

## The Priesthood

I recently participated in the ordination of several priests. As always, it was a joyful occasion. It reminded me of the happiness of my own ordination some forty-five years ago.

Many priests celebrate the anniversary of their ordination in May or June. It is an appropriate time to reflect on this blessing.

The Second Vatican Council attempted to emphasize the uniqueness of the priesthood of Jesus and of others' share in it by favouring the biblical term "presbyter" for those who make present the fruits of the priestly ministry of Jesus—the one and only high priest of Christian faith. But "priest" stuck.

"Priest" is derived from the Latin "presbyter" via German and Old English. Both mean "elder." In Judaism of biblical times, the priest sacrificed sin offerings on the altar and led worship liturgy. In the Western and Eastern Church, priests continue to re-present in the Mass or Divine Liturgy the sacrifice of Christ for the atonement of our sins. As pastor, the priest feeds God's people His precious Word, in both Scripture and the Eucharist.

Professor Richard Nelson wrote, "at its heart, the biblical priestly office was about community. Priesthood existed for the sake of the community's safety and well-being, social cohesion, and balance, as well as for its faithfulness and standing before God. Priests lived and worked at the intersection of Israel's vertical community with the Lord and its horizontal community with itself."

Priests remain servants of the People of God through the high and low points of human existence: birth and death, marriage and sickness, reconciliation and communion, joy and sorrow. Priests laugh and they cry. They are often bone-weary and occasionally overflow with exhilaration.

They are leaders and savants. They are sinners and saved. Priests are the anointed of God. They are vehicles of the Holy Spirit. At the Last Supper, Jesus chose to call the Apostles, His future presbyter-priests, His "friends."

Today's world is troubling. The economic and relational stabilities of many of our parishioners are threatened. Priests encourage the anxious to put their confidence in God's Providence, the Heavenly Father's loving care for them. Priests also call forth, from the faithful who can assist, a generous response to benefit those constrained by changing financial or emotional landscapes.

If you had asked men ordained in 1957 or 1967—celebrating diamond or golden jubilees this year—what it meant then to be a priest, they would likely have mentioned being dispensers of the graces of the sacraments. Perhaps they would have mentioned the privilege of celebrating Mass and the power entrusted to them

to forgive sins in confession. They would have described their commitment to celibacy as both a gift and a challenge, a charism from God that freed them to dedicate themselves totally to His people.

Today, these same priests and those ordained after them in 1992—and celebrating their silver jubilee of ordination this year—might have a different perspective. They may speak of the blessings of God’s reconciling love and their trust in Jesus Christ. They may see themselves as “earthen vessels, clay jars” unworthy but chosen by God to serve in the ministry of reconciliation that belongs to Him, not them.

All the jubilarians know that they have reaped what others have sown. Now others will reap what they have sown. As they look back on their priestly lives, they are full of gratitude. They echo St. Paul’s prayer, when he implored that God’s grace, as it extends to ever more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Such is the joy of the Catholic priesthood in every age.