

A Priest's Life

THE CALLING, THE COST, THE JOY

PREFACE BY

ARCHBISHOP EDWIN F. O'BRIEN

Compiled and edited by Patricia Mitchell

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Archbishop of Baltimore

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Preface

“The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.”

—*St. John Mary Vianney*

We all live busy lives—priests and laypeople alike—and sometimes we fail to take the time to truly reflect on what we do and why we do it. Inspired, no doubt, by the Holy Spirit, Pope Benedict XVI in June 2009 inaugurated a Year for Priests. He was wise to do so, for it has given all of us in the Church time to meditate on the great gift of the priesthood.

What makes a great priest? When he announced the Year for Priests, Pope Benedict declared St. John Vianney the universal patron of priests and relied on him as the model for all priests. What was it about this nineteenth-century French pastor—a simple parish priest who ministered in the small village of Ars—that warrants such an honor? Here are some of the pope’s observations about John Vianney’s ministry:

- He identified himself completely with his ministry. There is “extraordinary fruitfulness,” the pope said, when the holiness of the ministry of the priesthood coincides with the holiness of the person who is the priest.
- He taught his parishioners primarily by the witness of his life. It was from his example that they learned to pray. He communicated the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist to his parishioners by the way he celebrated Mass.

- He was convinced that the fervor of a priest's life depended entirely on the Mass, and when he celebrated, he offered up his own life in sacrifice.
- He put his “unfailing trust” in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and made it the center of his pastoral concerns.
- He practiced the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, even though they were not required of him as a diocesan priest.

In his letter, Pope Benedict noted that throughout his life, St. John Vianney remained in awe of the gift and task entrusted to human beings through the priesthood. And what a great gift it is! As I recently told a group of retired priests in my archdiocese, if the Blessed Mother herself were to appear in our midst today, she could not do what the simplest priest does every day and what she did physically in Bethlehem: give us the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. Nor could all the angels and archangels in heaven, acting in full unison, forgive even one venial sin. Only the priest, acting in the person of Christ, can do these things and so much more, not of his own merits or power, but because he is chosen, called, and empowered by God himself to continue the saving work of the risen Jesus.

No human being can ever feel worthy of such a gift—or such a responsibility. Because we are human, there will be times when we fail. But our response to our weaknesses must be to cling ever more closely to Christ. To be good and holy priests, we need a fervent prayer life, the sacraments, and immersion in God's

word. Pope Benedict’s letter proclaiming the Year for Priests ends by urging priests to make a commitment “to the ideal of complete self-oblation to Christ and the Church, which inspired the thoughts and actions of the saintly Curé of Ars.”

For me, *A Priest’s Life: The Calling, the Cost, the Joy* captures that idea of “self-oblation”—that gift of self—spoken of by the Holy Father. Some of the priests in this book speak of their initial gift of self to Jesus and his Church in their discernment leading up to ordination. Others speak of the ongoing need to offer themselves to Jesus, as they identify with Christ as “a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). All these stories show both the joy and the sacrifice of this vocation.

The Word Among Us has done a service for the Church in collecting and publishing these stories. They reflect the many and varied ways priests are serving the Church throughout the world. They also provide us with a glimpse into the hearts of these priests—what moves them, what energizes them, and what fulfills them. Above all, these stories help us to see more clearly why the priesthood is such a gift to the Church, and why we need to continue praying for our priests and asking God for more priestly vocations.

I would like to invite readers of this book to pray for priests in a special way. As you intercede for them, ask the Lord to keep all priests close to his heart and renew in them the passion that they need to carry out their duties faithfully each day.

My motto as archbishop is taken from Jeremiah 3:15: *I will give you shepherds*. God has promised to give us priestly vocations, but we also need to be faithful in praying for them. I have noticed that in those parishes and dioceses where there is an

abundance of Eucharistic adoration, there is an abundance of priestly vocations. They have taken seriously the Lord's solution for great harvests but too few laborers: "Pray the harvest master to send laborers into his harvest" (see Matthew 9:38). Let us all take up this practice regularly and ask the Lord to send us priests for his Church.

