



SHARING IN THE CHARISM OF THE

Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary
of Wichita

May 29, 2016

Praying for Priests

“We pray for priests.” What does this mean? Certainly it includes intercessory prayer for priests and their intentions, but it involves a lot more than that. This evening we will consider several things: why the Sisters pray for priests; who priests are and what they do; and how we can support them by living our own vocations generously.

Priests are important in the life of the Church, the world, and each individual in this room. As a Religious community, the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary are deeply grateful for the presence and ministry of priests. Priests have been instrumental in our community’s history, in our life in Wichita diocese, and in individual Sisters’ vocations. A priest was given the founding charism of our original Community in Spain. A bishop asked for missionary Sisters to be sent to California. A priest appointed by the Vatican directed our foundresses as they sought to preserve the IHM charism. A bishop invited our foundresses to move to the Wichita diocese. Priests have served as our chaplains, confessors, spiritual directors, retreat masters, and coworkers in the Lord’s vineyard of Catholic education. Priests have concelebrated our Sisters’ profession Masses and helped us serve the faithful, such as offering confession and benediction during our Novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Praying for the sanctification of priests is part of the charism of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Wichita. The IHM charism was first given to our original founder, Fr. Joaquin Masmitjá,

in Spain. He was a diocesan priest as well as a tertiary member of both the Servite and Carmelite orders. For the Servites, the primary lens of prayer is meditation on the Sorrows of Mary—her participation in Jesus’ saving Passion and Redemption of the world. The Carmelites, on the other hand, emphasize habitual recollection and attentiveness to God in an atmosphere of silence; they are also dedicated to praying for priests. Fr. Masmitjá incorporated both the Carmelite and the Servite traditions when he formed the original community of IHM Sisters in 1848.

Although prayer for priests was always included in our charism, it was not explicitly articulated at first. That began to change in California, before Mother Joanne became our superior in Wichita. One day, while Sister Joanne was doing some spiritual reading, she experienced a strong desire to become a priest. This was not the same as St. Therese’s metaphorical desire to be a priest in the sense of spreading the Gospel as a missionary. No, Sister Joanne recognized the sudden interior urge for priesthood to be a *temptation*. It was a temptation to *take* something that was not given to her, rather than to *receive* the vocation God had already called her to live. She immediately threw the book across the room and firmly resolved to be faithful to the vocation God had given her—the vocation to be a Religious Sister. She decided that, from that point on, she would pray daily for the sanctification of priests.

This experience of Mother Joanne provides several insights. First, even though she was a faithful daughter of the Church, a Religious Sister seeking holiness, she too was subject to temptation. Experiencing temptation is not a sin; in fact, if we resist temptation with God’s grace, we can grow stronger in virtue. Second, she exercised the discernment of spirits. The good Spirit invites us gently, respecting our freedom and the teachings of the Church. The bad spirit pushes us; it tries to catch us off guard so we will give in to an act we will later regret. Mother Joanne recognized the bad spirit at work, which is why she reacted so violently and decisively. A third lesson regards vocations. Mother Joanne

acknowledged that there are distinct yet complementary vocations; she determined that she would pray for priests and support them rather than compete with them. We, too, can receive our vocation gratefully from our loving Lord. We can live generously according to the way God created and called us, meanwhile contributing to the holiness of others—whether they share our vocation or have a different vocation in the Mystical Body of Christ.

Finally, this experience of Mother Joanne demonstrates the organic growth that normally happens in a healthy community. The IHM charism already included aspects of the Carmelite charism, including prayer for priests. God allowed Mother Joanne to undergo the temptation and resolution I have just described; subsequently, prayer for priests would become an official and community-wide practice of the IHM Sisters in Wichita. If a charism remains stagnant, it dies. It must grow and be adaptable to meet the needs of the Church as time goes on. It's like the development of doctrine across the centuries of Church history: the essentials remain constant, but there is organic growth and openness to new needs through the passage of time.

