

**MISSIONARY  
RENEWAL  
ASSEMBLY**

# The Identity and Mission of the Priest Today

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# Addressing Head On Big Issues

- From afar I've admired what has been happening in Detroit.
- Despite massive social and economic changes, and facing many of the same ecclesiastical changes and challenges confronted elsewhere, the Archdiocese of Detroit has gotten out in front with courage and creativity, rooted in the Gospel.
- From Synod 16, to the beatification, to Unleash the Gospel, to the missionary strategic plans, to the Families of Parish, the Archdiocese is trying to respond to long-term pastoral planning needs in a way so as to continue and advance the evangelizing mission of the Church.



# The Church's Situation Today

- Some dioceses, particularly in the southwest, are expanding thanks to immigration; others, traditionally small, are growing through OCIA. In most places, dioceses are shrinking.
- Six Catholics are leaving the practice of the faith for every convert.
- The rise of the “nones”
- One of six Catholics attends Mass on each Lord's day; only three of ten professes Catholic Eucharistic teaching.
- Sunday Mass attendance is down anywhere from 10-33 percent after Covid.
- Since 2014, total active diocesan priests are down 9 percent; religious by 14 percent; priestly ordinations by 24 percent; seminarians by 22 percent; one third of priests in the US are retired.





## The Church's Situation Today

- Baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations, Marriages and diaconal ordinations are all statistically down and priests in many places comment the same is true about confessions and anointings.
- Many Catholic elementary schools, high schools and parishes are no longer self-sustaining and are needing to close or merge.
- Hospitals and many of the Church's charities are struggling, surviving by outside support.
- Attempts to marginalize and instrumentalize the Church and violate religious freedom and the religious and conscience rights of believers.
- The clergy sexual abuse crisis has severely wounded the credibility of the Church, of priests in general, of bishops and even of the Pope.
- There is growing secularization such that many are no longer growing up with even the most minimal cultural Catholicism.







## Sources of Hope

- The rise of various great, mainly lay led, new evangelization organizations.
- Some thriving programs for young people.
- Great hunger for Eucharistic adoration seen in various parishes and among the young.
- The rise and thriving of various religious orders and movements doing well in terms of vocational numbers, formation and impact.
- Lots of concerns, but we're seeing seeds, buds and flowers of a new springtime.
- Church is being asked to relive the parables of the Sower and the Seed, the Weeds and the Wheat and the Mustard Seed.



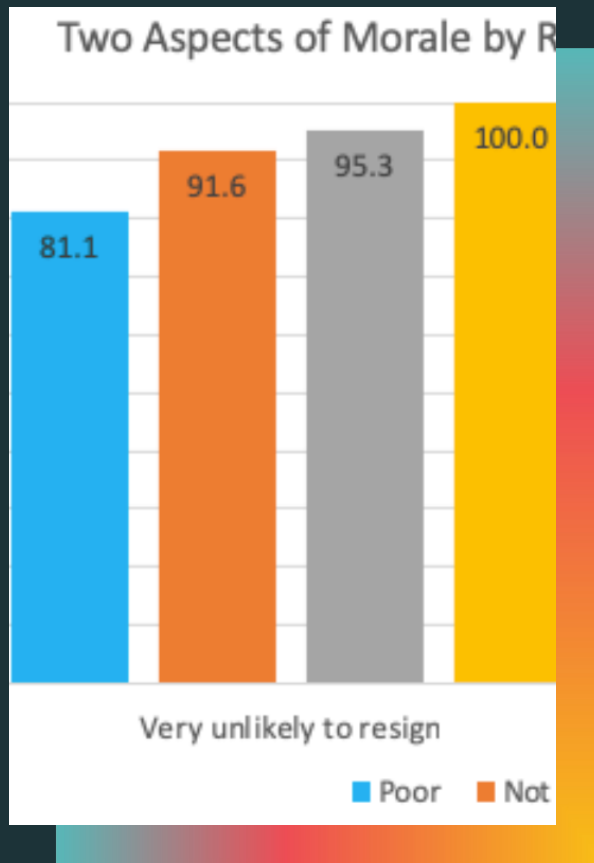
# Impact on Priestly Life and Work

- Demands have grown. Priests are wearing hats several priests once wore.
- Many are having to sacrifice *munus docendi* and *munus sanctificandi* for *munus regendi*.
- In various places, expectations haven't changed.
- Presiding over downsizing and closings can leave priests psychologically, spiritually and physically drained.
- Younger priests are being made administrators before they've even gotten used to being priests; older priests can be fatigued by the amount of new programs they've been asked to implement and because of the energy and effort required, often are hesitant.
- Priestly morale is taking a hit.



