

**SECULAR PRIESTHOOD:  
HOLINESS THROUGH  
BELONGING**

## Holiness through belonging

All are called to holiness

The Second Vatican Council reminded us that everyone is called to a life that is holy. It also reminded us that this does not mean being perfect. Rather it means tending to perfection, the perfection of love.

The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful, And so it must be. It is expressed by individuals who, each in his or her own state of life, *tend to the perfection of love*.

– Lumen Gentium, n.39

Any of us can begin to be holy, simply by taking a step in the direction of love from where we are now. Furthermore, we are not the initiators of holiness, any more than we are the initiators of love. God is the creator, the source of life. Love is our response to God's constant initiative; it is our sharing in the very being of God. We do this in various ways, according to our gifts of nature and of grace.

There are varieties of *gifts* but the same Spirit;  
there are varieties of *ministries* but the same Lord;  
there are varieties of *ways of exercising power*  
but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

– 1Corinthians 12:4-7

The following diagram is an attempt to express the Trinitarian source of our life. The gift we are and the gifts we have come from the Spirit of love that binds Jesus to God. This gift is the source of all the ways in which we share in Jesus' mission by being instruments of God's love to others. Paul reminds us, too, not to underestimate the power of our love-ministry. The Spirit's gifts are given with a view to the carrying out of the mission of Christ, and are effective because empowered by the creative energy of God the Father.



## ‘Secular’ Priesthood - a call to holiness

I am using the word ‘secular’ in its richest sense, for one of the special strengths of the secular priest is precisely that he is in and for the world. He knows it. His experience informs his insights which in turn contribute to pastoral decisions that are informed by his belonging to people in their everyday lives. This ‘unspectacular matter-of-factness’ (Tony Philpot), this ‘street-wise’ quality of his ministry and life is the seed-bed for special redemptive love. The Congregation for the Clergy writes:

In our times, as always in the Church, heralds of the Gospel are needed who are expert in humanity, profoundly knowing the heart of contemporary man, who share his joys and hopes, his fears and sorrows, and at the same time who are contemplatives, in love with God.

– PTCM, page 17

For such a calling to be truly graced, the priest’s experience, insight and decisions must be informed by his intimate communion with Christ. Two specially important qualities in today’s world are chastity of heart and simplicity of lifestyle. A priest is called to be chaste like Jesus. A priest can offer his real self to others only insofar as he continues to grow in emotional maturity and relates to people in a sexually responsible way, such that he grows in his capacity to truly be himself. Along with this comes a generosity of spirit whereby the priest, in offering himself in love, does so in a way that does not bind them to him but makes him a sacrament of the love of Christ, freeing them to respond to the love which God is offering them through the mediation of the priest.

Jesus spoke of the blessedness of the ‘poor’, that is to say, of those who recognised their need and who looked to God in trust. Priests are called also to share this virtue with Jesus:

A truly poor priest is indeed a specific sign of separation from, disavowal of and non-submission to the tyranny of a contemporary world which puts all its trust in money and in material security.

– PDV, n.29

Priests, as men whose ‘portion and inheritance’ (Numbers 18:20) is the Lord, ought to use temporal goods only for those purposes to which the teaching of Christ and the direction of the Church allow them to be devoted ... They are not to regard an ecclesiastical office as a source of profit, and are not to spend the income accruing from it for increasing their own private fortunes ... Priests are invited to embrace voluntary poverty. By it they become more clearly conformed to Christ and more ready to devote themselves to their sacred ministry ... More than the rest of Christ’s disciples they are to put aside all appearance of vanity in their surroundings. They are to arrange their house in such a way that it never appears unapproachable to anyone and that nobody, even the humblest, is ever afraid to visit it.

– PO, n.17

A Prayer

Let us conclude this reflection with the prayer taken from the Fifth Sunday of Lent:

Father in heaven,  
the love of your Son led him to accept the suffering of the cross  
in order that his brothers and sisters might glory in new life.  
Change our selfishness into self-giving.  
Help us to embrace the world which you have given us,  
that we may transform the darkness of its pain into the life and joy of Easter.