Throughout Christian history sinners have needed prayer for conversion and priests have faced many obstacles to fidelity and holiness. The Lord deemed it timely for Mother Joanne to address this need when she rewrote our Constitutions in 1979. In the section describing the Nature and End of [the IHM Religious] Institute, one article reads: "In union with Mary the Sisters pray for the Church, especially for the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of priests." ⁱ While it is true that I.H.M.s and Carmelites commit themselves to pray and sacrifice for priests, this holy endeavor is for *everyone!*

The Church calls priests and all the faithful to support one another. The Second Vatican Council teaches: "The object that priests strive for by their ministry and life is the procuring of the glory of God the Father in Christ. That glory consists in men's conscious, free, and grateful acceptance of God's plan as completed in Christ and their manifestation of it in their whole life." ⁱⁱ "The faithful for their part

ought to realize that they have obligations to their priests. They should treat them with filial love as being their fathers and pastors. They should also share their priests' anxieties and help them as far as possible by prayer and active work so that they may be better able to overcome difficulties and carry out their duties with greater success." ⁱⁱⁱ

In order to appreciate and support our priests with greater zeal, we will now consider who priests are and what they do for us. St. Augustine said in a homily, "We ask you in your charity to remember two points about us: first, that we are Christians, and second, that we are placed in charge. Because we are placed in charge, we are ranked among the shepherds [...] but because we are Christians, we too are members of the flock with you." ^{iv} Priests are Christian disciples with a special role in the Mystical Body of Christ; they are accountable for themselves as well as for those entrusted to their care by the Lord.

The Church describes the priest as "another Christ"—in Latin, *alter Christus*. The priest is called to echo the words of St. Paul in a unique way: "I live now, no longer I, but Christ lives in me." ^v The priest is no longer his own; he gives himself fully to God the Father and to the people who need his help, in the same manner as Jesus. Yesterday Bishop Kemme celebrated the ordination Mass for the newest priest in our diocese. The Mass booklet quoted the Second Vatican Council, explaining the sublimity of the mystery taking place: Priests are "partakers of the office of Christ, the sole Mediator." ^{vi} "By sacred Ordination a sacrament is conferred on priests through which, 'by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, they are signed with a special character and are so configured to Christ the Priest that they have the power to act in the person of Christ the Head.'" ^{vii}

To the vocation of priesthood God calls men affected by Original Sin, who live in a world that is often opposed to God. The Lord calls finite creatures to become priests, knowing their weaknesses and limitations; they are ministers of redemption while in need of redemption themselves. God appoints

them to stand in the place of the eternal Son incarnate—to stand in the place of Jesus—and to spend themselves drawing people to communion with the Triune God. Who is worthy of this vocation and ministry? The letter to the Hebrews says, “No one takes this honor upon himself, but only when called by God.”^{viii} The Church exhorts us to pray not only for priests, but also for those men who are discerning a vocation to the priesthood: “It is the duty of all the faithful of the diocese to assist the candidates for the priesthood by their prayers.”^{ix}

The priest stands in the place of Jesus for us, particularly in celebrating the sacraments. At Mass, only a validly ordained priest can pronounce the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, and bread and wine become the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God. In the sacrament of Reconciliation, only a validly ordained priest has the authority to hear a confession of sin and, in God’s name, pronounce the words of absolution, assuring the repentant sinner of God’s forgiveness. St. John Vianney, the patron saint of priests, described the sublime dignity of the priesthood in this way: “Oh, how great is the priest! The priest will only be understood in heaven. Were he understood on earth, people would die—not of fear, but of love.”

Although the role of a priest is most clear in the sacraments and liturgy, these are not the only ways the priest represents Jesus for us. Their very life is to manifest Jesus’ abiding presence among us. On the solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, which we celebrate today, the Church prays in her liturgy: “Christ, eternal priest of the Most High, you have commanded your priests to offer your sacraments[;] may they help them to exemplify in their lives the meaning of the sacred mysteries which they celebrate.”^x During the ordination mass of a priest, in the rite of ordination the Bishop prays to God the Father for the new priest: “renew deep within him the spirit of holiness; [...] by the example of his *manner of life*, may he instill right conduct.” When the bread and wine are brought to the sanctuary during ordination Mass, the Bishop hands them to the new priest, saying: “Receive the oblation of the holy people, to be

offered to God. Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and *conform your life* to the mystery of the Lord's cross." Priests are called to be holy, to lead God's people to holiness by their example.

