

Staying Strong in the Priestly Vocation and Strengthening Our Brethren



Fr. Roger J. Landry • Napa Institute Shepherds Circle
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Shepherds' Circle

- Shepherds' Circle is meant to bring young priests together to be strengthened in their priestly vocation, commitment and fraternity.
- It also hopes to strengthen them to strengthen their brother priests and presbyterates.
- One area where Shepherds' Circle aims to be helpful is with regard to priests who, because of struggles and temptations, may be wavering in their commitment or vulnerable to giving up on their priestly vocation.



Priests Vulnerable to Leaving

- In several U.S. dioceses, there have been a recent wave of younger priests leaving the active ministry.
- Surveys have shown that one percent of priests in active ministry are intending to leave the priesthood and another 4-5 percent say that they are probably going to leave. That means about one out of every 20 priests is quite vulnerable to giving up on his vocation.
- Many other priests are struggling with the issues that have led some priests seriously to consider leaving. In 2020, six percent said they were “dissatisfied” and 13 percent “very dissatisfied” with priestly life (Latinos are 37 percent dissatisfied or very dissatisfied). 20 percent said that they would not enter the priesthood anew if given the choice.



Priests Vulnerable to Leaving

- In this talk, we will examine:
 - The most common reasons given as to why priests have left the active ministry or considering them.
 - In response to some of the principal factors, some means the Lord seeks to strengthen us and brother priests in our vocation.
 - What we might be able to do not just individually but through Shepherds' Circle to try to help the Lord, the Church, and our Bishops strengthen our brothers who may be under serious temptation to let go of the plough.





Studies on Priestly Health

- I will be synthesizing the results of a few major studies on priests, particularly young priests.
- Dean R. Hoge's 2002 *The First Five Years of the Priesthood: A Study of Newly Ordained Catholic Priests*, analyzing data collected from priests ordained from 1995-1999.
- CARA's 2020 *Enter By the Narrow Gate: Satisfaction and Challenges Among Recently Ordained Priests*, focusing on areas of satisfaction in priestly life, problems being encountered, reasons why they and others have considered leaving the priesthood, with 54 percent of priests 35 and older than 35 and 46 percent 34 and younger.
- CUA's The Catholic Project's 2022 National Study of Catholic Priests, examining the state of the Catholic priesthood today in the US, 20 years after the Dallas Charter.



Reasons Priests Consider Leaving

- Loneliness. A sense of isolation and a general lack of connectedness
- Struggles with living a chaste celibate life.
- Discouragement from multiple sources
- Disenchantment and dissatisfaction with Church leadership — with Pope/Vatican, with their ordinary and bishops in general, with diocesan chanceries.
- Difficulties with pastors, other priests in their assignment, lay staff and parishioners.
- Rectory living — living with the “boss,” lack of privacy, sometimes situations of corruption.



Reasons Priests Consider Leaving

- Difficulty transitioning from supportive environment of the seminary to the diocesan context in which one can feel on his own.
- A lack of expressed appreciation from several expected places.
- Lack of support and welcome from their brother priests in the presbyterate. The difficulty of theological polarization, lack of shared pastoral priorities and vision. The lack of fraternity. Questions about whether some of their brother priests are believers and good men.
- Overwhelming workload and the stress dealing with it, leading to a sense of burnout. Sense of impossibility to live up to what they think are unrealistic demands. Not helped to set realistic limits as they slide from exhaustion to the depression of burnout. (CUA study showed 45 percent reported at least one symptom of ministry burnout, and nine percent show severe burnout. It's particularly acute among young priests.)