## Impact on Priestly Life and Work

- Most recent surveys have shown that priests overall are men of hope who, relative to other professions, say they are generally happy.
- But the 2021 Survey of American Catholic Priests (1036 priests) compared priest responses between 2002 and 2021.
  - “Very satisfied” — In 2002, 72%; in 2021, 62%
  - “State of the Church” — In 2002, 4% excellent, 58% good, 34 percent not so good, 5 % poor; in 2021, 1% excellent, 35% good, 51% not so good, 13% poor. A switch from 62% “good or better” to 64 percent “not so good or poor.” In 2002, 37% said the situation was improving, 35% about the same, and 28% getting worse; in 2021, 16% getting better, 36% the same, and 48 percent getting worse. The younger the cohort, the more pessimistic about the future; after 1990, 66-71% thought the Church was not doing well.



# Priestly Identity and Mission

- During a confusing age of big paradigm shifts when many priests are struggling to adjust, adapt and thrive, it's important to focus on the essentials.
- While context can change the way a priest's identity and mission is understood lived out, identity and mission are the same as they've always been.
- Vat II's *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, John Paul II's *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, and the Dicastery for Clergy's *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests* all focus on the "radical communitarian form" of the priesthood that can "only be carried out as a collective work" (PDV 17).





# Priestly Identity and Mission

- The priest is in intimate communion with the Blessed Trinity.
  - Priests are radically communal.
  - “The identity, ministry and existence of the priest are essentially related to the Most Holy Trinity” (DMLP 3)
  - He is in essential relationship with the salvific love of God the Father lived out in spiritual fatherhood, with the priestly being of Christ, and with the gift and sacramental character of the Spirit. (DMLP 4)
  - The priest is called to live this relationship in an intimate and personal way. (DMLP 5)
  - As Christ was sent, so priests have been sent; they exist within Christ’s spousal consecration for mission and the priest should be “fully aware of this missionary reality of his priesthood” (DMLP 16).



# Priestly Identity and Mission

- The priest is also in radical communion with the Church
  - He is “in” and ”at the forefront” of the Church, acting in the person of Christ the head and bridegroom but as a disciple a member of Christ’s Mystical Body and Bride.
  - His authority is an office of love, avoiding both being overbearing as well as disdaining personal configuration to Christ in view of being a manager. He is called to be a mediator and bridge imitating the Lord who came to serve not to be served, exercising their office in ”humble yet authoritative service” (DMLP 25). He’s is meant to promote the dignity, mission and charity of the laity.



# Priestly Identity and Mission

- The priest is also in radical communion with his bishop
  - “The ministry of priests is above all communion and a responsible and necessary cooperation with the bishop’s ministry” (PDV 17).
  - “Filial union with his own Bishop is an indispensable condition for the efficacy of the priestly ministry” (DMLP 33). It is an expression of maturity and is meant to be characterized by “sincere trustfulness, cordial friendship, prayer for his person and intentions and a true effort of consonance and convergence in ideals and programs” (33).





# Priestly Identity and Mission

- The priest is also in radical communion with his presbyterate
  - By Holy Orders, each priest is united to the other members of the presbyterate in an intimate sacramental brotherhood and by particular bonds of prayer, apostolic charity, ministry, fraternity, sharing in Christ's one priesthood and collaborating for the same cause, the building up on his Body (PO 8, PDV 17).
  - Priestly communion is meant to be a reflection of and participation in Christ's prayer for his apostles to be one like the Trinity so that the world might know the Son was sent by the Father and loves us like he loves the Son (PO 8; Jn 17). The imposition of hands by priests at priestly ordination is a sign of this sacramental communion and collaboration in priestly work.
  - This communion is meant to overflow in joint priestly prayer, fraternity, friendship, associations and even common life (PO 8).