For all Christians, our sanctification begins at Baptism. Baptism is the first sacrament; it removes Original Sin; it makes us Christian and children of God the Father. We renew our baptismal promises every Easter Sunday as a Church. This renewal involves a three-fold rejection of sin and a three-fold profession of faith, using the words of the Apostles' Creed. Faithful attendance at Sunday Mass, a consistent prayer life, and ongoing study of our Faith are important for all Christians. These are good means to ongoing conversion, faithfulness, and collaboration with priests in bringing others to Jesus.

After Baptism, priests conform their lives to Christ's even further as a response to God's invitation. Priestly ordination is its own sacrament, known as Holy Orders. At his diaconate ordination a man promises celibacy, obedience to the Bishop, and works of service for the faithful. At his priestly ordination a man promises obedience to the Bishop, prayer on behalf of the people in the Liturgy of the Hours, and the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In living out their vocation priests imitate Jesus, who always obeyed the will of God the Father. They imitate Jesus, who prayed for our salvation, particularly through the offering of his life for us on the cross.

Religious Brothers and Sisters also conform their lives to Christ's as a response to God's invitation. However, religious consecration is not its own sacrament; rather, it is a more radical living of Baptismal promises. At her profession, an IHM Sister vows chastity, poverty, and obedience according to the Constitutions. The Constitutions outline the way of life of the Institute's members. Our IHM constitutions include many elements, including praying the liturgy of the hours on behalf of the Church, daily Mass as a community, living in community, spreading the Faith through education, and—of course!—praying for the conversion of sinners and sanctification of priests.

As you can see, the priestly and religious vocations have some similarities and some differences. All of the vocations are complementary. When we all live our own vocations faithfully, we build up the Mystical Body of Christ. If any baptized person experiences temptation to disobey legitimate authority, he or she can offer it up for priests. After all, priests are intelligent men with free will who have promised to submit themselves to God's will as manifested by their Bishop. If any Christians experience temptation against chastity according to their vocation, they can offer it up for priests, who have promised to remain celibate for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. People tempted to negligence in prayer can offer it up for priests, who have promised to pray on our behalf.

Again, all of the vocations are complementary. Recall that priests represent Jesus. As Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we Sisters strive to be living images of Our Lady. From the cross Jesus gave Mary to us as our spiritual mother; all she wants to do is bring us to Jesus. As Mary assisted Jesus, so we Sisters want to assist priests. Mary spent her life on earth in motherly service of Jesus; in heaven she is a spiritual mother to Jesus' disciples and potential disciples. We IHM Sisters strive to spend our lives spiritually supporting our priests, the faithful, and sinners in need of conversion. God's family works in an interesting way: priests are figures of Christ and IHM Sisters are figures of Mary; therefore, while priests are our spiritual fathers, they are also our spiritual sons! As a mother is dedicated to the health and welfare of her children, so we are dedicated to the spiritual health and well-being of our priests.

As spiritual mothers, IHM Sisters pray for the conversion of sinners; as spiritual fathers, priests reconcile sinners with God in the Sacrament of Mercy. As spiritual mothers, IHM Sisters teach youth in the classrooms and offer days of retreat—or novena—to help them know the Lord; as spiritual fathers, priests preside at Mass where our students, friends, and families encounter the Lord on another level in

Word and Sacrament. As Mary is the handmaid of the Lord, so we hope to be collaborators and helpers for priests.

Again, the Religious and lay faithful alike are called to assist priests in their ministry. Priests spend themselves to bring Christ to others and others to Christ in the context of their priestly ministry. The rest of us can also spend ourselves bringing Christ to others and others to Christ in the context of our prayer, daily tasks, and encounters with others at home, at work, and beyond. A priest is called to offer his whole life and energy in service imitation of Jesus, who emptied Himself.^{xi} When we live our own vocations whole-heartedly and generously, we can offer our efforts for the perseverance of priests. St. Paul once wrote, “I will gladly spend myself and be spent for your sake.”^{xii} This is the disposition of Jesus; this is the ideal attitude of the priest. We can support our priests in return by offering prayers and spiritual sacrifices for *them*, as if to say to our priests: “I will gladly spend myself and be spent for your sake.”