Reasons Priests Consider Leaving

- Heavy-handed treatment by Church authorities.
- They feel left out of diocesan decision-making on things that impact them and their people (pastoral planning, assignments, etc.)
- They believe they're not prepared for various aspects of their mission: administration, personnel, the multi-tasking needed, different languages. Difficulties maintaining spiritual life because of workload. Feel guilty taking any time of.
- Tension and discomfort defending certain Church teachings
- The impact of cultural factors like lack of commitment in society

Priests and Their Bishops

- 82 percent of priests stated that they regularly fear being falsely accused of sexual abuse. Compounding their fear is the concern of many that if they are falsely accused, they would be treated as guilty until proven innocent and left without support. 64 percent of diocesan priests think that they would not be provided with sufficient resources by their diocese and 49 percent think they would not be supported by their bishop.
- 51 percent of priests say that they don't have confidence in their own diocesan bishop and 76 percent don't have confidence in the U.S. Bishops in general. It is logical that priests who do not believe that their bishops would support them and treat them justly if they were falsely accused of sexually abusing children would not have high confidence in their bishops.



Priests and Their Bishops


- The disconnect between bishops and their priests was highlighted in the Survey by the massive disparity in the way priests regard their bishops and bishops think they're regarded. Whereas 73 percent of bishops view priests as their brothers, only 28 percent of priests say that the bishops treat them that way. Similar discrepancies happen relative to bishops' behaving as spiritual fathers (70 to 28), co-workers (73 to 32), and servants (68 to 34). Priests mainly regard their bishops as administrators or CEOs who treat them as employees (55 percent), while only 44 percent of bishops identify as such.



Priests and Their Bishops

- The biggest disconnect, however, between the way bishops view themselves versus the way their priests regard them is over whether bishops could be counted on to help one of their priests who was struggling. 90 percent of bishops said that they would be there for such a priest, but only 36 percent of priests thought their bishop would.
- It is nothing short of shocking that 30 percent of bishops don't look at themselves as spiritual fathers to their priests, or 27 percent as their brothers, or 27 percent as their co-workers.
- It's more staggering that ten percent of bishops admit they would not be there for priests who were struggling.





Responding to the Crisis of Priestly Loneliness

- The top factor in these surveys is that priests leave, or are tempted to leave, because of a sense of loneliness and isolation.
- There are lots of factors from their living situation, to the lack of priestly fraternity, to insufficient support structures from their bishop and diocesan leadership, to suffering from differing theological, pastoral or liturgical visions, to the difficulty in establishing new friendships and connections. These all need to be considered and addressed.
- But I'd like to focus on what I think is the biggest cause, which is not normally studied in these surveys.

Responding to the Crisis of Priestly Loneliness

- *In Sinu Iesu: When Heart Speaks to Heart – The Journal of a Priest at Prayer*, was published in 2017 by Angelico Press. It contains the fruit of the prayer and what to me seems the credible private revelations given to an anonymous Benedictine priest from October 3, 2007 through June 2, 2016. In it, the priest humbly and plausibly claims to have regularly heard Jesus and Mary speaking to him in prayer, describing how Jesus desires to have an intimate heart-to-heart relationship with all his beloved disciples, but especially his priests.
- Among many other things, Jesus communicates to his interlocutor the source of the priestly scandals and what God is asking the clergy and all the faithful to do in response.



Responding to the Crisis of Priestly Loneliness

- “All of heaven weeps over the sins of my priests,” Jesus states, which are a “grievous affront to my own priesthood,” adding, “Every time a priest sins, he sins directly against me and against the most Holy Eucharist toward which his whole being is ordered. When a priest approaches my altar laden with sins that have not been confessed or for which he has not repented, my angels look on with horror, my mother grieves, and I am again wounded in my hands and my feet and in my heart.”



Responding to the Crisis of Priestly Loneliness

- Jesus' desire, however, is not to condemn but to convert:
- “I am about to renew the priesthood of my Church in holiness. I am very close to cleansing my priests of the impurities that defile them. Soon, very soon, I will pour out graces of spiritual healing upon all my priests. I will separate those who will accept the gift of my divine friendship from those who will harden their hearts against me.” He emphasizes about the latter what we now all know: “Those who do not live in my friendship betray me and impede my work. They detract from the beauty of holiness that I would see shine in my Church.”