We are blessed, indeed, to have many deacons, religious, and lay people working the harvest. But without the priest, there is no Eucharist. And without the Eucharist, there is no Church. How fitting, then, and how necessary, to turn to the Eucharist in our prayer for priests, especially in this Year for Priests.

Most Rev. Edwin F. O'Brien
Archbishop of Baltimore

Introduction

When Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated a Year for Priests in June 2009, he did it first and foremost for the priests themselves. He invited them to renew their faith so that they could become ever more effective witnesses to the gospel in the world today.

But this Year for Priests is for the whole Church as well. Not only does it help those of us in the laity to take a step back and recall the vital role of the priest in the Church and in our faith lives, it also inspires us to encourage and pray for all of our priests. At *The Word Among Us*, we thought that one way we could celebrate this special Year is to publish *A Priest's Life: The Calling, the Cost, the Joy*.

In these times, when we often hear about the weaknesses and failings of priests, we wanted to compile these stories and witnesses to honor the many thousands of priests worldwide who serve us so selflessly. The priests you will meet in these pages are hardly representative of all the priests serving the Church today. And yet, in another sense, they are. As you read their stories, you will see beyond the specific circumstances of their lives to the passion they have to serve God in this special way. They love the Lord, they love the people they serve, and they love this vocation that God has given to them.

A Priest's Life features stories of priests serving God in many different ways—in parishes, in foreign missions, as prison chaplains, as teachers and preachers, on battlefields. Some of the men in this book write about their path to becoming priests—the discernment, the challenges, and finally the certainty that they are

doing what God wants for them. Others write about their ministries. Some have traveled the globe as evangelists, proclaiming the good news. Others are parish priests who faithfully, day in and day out, carry out their duties and often discover, much to their surprise, that they have been the catalyst to a changed life. Some of these stories relate a powerful moment in the ministry of that priest, such as caring for survivors of 9/11, praying with a person who is then healed, or hearing the confession of a person who has spent a lifetime away from the Church.

Though their ministries, their paths, and their years of service differ, these men share a common calling from God to serve him in the priesthood, and they all reflect the joy and fulfillment of living out that call. Whatever their story, all the priests who contributed to this book convey an energy and excitement about their lives, and in so doing, they honor every priest who seeks to live for the Lord and serve his Church. We hope that these stories will move you in one way or another, just as they have moved us. We are indebted to those who have taken time from their very busy schedules to write them.

Our Church needs priests who, like all of us, can find the time to nurture their own relationship with the Lord while at the same time serving others. It is only with the Lord's power and grace that any of us can begin to live up to our vocations. We all need to support one another as we strive to live out the great calling that God has given to each of us in baptism.

In this Year for Priests and beyond, may we all remember to pray for our priests each day. May we remember to thank them for the work they do. May we encourage them with our love and support. May we also ask the Lord to shower his grace on

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men who are discerning a call to the priesthood. We, the Church, need priests.

Lord, send us men whose hearts are enflamed with your love so that they are willing to become a living sacrifice for you. We thank you for the priests that serve us so faithfully today. Renew their hearts—and ours as well—so that together we can love and serve your body on earth.

Jeff Smith
President
The Word Among Us, Inc.

Patricia Mitchell
Editorial Director
The Word Among Us Press

The People's Prayer for Priests

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has recommended that parishes offer this prayer throughout the Year for Priests.

Dear Lord,

We pray that the Blessed Mother
wrap her mantle around your priests
and through her intercession
strengthen them for their ministry.

We pray that Mary will guide your priests
to follow her own words,
“Do whatever He tells you” (John 2:5).

May your priests have the heart of St. Joseph,
Mary's most chaste spouse.

May the Blessed Mother's own pierced heart
inspire them to embrace
all who suffer at the foot of the cross.

May your priests be holy,
filled with the fire of your love,
seeking nothing but your greater glory
and the salvation of souls.

Amen.

Saint John Vianney, pray for us.

Chapter 1

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Why Did I Fear?

