homophobic, as fostering and abetting the abuse of children and young people, as inappropriately intrusive into the politics of the nation, as money-grubbing, and as generally intolerant and inflexible. In their extreme form, these blanket judgments are unfair and inaccurate. We have to candidly admit, however, that they are not without foundation. It has to do with what some in the church have done or failed to do in living out the ideals of the Gospel. And so, priests, who represent the church as an institution, seem to face a truly distressing environment in which they try to serve and fulfill their mission.

Another challenge for priests stems from larger trends of church life. There are vibrant and welcoming communities of faith. Still, the overall number of church participants in the United States and Europe continues to diminish. There is no single reason why people leave or drift from the church or why young people just do not engage it or why church planning for the future inevitably means planning for reductions — downsizing and amalgamation as we are doing in Chicago. No one seems to have a clear fix on this situation or an effective way to address it. And that is indeed a huge challenge for priests.

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Finally, there are what I would call "forever challenges." Throughout history, priests have tussled with ecclesiastical bureaucracy, with uncomprehending and sometimes insensitive bishops, with other priests who are more competitive than collaborative, and parishioners who seem forever fixed in their ways. And so it is today.

Taken together, these challenges make for a very sobering context for our priestly ministry. Do these challenges mean that priests' morale is down? It would seem so. But the picture is complex.

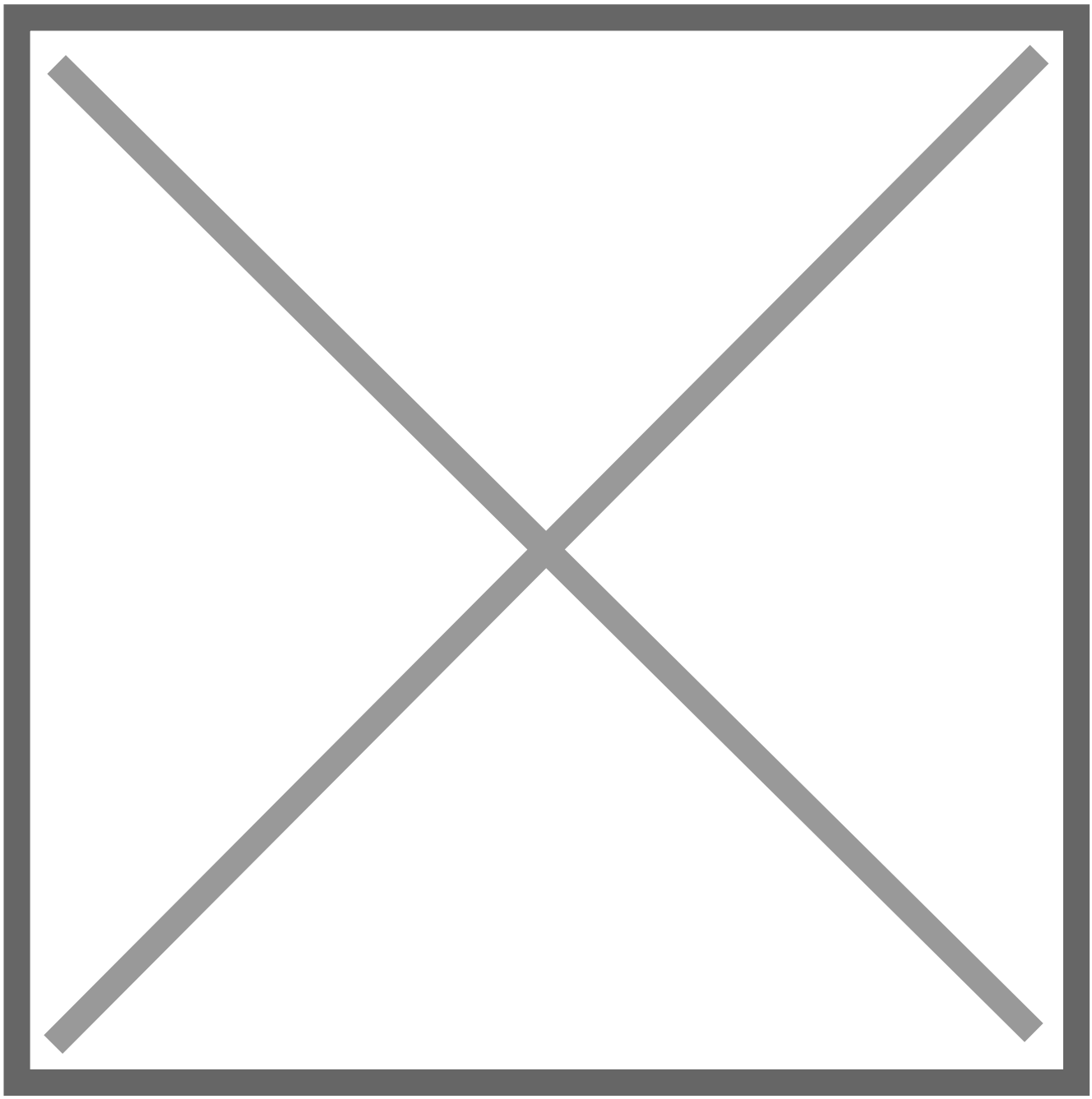
Since the end of the Second Vatican Council, many studies of priests' morale have generally moved to the same conclusions: Priests voiced frustrations and complaints about church structures and the context of their ministry. They also thought that *other* priests had morale problems. But when the questions were framed personally — "What about you? Are you happy and fulfilled doing what a priest does?" — priests

were positive about their ministry and their sense of mission and purpose. Relative to other American male workers, priests have consistently had a higher-than-average sense of satisfaction in doing what they do.