What we do flows from who we are. The vocation to the priesthood is indissolubly bound up with the mystery of Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross and the Eucharistic celebration. The Second Vatican Council teaches: “Hence priests teach the faithful to offer the divine victim to God the Father in the sacrifice of the Mass and with the victim to make an offering of their whole life.”^{xiii} The liturgy for *Corpus Christi*, which we celebrate today, includes this prayer to Jesus: “Priest of the new and eternal covenant, you offered perfect sacrifice to the Father on the altar of the cross; teach us to offer ourselves with you.”^{xiv} St. Paul counsels, “Whatever you do, work at it with your whole being.”^{xv} Where do we get the energy to give ourselves wholeheartedly, continuously? It is in communion with Jesus, through prayer and the sacraments, that we can give ourselves generously to God and others.

Fortified by faithful prayer and the prayer of the faithful, priests engage in many forms of ministry. As Jesus “went about doing good,” so priests spend much time and energy in apostolic work.

This involves many works of mercy. Sometimes priests engage in corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead. Even more often, priests exercise the spiritual works of mercy: counseling the doubtful, consoling the sorrowful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing sinners, forgiving offenses, bearing wrongs patiently, and praying for the living and the dead. Any time we do these works of mercy, we can include in our intentions the charity and perseverance of priests.

The priest must “be all things to all men” as St. Paul strove to be. Like Jesus in his public ministry on earth, the priest must “empty himself”. A priest must be constantly available to everyone else in their diversity of needs. A priest might offer a wedding Mass and a funeral Mass back to back; he might hear the confession of a simple child followed by the confession of an adult in serious, habitual, even criminal sin. He might finish celebrating a baptism only to be called to the scene of an accident where he administers last rites to a dying person and must console a shocked and grieving family. A priest might spend his day with a routine or schedule in mind, but he must also be ready to respond to urgent needs and emergencies. Priests are called to be like Jesus, who took his disciples to a deserted place to rest after much activity: when needy people approached him, he interrupted his rest in order to minister to them.^{xvi}

We too may find the need for flexibility in our day in order to respond to others in a Christ-like manner. My grandma has a little quote taped on her restroom mirror: “Lord, make me interruptible.” The IHM motto expresses the same idea differently: “I take what is set before me,” in imitation of Mary’s “Fiat” at the Annunciation. When we embrace whatever God sends or permits, we can include priests in our intentions. We can pray that they will be Christ-like and generous in ebb and flow of their ministry.

We have considered various ways to pray for priests and offer parts of our day for priests. Why do priests need our prayers? Well, the devil hates priests and does all he can to weaken and destroy their vocation; the secular media tends to sow seeds of suspicion about priests and discredit them, painting them as predators and hypocrites; and many misguided people, who disdain Christ or the Catholic Church, oppose and persecute priests who *represent* Christ and the Catholic Church. Our priests have to suffer with the crucified Christ; they benefit greatly from our respect, verbal support, prayer, sacrifice, and self-offering to God and the Church.

Once I knew a priest who joined the military for a short time. He had to serve in a war-torn area and witnessed many atrocities in the course of his ministry to the soldiers. I wrote to him to assure him of my prayers. He wrote back and told me that every soldier had a “battle buddy”—that is, someone to watch his back so he wouldn’t be attacked and overcome by their enemies. He thanked me for being his “spiritual battle buddy”! Our prayers and offerings for priests can help support them in whatever battles they may face, especially spiritual battles.

We must also remember to call upon our Lady to help priests. She prayed with the first priests, the Apostles, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In the same way she has prayed with and for her Son’s priests down the centuries; she has a great maternal love for these men, who are called to represent her Son, Jesus, on earth and continue his saving work until He comes again.

There are many other ways to support priests and pray for their sanctification. Each year during Holy Week the Sisters draw names of all our diocesan priests, and then write each one a card. We commit to praying for each priest by name daily from Holy Thursday of that year to the following Holy Thursday, since Jesus instituted the Eucharist and the priesthood on the first Holy Thursday. We also let them know that on every Thursday of the school year our communal Mass is offered for the

sanctification of our diocesan priests. Writing to a priest is one way to express encouragement and support for our pastors and other priests.

Priests are human, and like everyone else they carry crosses. When we face trials we can offer them for the perseverance of priests. There's bound to be a priest somewhere at any given time experiencing a trial or temptation similar to ours, for example: loneliness; strains in relationships; aggravation or irritation; worry, nervousness, or fear; temptation against the vows of baptism or one's vocation; pressures caused by time constraints; the misunderstanding or ridicule of others; slander, libel, or false accusation; recognition of one's own weaknesses; perception of one's own inadequacy; humble admission of sin or failure; the struggle to resolve and amend sin. Lest this list seem dismal, we might also add that we can offer up joys for priests! For example, in moments of gratitude for our own vocation, we can pray that priests rejoice in and give thanks for *their* vocation. Whenever we renew our commitment to our own vocation, we can pray that priests be renewed and flourish in theirs.