Fr. Gerard Francik

Sometimes it's not clear to us what God's call is in our lives. It can seem very mysterious. But what I've witnessed again and again, especially in my work now as vocation director for our diocese, is that if we believe that God is calling us and we respond in faith, he will confirm that call with a sense of his joy, presence, and peace. That has certainly been the case in my own life.

God spoke very clearly to me one morning as I was walking across my college campus. I had been in one major freshman year, and then had changed to another—mass communications. (Funny that God used that in a different way!) I enjoyed my classes, was getting good grades, and had completed several internships.

But something was missing. I just couldn't imagine myself working in this field every day from nine to five. I thought that after a few years, I would get bored. So what should I do? That day God spoke very clearly in my mind. No lightning bolts or thundering voices from mountaintops, just a clear thought: "Be a priest." Of course I ran away from the idea, thinking it was the strangest thing in the world. But looking back, I can see what had contributed to this "idea."

A newly ordained priest had just arrived the year before in my parish. His life looked great. People loved him; he loved the liturgy and the people. In him I saw a bit of myself. I had always loved the liturgy, music, and my faith, but with his encouragement, I

became directly involved in the parish. I joined the liturgy committee and helped with music, the youth group, and the RCIA program. My faith blossomed, and I felt God's call, which was accompanied by a sense of joy and peace. When I was involved in church, I was at home. When I finally entered the seminary three years later, I woke up late one night and asked myself, "Why did I fear?" God's presence and confirmation were so real.

Making a Difference

I want to share with you two stories that show why I am a priest and how God continues to confirm his calling to me. Just a few months ago, I received a phone call from a young woman who now lived on the West Coast. She was going to be in town for a few days and wanted to stop by and visit with me. I had no idea why. I didn't even recognize her name, but there I was, a few days later, greeting her and her mother at the door.

She came into my office, and with tears in her eyes recounted the story of the death of her stepfather. Neither she nor her mother had been Catholic, but they remembered my taking care of her father when he was hospitalized and later as he was dying. She said that I had included them so much in the funeral, even though they did not understand all of the rituals. She wanted me to know how grateful she was. I thought that was the end of the conversation.

But then she described how, days later, she and her boyfriend were driving in a car together and had a terrible accident. He was killed. Others blamed her for his death, and in fact, she found herself feeling terribly guilty (even though she was not)

and blaming herself. One desperate day, driving through some country roads at very high speeds, she decided to try to find me. I had been transferred to our youth retreat house. Luckily, after she checked with the front office, I appeared and was able to sit and talk with her. She said it took no more than five minutes, but that conversation changed her life. She left there feeling God's presence and peace.

That young woman came back to thank me. She said she thought that priests too frequently are not told how they have helped another in need. I honestly don't remember the conversation that she said changed her life.

Five years ago a couple I married called with great news. I knew that they had wanted children and that, for years, they were unable to conceive. This time the news was different: They were going to have a baby. They had heard from an adoption agency, and they were flying to China to meet their new little girl. They would be there two weeks but wanted to arrange for her baptism when they returned. "Would you be willing to baptize our baby?" the husband asked. "Of course," I replied. "I would be honored." I then asked how his parents must feel, since he was an only child and this would be their first grandchild. He said, "Oh, we haven't told them yet. We wanted to tell you first!" I was speechless. One of the most poignant and important moments of life, and they wanted me to be part of it first.

That is why I am still a priest. I am able to walk into the most profound moments in people's lives and make a difference. God confirms his call to me every day by using me to bring his blessings and grace to others in so many ways. Most of the time, I'm not even aware that he is using me, because it is God giving the

blessings and grace, not me. And people like these, who cross my path every day, are such a blessing to me personally. Is life as a priest lonely? Not with wonderful people like these! 

Fr. Gerard Francik was born in Baltimore in 1960 and graduated from Towson University before entering the seminary in 1982. He was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Baltimore on May 16, 1987 and is currently serving as vocation director for the archdiocese.

Chapter 3

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“I Will Not Leave You Orphaned”

Fr. Daren J. Zehnle

I discerned a call to the priesthood through the many events of my life, some of which were very sad and painful. Yet it was in each one of these experiences that I most deeply felt my call to the priesthood as a call to share the love of Christ Jesus with a hurting world. These events seemed to come together, almost like a puzzle, and in them I was able to hear the Lord’s will for my life.