Responding to the Crisis of Priestly Loneliness

- The root of priestly sins, Jesus says, is the “loneliness” that comes from a lack of friendship with him. Jesus desires to be the friend each priest needs, “the Friend with whom they can share everything, the Friend to whom they can tell everything, the Friend who will weep over their sins without, for a moment, ceasing to love them.”
- He laments, “If priests lived in my friendship, how different my Church would be! ... Many of the sufferings and hardships experienced with my Church at the hands of her ministers, my priests, would not exist.” The lack of “experiential knowledge of my friendship and love,” Jesus continues, “is the root of the evil that eats away at the priesthood from within.”



Responding to the Crisis of Priestly Loneliness

- This lack of friendship, he says, is seen in the “coldness and indifference” with which priests approach Jesus in the Eucharist. “There are priests who go into my church only when they have a function to perform.” They receive little from their daily communion “because they expect so little.” He adds sorrowfully, “Even after two thousand years of Eucharistic presence in my Church, I remain unknown, forgotten, forsaken, and **treated like a thing to be kept here or there.**” Priests, moreover, “keep themselves apart from me. Their lives are compartmentalized. They treat with me only when duty obliges them to do so.” And because of loneliness, they look for love “in other places and in creatures unworthy of the undivided love of their consecrated hearts,” as they try to “fill the emptiness within with vain pursuits, with lust, with possessions, with food and drink.”



Responding to the Crisis of Priestly Loneliness

- What's the remedy? "The sins of my priests call for reparation," Jesus declares. The particular reparation he implores is Eucharistic adoration. "The renewal of my priesthood in the Church will proceed from a great return to the adoration of my real presence in this the Sacrament of my love. ... This is the remedy for the evil that has so disfigured my holy priesthood in the Church." He underlines, "I want priest adorers and repairers," "priests who will adore for priests who do not adore, priests who will make reparation for priests who do not make reparation for themselves or for others." He says that priests "will be renewed in holiness and purity when they begin to seek me out in the Sacrament of my love," meaning the Eucharist.



Responding to the Crisis of Priestly Loneliness

- Time with Christ in prayerful adoration is meant to develop that friendship that is the source of true priestly life. **“The secret of priestly holiness,”** Jesus states, is **“a life of friendship with me, a ‘yes’ renewed each day to the gift of divine friendship that I offer each priest.”**
- This is where priests learn to identify **“with all my interests, with all my sorrows, with all that offends me, and ... with my burning zeal for the glory of my Father and for the holiness of all my people.”** He adds, **“All the rest is secondary.”**
- **“There has never been in all of history a single priest whom I have not destined for a great holiness,”** Jesus says. **“A holy priest is quite simply one who allows me to live in him,”** and for this reason, **“I offer them my presence in the Eucharist. Yes, this is the great secret of priestly holiness.”**





Responding to the Issues of Priestly Chaste Celibacy

- The second major factor is difficult for some priests in living happily their chaste celibacy.
- If they lack *philia* — with friends, with brother priests — it's easy to give into the temptation to think that what they lack is *eros*.
- Similarly, if they do not sense in prayer the Lord's *agape* and *philia*, it's harder for them to love him back and to love with him the Church.
- St. John Paul II: "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it" (RH 10).



Responding to the Issues of Priestly Chaste Celibacy

- We need a formation (before, in and after seminary) that helps address in a healthy way basic human desires and needs:
 - For a sense of belonging
 - To love and be loved (*philia, agape*)
 - For basic esteem and approval
 - To reaffirm our masculine and fatherly identity
 - To feel needed
 - To be challenged to mature
 - To have someone and something to live for
 - To receive constructive feedback
 - To have intimate friendships where we can share our profound experiences and feelings.
 - To sense a deeply shared common mission
 - To experience our generativity
 - To receive dependable moral support
 - To experience joy and pleasure

