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The average day of a parish priest

by Michael Sean Winters

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I just read an article at the CNS blog about what the average day of a parish priest looks like and how that does, or does not, comport with the sketch provided by the Holy Father in his sermon opening the "Year of the Priesthood" or with a typical day in the life of the Cure d'Ars. The article shows a priest who loves his people, is actively engaged in their lives, and who discovers Christ in his daily work. "The challenge is to remember that 'God is in the interruptions' and that a priest, like Christ, must always be kind," Fr. Kenneth Doyle writes, articulating a beautiful insight into what we might call the spirituality of the quotidian.

One other sentence caught my eye. "Then it was off to the hospital and a local nursing home to visit parishioners, back to the parish for a wedding rehearsal, a 20-minute respite to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, a supper-sandwich wolfed down at a local deli before repairing to the rectory desk to write a funeral homily."

The Liturgy of the Hours was, of course, never intended to be prayed alone. This carryover from the spirituality of monastic life to the rigorous, extemporaneous schedule of a parish priest has long been an imperfect fit. Psalms are meant to be sung, too, not recited, still less mumbled. There was something charming in Pope John XXIII's observation when a liturgist suggested a renewed focus on the Liturgy of the Hours as the regular prayer of the church. The jolly pontiff said he enjoyed praying the office so much he did the whole thing first thing every morning. Charming, yes. Theologically on point, no. Good Pope John, of course, was a master of the mixed signal. Leading up to Vatican II, he added the words "sed et beati Joseph, eiusdem Virginis Sponsi" to the Roman Canon, simultaneously confirming a liberal point -- the Roman Canon could be changed -- and reinforcing a conservative point -- the pope could act on his own authority without waiting for the council.

But, back to the Liturgy of the Hours.

One of the challenges of today's priesthood must be the isolation, living alone in increasingly far flung parishes, away from other priests. This must have a psychic impact, but let us focus only on the liturgical. How can parish priests today pray the Liturgy of the Hours in the manner in which they were intended? Suggestions for some kind of presbyteral oratory for diocesan clergy, where they could live together, would meet with a great deal of opposition from the priests themselves. But, why not follow a simple formula that is the practice I encounter at Mass at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington. At the end of daily Mass, chant vespers. If the Mass is in the morning, chant matins. Include the people of God in the Liturgy of the Hours. Chant does not require much in the way of musical sophistication. It is a small step, but most long journeys entail many small steps. And, thinking about such issues shows that declaring the "Year of the Priesthood" is already paying dividends.

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