So, where does all this leave us? Even if all the challenges do not significantly damage our morale, they still remain daunting in themselves. They can stymie us and cause us to wonder how exactly we ought to shape our ministry. What can we do?

A first step is to honestly acknowledge the challenges that we face. They are real, and they are not going away. Then, as we make our personal discernment about shaping and directing our ministry in this complex situation, we need more than ever to use proven spiritual resources that are available to us, such as spiritual direction, prayer groups, retreats and sustaining friendships. Spiritual support is necessary now more than ever.

Other steps can take us forward. Pope Francis and his predecessors inspire me to look to the renewal of the Second Vatican Council. Consider these four steps and directions that echo the council and the popes of the last six decades.



A priest elevates the host during a Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City in 2020. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

1. Before you preach, ask questions and listen.

When he speaks about pastoral ministry, Pope Francis likes to refer to the Spanish word *cercania* or, in Italian, *vicinanza,* which we can translate as "closeness." I would call it "pastoral intimacy." And for Pope Francis, this intimacy is the essential

foundation for all the care that we extend to people. We priests, he says, need to have the smell of the sheep. That is closeness! Let me suggest one way to achieve this.

Asking questions is an essential way to build closeness. So it is in the ministry of Jesus. He asks questions, many questions: What do you want me to do for you? Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? What are you looking for? Do you also wish to go away? Do you love me? Jesus' questions enable him to connect with others. This is the point of Michael Buckley's excellent book *What Do You Seek? The Questions of Jesus as Challenge and Promise*.

Our questions express our interest in others and our desire to get to know them. How these questions unfold is also very significant. Ask questions but also listen carefully. Lead with questions to draw out not only pain and struggle but also grace and hope.

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2. After listening and coming close, preach as Jesus preached and, of course, preach him.

The preaching of Jesus begins: "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news." To proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God is to declare that God is reclaiming this broken world and our wounded lives. This essential hope enables us to navigate whatever comes our way. And to call people to repentance means inviting them to God's first and last word — mercy. Put simply, to preach as Jesus preached means proclaiming hope and mercy.

We must also preach Jesus, not just as another theme. Jesus, the crucified and risen one, is himself incarnate hope and mercy for us. But how do we do this preaching? I can share my own experience of this. It's not the only path, but I know it works for me.

First, I need to enter into the word of God, stay there and let it work its power on me. Then I can speak about Jesus, who is hope and mercy. If I do, a process sets in motion. I begin to reveal myself and actually share my state of soul. If knowing our people is the first step of pastoral intimacy, then preaching in this way is its second step.

Parishioners can detect whether or not we believe what we say. They know whether or not we are speaking about Jesus from our experience. They are not fooled by fancy rhetoric or clever stories. Whenever we preach, we lay our souls open in all our vulnerability. That is frightening and sobering. It is also encouragement to truly engage God's word before we try to proclaim it.



In this 2015 file photo, a priest blesses a student involved with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students at a church on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin at the University Catholic Center. (CNS/Courtesy of FOCUS)

3. Serve unity, so that in everything you do, you bring and keep your people together with one another and with the Lord.

Jesus' farewell begins in John 13 with him serving his disciples by washing their feet and anticipating his self-sacrifice the next day. His farewell concludes with his prayer for his disciples and its steady refrain, "Father, may they be one as we are one, I in you and you in me."

The service of Jesus is not about doing favors for others. The service of Jesus is his self-giving love that brings us to unity with the triune God and each other. Whenever we serve and in whatever way we serve, we have our template in him.

The great evil at work in our world is division evident in so many ways. We are often divided and conflicted within ourselves. We are also divided in our closest relationships. Think of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. Communities can be fractured. A whole world can be at war within itself. We are divided even from the environment that sustains us.

This means that whatever our particular act of our service is, it always needs to be directed to reconciliation and fostering unity and uncovering the fact that we are *fratelli tutti*, all brothers and sisters to each other.



Fr. Mark Searles, a resident priest at St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania, wears a mask while giving Communion to a parishioner following an Oct. 2, 2020, Mass celebrated in the parish parking lot. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

4. Pray as intercessors.

Of course, prayer is at the heart of our priestly ministry. We lead prayer, we preside at the Eucharist, we celebrate other sacraments. There is also another way of prayer for us. The people of God entrust us with the responsibility of praying for them. We are intercessors.

To intercede is to place people and situations into the hands of God. We take them, hold them and surrender them into God. And that is remarkable.

Some time ago, I remember reading a passage from Marguerite Yourcenar, a French writer of some note and not an especially religious person. She had, however, a spiritual insight that has never left me. She wrote that if we pray for people, over time they will appear differently to us. She implied that we would begin to see them as God sees them.

When we priests intercede for people and for the world at large, when we continuously place them in God's hands, something happens to us. We do begin to see others differently. And when we consider all the challenges that we noted, we need that higher vision, the way of divine seeing that will enable us to be wise stewards.

This is no quick fix. It is a way of being present, and, in the words of Mother Teresa, we finally will be more concerned about being faithful than being successful. That is no small thing.

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