Responding to the Issues of Priestly Chaste Celibacy

- Better preparation for spiritual fatherhood and to help people look at others from the perspective of a good and loving father. Every instance of lust in the heart or in the flesh involves what must be regarded at the spiritual level as a form of incest. Few are ever attracted to incest and seeing things through the lens of spiritual fatherhood can help thwart temptations.
- Better preparation to help priests handle the situation of falling in love with someone. We can't help being attracted to someone attractive — any more than a husband to someone other than his wife — but we do have freedom in how we respond in accordance with our previous loves and commitments. Honesty in admitting our attractions to God, ourselves and our directors, and prudence in avoiding situations where we're vulnerable to infidelity in the heart or flesh.
- Greater help to fight the temptation to pornography when alone and isolated.



Responding to the Panoply of Other Issues


- In terms of handling the many other issues, like discouragement, disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the Church, difficulties with pastors and staff and rectory living, the transition from seminary and the need for support, appreciation, and priestly fraternity, to deal with the workload and prevent burnout, to handle heavy-handed treatment, the frustrations of being left out of important decision-making, to get help prioritizing our spiritual life in the midst of much to do, to get advice about aspects of priestly life for which we might not have been prepared, as well as encouragement with regard to representing the Church's teaching faithfully in areas that might give discomfort, there's a need for spiritual direction.
- A story from an interaction with a midwestern clergy director from 2012.
- The 2020 CARA study documented that 21 percent of priests say they receive no spiritual direction at all. Many more priests don't receive spiritual direction regularly.



Responding to the Panoply of Other Issues

- Most young priests leave seminary intending to have a spiritual director, finding one and starting. Eventually, however, directors are transferred, priests are transferred, and many priests cease regularly receiving spiritual direction.
- Many likewise get out of the habit of going to confession regularly.
- St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “He who constitutes himself his own director becomes the disciple of a fool. ... It is easier and safer for me to command many others than myself alone.”





Responding to the Panoply of Other Issues

- The need to prioritize spiritual direction for the sake of accountability, continued growth, nipping problems in the bud.
- Congregation for Clergy 2011: “The reality of the ministry demands that the priest personally receive spiritual direction, seeking it out and following it with fidelity, so as to be better able to direct others:
- *Presbyterorum Ordinis*: “In order to contribute to the improvement of their spirituality it is necessary that they themselves practice spiritual direction. By placing the formation of their souls in the hands of a wise fellow-member, they will enlighten the conscience, from the first steps in the ministry, and realize the importance of not walking alone along the paths of spiritual life and pastoral duties.”
- Pope Benedict (2011): Everyone, in fact, especially those who have heeded the divine call to follow Christ closely, needs to be accompanied personally by a guide reliable in doctrine and expert in the things of God, who can help people to watch out for facile forms of subjectivism, making available their own knowledge and experience lived in the following of Jesus. It is a matter of establishing the same personal relationship that the Lord had with his disciples, the special bond with which he led them, following behind him, to embrace the Father’s will, namely, to embrace the Cross.”

Responding to the Panoply of Other Issues

- Nowadays, technology makes spiritual direction easier for those far away from good candidates as directors: phone, Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, etc. The good to the soul is worth the small risk of electronic eavesdropping: it's not confession.
- But considering the needs many of our brothers have, not to mention those discerning vocations and striving to align their life to life in Christ according to the Holy Spirit, good shepherds need to prepare to give spiritual direction. There's a huge need.
- Pope Benedict 2006 to priests in Warsaw: "The faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter between man and God. The priest is not asked to be an expert in economics, construction or politics. He is expected to be an expert in the spiritual life. With this end in view, when a young priest takes his first steps, he needs to be able to refer to an experienced teacher who will help him not to lose his way among the many ideas put forward by the culture of the moment."