To share my story, I need to start at the beginning. When I was about four years old, my mother developed a brain tumor, which confined her to a hospital bed in our home. I have a few very fond memories of Mom walking, but most of my memories are of her bedridden. After Mom’s cancer developed, Dad stopped working as an electrician and stayed home to care for her, my brother, and me.

On February 20, 1986, my brother and I awoke as usual. We readied ourselves for school and only needed Dad to cook us breakfast before we got on the bus and were off to school. Oddly though, Dad was not up yet. Typically he was already in the kitchen, listening to the radio and fixing breakfast. My brother and I thought nothing about it, and when we were ready, I went to wake him up. Not finding him in his bedroom, I discovered him on the couch where he had fallen asleep the night before. I

called his name and shook him, but Dad would not wake up. I woke Mom and she, too, tried to rouse him, but to no avail. Out of desperation, we called my Aunt Marie, who arrived shortly thereafter, but she could not wake Dad either. At long last we called the ambulance.

When the paramedics arrived, my brother and I were sent outside to wait with the neighbors who had come down to our house. If I remember the morning correctly, it was snowing lightly but was not chilly. The wait outside seemed like an eternity.

Finally, one of the paramedics stepped outside. He said not a word, but I can still see the look on his face as he sadly shook his head as though to say, "No, he did not make it; he is dead." The look on his face said it all. As soon as he stepped through the door, I knew, and I cried my heart out. I could do nothing but cry for the next two or three days. I was not quite eight years old.

I was, quite naturally, devastated. For a long time, I constantly asked God, "Why did you do this? How could you let this happen? What did I do to deserve this?" I simply could not understand.

I am not quite sure how I survived that experience, but I did. My brother and I moved in with Dad's sister, her husband, and their four children. Let me tell you, it was a houseful, especially when you count the dogs, cat, hamsters, and bird!

Mom was placed in a nursing home, and we visited her every week after Mass and other times throughout the week when we could. As time progressed, she grew steadily worse. On January 18, 1988, I was building yet another bigger and better Lego castle with my cousins when the telephone rang. My aunt then told me the purpose of the call: Mom had just died. I was not quite ten years old.

Why Me?

I was again devastated. Again the question of “Why?” emerged from deep within me. I could not grasp how God could take away the two most important people in my life, especially when I was so very young. I had done nothing wrong. I did not deserve this. Day after day I would ask God, “Why? Why me?” I also asked him countless times to return my parents to me. I remember wishing many times, “Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight.” Each time I thought those words, I asked for my mom and dad. I told no one of this wish. It never happened.

To this day I have not received an answer to my initial question, but as I continually questioned God, I slowly found myself praying, and in the midst of this prayer, I heard him say to me, “It is I. Do not be afraid” (John 6:20). “I will not leave you orphaned; I will come to you” (John 14:18, NRSV). “I am here. I love you.”

And come to me he did: through the Scriptures, prayer, and the sacraments. I slowly came to know that “the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them / and lead them to springs of life-giving water, / and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17). I began to feel the Lord’s loving presence, and I began to ask him—subconsciously, but I asked him nonetheless—“Who are you, sir?” (Acts 9:5). As I listened to him in prayer, I came to know him, and I recognized him as “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

Growing up without my parents was very difficult indeed, and their deaths had a very profound impact on me. All of my personality traits and qualities can be traced back to their deaths in

some fashion. Don't get me wrong: My aunt and uncle were both very good to me, and I could not have asked for better, but they could never take the place of my parents. This they realized, and never did they attempt to do so.

Experiencing God's Love

These many years later, I look back on these two events that shaped my very being with gratitude, not because of the loss of my parents, but rather because of how I grew and matured as a result of their deaths. After Dad died, but especially after Mom, I began to pray to God, asking him for answers, for support, and for love. As I spent more time in the presence of God, I felt his love in a very real way, and drew immense peace and comfort from that experience. In my great sadness and pain, I went to him, and there I experienced his love.