The Holy Mass is a beautiful prayer: Jesus offers Himself to the Father and to us; we are invited to participate in Jesus' self-giving. At the same time, participation in Mass can involve distractions, both within and outside a person. If members of the congregation can be distracted by the handful of people around them, so too can the priest—especially since he can see the whole congregation at once! Priests probably witness all kinds of things at parish Masses that could distract them; they may also have internal preoccupations as they enter into Mass. We can support priests at Mass in a number of ways. Here are some ideas: observing modesty and simplicity in clothing and appearance, not attracting attention to ourselves; arriving early for Mass rather than rushing in late; making a reverent genuflection and sign of the cross; remaining mentally present during Mass, really listening to the readings and prayers; praying for the celebrant periodically during Mass so he may enter more fully into the liturgy,

especially the Eucharistic prayer; offering ourselves and the priest to God the Father at the offertory and Great Amen; receiving holy communion with attentiveness and reverence for our Eucharistic Lord.

What a gift to be able to receive the Eucharist every day! Another sacrament we can receive regularly is Reconciliation or Confession. St. John Vianney was greatly devoted to celebrating both sacraments; he had a tremendous zeal for converting sinners. Many penitents made great sacrifices to travel and go to confession to the saintly priest. In a conversation with another priest, St. John Vianney confided that he gave relatively light penances to such penitents so as not to discourage them. The priest asked how that could be just in the case of grave sins. St. John Vianney replied, "I give them a small penance and the remainder I myself perform in their stead." ^{xvii} Only God knows how many of our own confessors have done likewise! How can we support priests as they offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Here are some ideas: praying for the priest to have the Holy Spirit's gift of council to guide us; being simple and honest in confession; praying in thanksgiving and intercession for the priest, even if that particular confession has been a difficult experience; praying for the priest's perseverance, discernment, and Christ-likeness as he reconciles sinners to the Father.

When we pray for the sanctification of priests, we pray that they may be more like Jesus. This benefits priests personally, and it also benefits everyone else! The more priests are united with Christ, the more effective they will be as his ministers, converting sinners and drawing disciples into deeper communion with the Triune God.

Perhaps our Lord will invite you to offer particular actions or situations in your life for the sanctification of priests. For now, however, let us offer an intercessory prayer for priests:

"O Jesus, I pray for your faithful and fervent priests; for your unfaithful and tepid priests; for your priests laboring at home or abroad in distant mission fields; for your tempted priests; for your

lonely and desolate priests; for your young priests; for your dying priests; for the souls of your priests in purgatory.

“But above all I commend to You the priests dearest to me: the priest who baptized me; the priests who absolved me from my sins; the priests at whose Masses I assisted and who gave me your Body and Blood in Holy Communion; the priests who taught and instructed me; all the priests to whom I am indebted in any other way. O Jesus, keep them all close to your Heart, and bless them abundantly in time and in eternity. Amen.”

St. John Vianney, pray for us. Mary, Mother of Priests, pray for us.

ⁱ IHM Constitution no. 7

ⁱⁱ *Presbyterorum ordinis* no. 5

ⁱⁱⁱ *Presbyterorum ordinis* no. 9

^{iv} Office of Readings, 13th Week, Monday

^v Galatians 2:20

^{vi} *Lumen Gentium* no.28

^{vii} *Presbyterorum Ordinis* no. 2

^{viii} Hebrews 5:4

^{ix} Instruction of the Rite of Ordination

^x Evening Prayer I, *Corpus Christi*, Intercessions

^{xi} cf. Philippians 2:5, 7

^{xii} 2 Corinthians 12:15

^{xiii} *Presbyterorum ordinis* no. 5

^{xiv} Morning Prayer, *Corpus Christi*, Intercessions

^{xv} Colossians 3:23a

^{xvi} cf. Mark 6:30-34

^{xvii} The Curé D’Ars: St. Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney, Abbé Francis Trochu, p. 269-70