Responding to the Panoply of Other Issues

- St. Margaret Mary Alacoque about St. Claude de la Colombière: “His gift is to lead souls to God.”
- There’s a need especially to encourage young priests to receive spiritual direction and to be ready to guide them, formally or informally, and to help them avail themselves of things to help them grow in the priestly life, from retreats and recollections, to good spiritual reading, to other opportunities for solid continuing priestly formation.
- DLMP 54: *Spiritual Direction for the Priest and for the Others* — Along with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the priest must also exercise the ministry of spiritual direction. ... The generous and active attitude of priests in practicing it also constitutes an important occasion for identifying and sustaining the vocations to the priesthood and to the various forms of consecrated life.”





Conclusion

- The image used for this presentation is Giotto's famous *Navicella*, put into mosaic in the vestibule of St. Peter's Basilica.
- If Peter, representing not just his successors the popes but his brother priests, were able to do the miraculous when he kept his eyes on the Lord, he can also begin to sink, drown and die if he takes his eyes off the Lord.
- Christ rescues Peter when he cries out for help, embraces him, and takes him back into the boat and everything calms down.
- For priests who have taken their eyes off Christ or are sinking, humble crying out for Christ's help is the way back, and good shepherds in Christ's person need to assist.



Welcome!

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



Most Recent Homilies

God's Comfort and the Conversion Required to Receive It, Second Sunday of Advent (B), December 6, 2020

Accepting, Following and Announcing Jesus without Offense, Second Sunday of Advent (EF), December 6, 2020

Walking the Way of the Kingdom Jesus Indicates, First Saturday of Advent, December 5, 2020

Running to Meet Our Light, Strength and Salvation, First Friday of Advent, December 4, 2020

Listening to and Acting on the Long Awaited One's Words, First Thursday of Advent, December 3, 2020

Going Hungry to Meet Christ in a Three-Fold Banquet, First Wednesday of Advent, December 2, 2020

Childlike Eyes to See, First Tuesday of Advent, December 1, 2020

Singing the Song of the Lamb, 34th Wednesday (III), November 25, 2020

Turning to the Lord Who Comes to Judge the Earth, 34th Tuesday (II), November 24, 2020

Following the King and Lamb Wherever He Goes, 34th Monday (I), November 23, 2020

Most Recent Articles

Our Duty and Salvation, The Anchor, November 27, 2020

Living the Reality of the Kingdom of Christ, National Catholic Register, November 19, 2020

The Knights Our Age Needs, The Anchor, November 13, 2020

Remembering Andrew Walther, November 7, 2020

Just a Parish Priest, The Anchor, October 30, 2020

Coming to Know the Original Three-Dimensional Carlo Acutis, The Anchor, October 16, 2020

A Good Shepherd Full of Christian and Priestly Virtues, The Pilot, October 5, 2020

Returning to the Sacrament of Divine Love, The Anchor, September 18, 2020

The Pastoral Malpractice of Liturgical Abuse, The Anchor, September 4, 2020

The Chosen, The Anchor, August 21, 2020

Most Recent Talks

Receiving the Lord Jesus as Mary and Joseph, Advent Day of Recollection for the Leonine Forum, December 5, 2020

Novena in Preparation for the Immaculate Conception, Leonine Forum, November 28 to December 8, 2020

Blessed Michael McGivney and the Call to Holiness, McGivney Festival Young Adult Prayer Vigil, October 31, 2020

Apprenticeship in the Art of Living, Duc in Altum Virtual Schools Summit, October 28-30, 2020

Preaching on Marital Love and Accompanying Couples toward the Full Embrace of the Church's Teaching, Diocese of Gary Clergy Convocation, October 20, 2020

The Divorced and Remarried, Challenges and Triumphs in Pastoral Care, Diocese of Gary Clergy Convocation, October 20, 2020

The Heart of the New Evangelization: Meeting, Knowing and Loving Jesus Back, New Zealand Evangelion's In his Name Virtual Conference, October 10-11, 2020

Christian Anthropology: The Human Person in the Modern World, Leonine Forum Opening Lecture, October 8, 2020

Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching, UNSRC Catholic Club, August 27, 2020

Making Better Confessions, Catholic Information Conference, July 24, 2020

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Discussion

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