# Priestly Identity and Mission

- The priest is also in radical communion with his presbyterate
  - Unity among priests is meant to be a “true family in which the ties are not of flesh or blood but come from the grace of Holy Orders” (DMLP 34).
  - It is a remedy against isolation, loneliness and subjectivism.
  - The presbyterate is not supposed to be a group but a team.
    - A group is a collection of individuals who coordinate their efforts, while a team is a group of people who share a common goal, with greater mutual accountability and shared leadership, more defined roles, expectations, responsibilities and division of labor.
    - On winning teams, teammates get along, complement each other, work together, accept coaching and put “us” before “me.”





## Biblical Models of Collaboration

- Christ's sending out the twelve apostles "two-by-two" (Mk 6:7-13) and then the 72 disciples "in pairs" (Lk 10:1-12)
- They would have been able to cover twice as much ground if he had sent them out solo. Why did he send them out in pairs?
- St. Gregory the Great (March 31, 591 homily):
  - "The Lord, our Savior, teaches us early on in his words, sometimes in his works. For his actions themselves are precepts: what he does without saying anything, we must do. So here he sends his disciples two-by-two to preach, because there are two precepts of charity, the love of God and the love of neighbor, and that if there are not at least two people, charity cannot exist.  
... The Lord sends his disciples two-by-two to preach, to show us without words that he who has no charity for the neighbor must in no way assume the office of preacher."





## Biblical Models of Collaboration

- The first reason for being sent two-by-two is to *show* the Gospel by their mutual love that the kingdom of God has come.
  - Some of the apostles, like Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector, shouldn't have gotten along!
- Their joint mission showed the familial nature of the Church
  - Jesus had come to form a family of those who hear the word of God and observe it (Lk 8:21)
  - “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20).
  - It's part of the revelation of the re-creation. St. Ambrose says it hearkens back to the pairs entering the Ark, which foretold “the mystery of the Church.” Almost all of the prophets went out alone. The New Covenant proclamation is different.





## Biblical Models of Collaboration

- There was greater witness through their joint proclamation
  - In Biblical times, there was a tradition of “two witnesses” to give reliable testimony (Deut 9:5). The apostles’ proclamation would be able to be more effective.
- There would be greater mutual support in the Mission
  - Eccl 4:9: “Two are better than one. ... If the one falls, the other will lift up his companion. Woe to the solitary man! For if he should fall, he has no one to lift him up.”
  - Part of this support is accountability. We are less likely to succumb to temptations when someone is with us. The other’s example and fraternal correction can strengthen us
  - It would help prevent apostolic loneliness.





# Biblical Models of Collaboration

- St. Paul lived this mystery of radical communion and collaboration with his fellow apostles as well as with lay people.
- We see him collaborate with Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Luke, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Prisca and Aquila, Philemon, Onesimus, Epaphroditus, Phoebe, Urbanus, and Tertius, all of whom he calls “co-workers.”
- St. Paul viewed the sharing of the Gospel as a *synergos*, a joint work.
  - He discovered the unity of the Church at his conversion at the Damascus gates in Jesus’ question.
  - He wrote to the Corinthians at length about the unity and diversity of the Church as a Mystical Body and how each organ has a manifestation of the spirit for the communion good.
  - That unity is brought about by Baptism and strengthened by the Eucharist.





## Challenges to Collaboration

- Priestly communion and collaboration, essential to priestly identity and mission in any age but particularly important as we confront the challenges today of proclaiming the Gospel in the US, requires virtue and cooperation with the Holy Spirit.
- The devil is the great divider and wants to rupture the radical communion of priests with God, their bishops, fellow priests and the Church. He wants isolation and priestly isolation is a means.
- In an age of consumerism and affinity, the Church can resemble ancient Corinth with people identifying with Paul, Cephas and Apollos rather than with Christ. As faithful travel, they often don't find a universal or catholic experience of our faith. This is a harm to communion.
- There are several things that can frustrate priestly communion and collaboration and foment disunity and division.