When I was seventeen, I went on my first Teens Encounter Christ (TEC) retreat. Here I was able, for the first time, to really let go of much of the hurt and pain that I had kept bottled up deep within me. It felt so good to be free of that pain after so many years, and with that release, the love of God seemed to flow through me. I could truly feel the healing presence of God in and around me.

God's presence to me was also manifested in the person of Fr. John Beveridge, the pastor at my parish. Fr. John helped me through these difficult experiences without even fully realizing that he had done so. He was always there for me from the moment I first arrived in the parish after Dad died. As I grew, so too did our friendship. He was always there with a listening spirit, a compassionate heart, helpful advice, a great joke, and an encouraging

and loving spirit. Fr. John shared in all of my pains and in all of my joys; this I felt called to do for others.

My experiences of Fr. John's loving care and concern for me, together with my experiences of God's deep love for me, began to foster within me a desire to serve the Lord. This desire developed through grade school and especially into high school as I became more involved with the parish and with the TEC community.

Then in high school, I began to feel God stirring within my heart, calling me to into his service as a priest. I heard his voice in "a tiny whispering sound" in the stillness of my heart (1 Kings 19:12). I came to realize that his love, which I had experienced and had come to rely upon, required me to give it to others; I could not keep it to myself. I heard him calling: "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8). As he called to the apostles, so he called to me: "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). But unlike the apostles, I did not immediately leave everything to follow him. I said, "I am too young" (Jeremiah 1:6), and he responded: "Follow me" (Mark 2:14).

Even so, I thought myself unworthy of so generous a calling—indeed, I am unworthy of it. There were others in my parish more fit for his service, I thought. There were others more popular, more intelligent, more talented, more loving than I, and so I at first declined his invitation, choosing instead to teach history. I could not see why the Lord wanted me, wounded as I was. I did not yet realize that, as Thornton Wilder wrote, "In Love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve."

After my first TEC weekend, I could not decide exactly what I wanted to do with my life, whether I wanted to teach history or

become a priest. I told no one about what the Lord was saying to me, which made even more remarkable what soon happened after: At this point of indecision, many parishioners approached me before, during, and after Mass and told me, "You should think about the priesthood; you'd make a good priest." I was stunned.

Within a matter of weeks, it was not simply a handful of my fellow parishioners saying this to me, but dozens, and the number grew with each passing week. They never pushed or shoved; they simply commented. But even with such affirmations, I still was unsure. I knew that I was not worthy of so great a calling, but who of us is?

A Flashing Light

At one point I decided that I wanted to teach history and yet, as is often the case with God, the desire for the priesthood never left me. It was like a light flashing in the back of my mind, blinking in an irritating way, as if to say, "Hey, look at me!" And so I did. I looked closer at and prayed about the priesthood, and came to the conclusion that this is God's call for me: to be a priest. The priesthood simply seemed as though it would fit my personality and my desires, and I somehow knew that only as a priest would I ever find joy, contentment, fulfillment, and peace.

After I made this decision, the thought of teaching history no longer appealed to me. (Now, as a priest, I teach Church history in our parish high school.) Meanwhile, signs of God's call became more and more apparent. I grew more in love with helping at the parish and in the TEC community, and this continued through my college years as I devoted most of my time to campus ministry

and the RCIA program. All through college, the desire to serve God as a priest only grew.

After receiving a bachelor's degree in history, I went to study and be formed for the priesthood at the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary. I was ordained to the priesthood of Jesus Christ on May 28, 2005, for service in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois.

If, after reading this, you find yourself asking, "What does the Lord want of me?" ask yourself three simple and basic questions:

Where do I find joy?

Where do I find peace?

Where do I find fulfillment?

Where these three answers coincide, there I am certain is God's will.

And if you find yourself asking, "Lord, why me?" ask yourself instead, "Why *not* me?" 

Fr. Zehnle is pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Virden, Illinois, and of St. Patrick Parish in Girard, Illinois. This story is adapted from one appearing on his blog, "Servant and Steward," at www.servantandsteward.org.