## Sources of Priestly Disunity

- Priestly identity — Some focus too much on worship or on service rather than unite love of God and neighbor.
- Theology — The 2021 SACP asked priests about seven questions all considered sinful in the Catechism: abortion, suicide, IVF, nonmarital sex, masturbation, homosexual sex and birth control by married couples. The results showed: Only 72% thought abortion was always wrong, 61% suicide, 58% same-sex sex, 49% IVF, 42% masturbation, and 39% birth control. Only 30% thought that all seven actions were always sinful; 18% thought none of them was always a sin. Other areas of theological division: migration, poor, death penalty, just war, nuclear weapons, guns, worthiness to receive holy communion, sin, forgiveness, the ordination of women, salvation outside the Church, heaven, hell, purgatory.

**Table 2. Are These Actions Sins?**

Always	Often
61.0	28.3
72.2	23.7
39.2	27.0
49.2	18.1
57.6	21.7
61.0	21.9
41.8	24.4



## Sources of Priestly Disunity

- Pastorally — We can have different priorities for our parish. We can be divided in terms of how we try to proclaim the truth in charity; some are conflict-averse, others are confrontational.
- Liturgically — Priests are divided not just on conspicuous things like attitude toward the TLM or the orientation of the altar, but also on the purpose and length of the homily, duration of the Mass, Eucharistic prayers used, style of vestments, colors for funerals, where to place the tabernacle and baptismal font, Church architecture and liturgical art, liturgical music selections, liturgical instruments, singing of the Mass, use of incense, Mass on days off and more, frequency of confession, attitude to anointing calls, etc.
- Work ethic — Some priests are high energy workaholics. Others are low energy and others take a lot of time off. Living with either can be difficult for collaborators.





## Sources of Priestly Disunity

- Rectory living — Some spent a lot of effort and parish resources on the rectory; others let it fall into disrepair and become a dump. Some hire cooks and housekeepers; others have no food in the fridge. Some have a stocked bar, others never drink. Some are messy; others OCD. Some live in the common rooms; others close their doors during the day.
- Collaboration — Some hunger for collaboration, others believe they work better alone.
- Politics — There can be disagreement about what issues to be prioritized, how we should guide our people in terms of the moral dimension of their political choices, others are strongly partisan. Ecclesiastical politics can likewise divide.



## Sources of Priestly Disunity

- Spiritual, Moral and Human Formation Issues — Sometimes priests, sadly, can be living double lives. Some aren't men of personal prayer. Some nurse resentment. Others have serious issues with anger, envy, pride, sloth, even greed, lust and gluttony. Others struggle to forgive.
- These are all issues that can divide priests from each other and impede effective collaboration.
- In some cases, there are simple disagreements about priorities and pastoral preferences and practical wisdom. In other cases, one is clearly right and the other wrong.
- As we look at the need for greater collaboration, we need to acknowledge these differences, put in the sometime arduous effort to work through them, and, for serious things, ask for help and receive it in a good spirit.



## Others Challenges to Collaboration

- Getting out of the old wineskins — Many of us have been trained in ecclesiastical settings that did not prioritize genuine teamwork and collaboration. Some of us have been in assignments as parochial vicars we've simply endured waiting to become pastor to adjust things to our priorities, preferences and pastoral wisdom. It's led many priests to prefer being, living and working alone.
- Reluctance for greater accountability — Sometimes we resist being accountable to each other in terms of the fruits of our labors, days off and vacation time, how we steward and spend the resources the people entrust to us, even how much we pray, treat our people, offer the sacraments, etc. We have gotten used to pastoral subjectivity. We like being in charge and in control. Collaboration can stretch us and be a source of frustration.
- The necessity of personal and pastoral conversion





## What We Have Going For Us

- While there are challenges, there are, too, many things we have and can do to strengthen our unity.
- Trust in God and in his work to remedy our weaknesses.
- Trust in Jesus' prayer for unity on the night of the ordination of the first priests, so that priests' unity can catalyze ecclesial unity.
- Trust in our vocation and in the priestly calling of our brothers. The Lord has not left us alone in the noonday sun!
- Trust in the vocation and grace of office of bishops.
- Trust in the gifts of the Holy Spirit working through our lay collaborators.
- A focus on Church history and how the Holy Spirit has done marvels.
- A confidence in the power of Jesus' work in the Eucharist, which makes the Church. The Mass is an efficacious sign of unity. A greater focus on the Eucharist during the Revival can help us rejoice in what we have rather than focus disproportionately on what we lack.







## Two Final Thoughts

- On Sunday, the priest with the just reputation for being the best pastor in my Diocese of Fall River — having turned around four different parishes, making them hubs of perpetual adoration, community and charity throughout the community — retired, just short of 80, from his parish on Cape Cod.
- A friend of mine sent me an audio recording of his powerful homily in which, with gratitude to God, in the midst of many concelebrants, he reflected on the meaning of the priestly vocation and what it means to be a shepherd and spiritual father today.
- He said, “The truly faithful priest never allows his ministry to become a cult of personality. This isn’t your Church. This isn’t my Church. This is Christ’s Church. He is the head of the Church and we are merely caretakers of it for the short time we have on earth.”





## Two Final Thoughts

- Yesterday was the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my priestly ordination. Anniversaries are always great days of gratitude to the Lord for the gift and mystery of the priesthood as well as days of conversion and recommitment. I've always found the *Collect for the Mass for the Priest Himself on the Anniversary of his Ordination* quite powerful, and I'd like to use it to finish our prayer together at the beginning of this Missionary Renewal Assembly:

“Holy Father,  
who by no merit of my own,  
chose me for communion with the eternal priesthood of your Christ  
and for the ministry of your Church,  
grant that I may be an ardent yet gentle preacher of the Gospel  
and a faithful steward of your mysteries.”





## Questions for Discussion

- What can we learn from the apostolic collaboration in the apostles' first missionary journeys that can inform our priestly communion and collaboration in unleashing the Gospel?
- How are we being called to minister and to live differently in these new "apostolic times"? What formation do we need to respond effectively to the rapid secularization of culture?
- How do we respond more supernaturally to the ecclesial and vocational challenges of the present moment? How do we give witness to those who ask us for a reason for our hope?
- What forms of missionary conversion are necessary among the faithful in order to make Families of Parishes thrive as launching pads for the new evangelization?



# For More

- If you would like to have a copy of these slides or to have access to this Zoom recording, please go to **CatholicPreaching.com** and access them on in the section entitled “Most Recent Talks.”

**Thank you for the privilege of speaking to you  
Oremus pro ívicem!**



The screenshot shows the homepage of the Catholic Preaching website. At the top left is the logo with a cross and the text "Catholic Preaching" and "Fr. Roger J. Landry, Bishop of Fall River". To the right is a small portrait of Fr. Landry. Below the logo is a navigation menu with links: Home, Homilies, Articles, Plan of Life Book, Retreats, Teaching, Biography, and Search Q. The main content area features a "Welcome!" section with a large image of Fr. Landry speaking at a microphone. The text in the welcome section reads: "I warmly welcome you to this website, put together at the insistence and with the assistance of friends. During my diaconal ordination, Cardinal Edmund Szoka gave me the following instruction from the Ordination Rite as together we gripped the Book of the Gospels: 'Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read. Teach what you believe. Practice what you teach.' Those words have never lost their resonance. Since that day -- October 8, 1998 -- I have tried to live up to that commission to be a 'herald of the Gospel,' by striving to teach what the Church believes, to practice what I preach to others, and to spread with joy and enthusiasm the truth Christ has entrusted to His church -- in and out of season, in and out of the pulpit. This website is a chronicle of those attempts. You may also follow postings of articles, homilies and teachings on Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. You can also subscribe to the podcast of daily homilies, lectures and talks through Apple Podcasts and Google Podcasts. It constitutes the 'five loaves and two fish' (or even less!) that I have placed into the hands of the Lord as an attempt to feed a hungry crowd, confident that, if He wishes, He can multiply and supplement that meager offering to nourish many more (Jn 6:1-14). In Christ, Fr. Roger J. Landry". Below the welcome section are three columns of "Most Recent" items: Homilies, Articles, and Talks, each with a list of recent content and dates.