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**SPIRITUALITY  
OF THE DIOCESAN PRIEST**

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## SPIRITUALITY OF THE DIOCESAN PRIEST

**Jose Parappully SDB**

In his exploration of the spirituality of the diocesan priest American priest scholar and seminary rector Donald Cozzens observes:

At the heart of any discussion of the quality of priestly ministry is the authenticity and maturity of the priest's spirituality. It remains the fundamental issue undergirding his preaching, presiding, pastoral care, facilitating, and administering. While pastoral skills can be taught, they remain techniques unless rooted in a vibrant spiritual life. (Cozzens, 1997, p. 42).

Spirituality is rooted in a person's basic attitude toward life, the whole of life, and not simply the cultic dimension of life. It includes all the behaviours that flow from that attitude. As such it encompasses the whole of one's life as lived out in the existential realities of one's particular life situation. The basic attitude and the behaviours that flow from it are often shaped and coloured by the awareness of and faith in the transcendent—a reality beyond oneself and the visible world that gives meaning, significance and direction to one's existence. When this awareness of the transcendent pervades the whole of one's life and influences attitudes and behaviour one is spiritual. In this sense, spirituality can simply be described as the way one lives one's life as related to the transcendent (see Parappully, 2004).

The nature of one's spirituality is rooted and shaped by one's identity. The identity of the diocesan priest is that he is the chosen mediator in the interaction of God and the human person. He stands at the intersection of the human and the divine. His presence at this juncture is determinative of his

spirituality. This identity as mediator is coloured by his two major functions—minister of Word and Sacrament (the liturgical function) and Doctor of Soul (the healing and reconciling function) in a myriad of ways. This article presents ten characteristics of the spirituality of the diocesan priest based on this identity. It also provides Scripture references and questions for reflection for each of the characteristics.

### **1. Spirituality of Caring Involvement**

Unlike that of the monk or the religious priest, the diocesan priesthood is a call to involvement in and service to the community. The diocesan priest (hence forward referred to simply as priest) cannot become holy apart from the community to which he is sent. He becomes holy within the community by ministering to it and leading it. His spirituality is rooted in a caring involvement in his community. It is in the community he serves that the priest encounters God. "A spirituality that is truly 'priestly' comes to be as a priest surrenders himself to his role in the community, ministers to it, and allows himself to be enriched and enlivened by the people he serves" (Schwartz, 1997, p. 2.).

This involvement is not just doing things for the people. The priest is called to a special relationship with the people for whom he was ordained. This relationship is at the heart of priestly identity and priestly ministry (Schwarz, 1997). Gallagher and Vandenberg (1993) observe that there must be something special going on between a priest and the faithful at a personal level. What a priest has to offer his people that no one else

has to offer is the unique relationship he can have with them as their priest. This is why it is important not to confuse being a priest with doing priestly things. Priestly activity becomes truly “priestly” to the degree it reflects a genuine commitment and bonding between priest and his people.

The priest needs to know his people—their hopes and aspirations, their fears and anxieties, their needs. It’s important for the priest to give time to his people—to listen, to console, encourage, celebrate; to be attentive to do little things in people’s lives—hurts, losses, illness, anniversaries—names. To do so, the priest has to be seen as available and approachable.

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastorem Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II (1979) highlighted the importance of this caring involvement in the priest’s spirituality. Pointing out that “an intimate bond exists between the priest’s spiritual life and the exercise of his ministry” (#24), he observed:

The spiritual life of the ministers of the New Testament should therefore be marked by this fundamental attitude of service to the People of God. (#21)

Through his daily contact with people, his sharing in their daily lives, the priest needs to develop and sharpen his human sensitivity so as to understand more clearly their needs, respond to their demands, perceive their unvoiced questions, and share the hopes and expectations, the joys and burdens which are part of life...In particular, through coming to know and share, through making his own, the human experience of suffering in its many manifestations, ... the priest can cultivate his own humanity and make it all the more genuine. (#72)

This caring involvement has to be expressed within the presbyterate itself—caring for fellow priests, through concern and assistance both spiritual and material. This fraternal solicitude is extended especially to those who for whatever reason are facing problems and difficulties, including those who have left the priestly way of life.

For reflection:

1Pet. 5, 1- 4. “*Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly...not as domineering but as examples to the flock.*”

*How much and how am I involved in the lives of the people I minister to and of my fellow priests?*

## 2. Spirituality of Meaningful Relationships

Most of the waking hours of a priest are spent in relationships—with parishioners, staff, fellow priests, bishop, civil servants. It is important that he brings to all his relationships deep respect for persons as human beings. He respects their freedom and their views. He does not boss over them or, worse still, humiliate them. He seeks to relate to people as Jesus did.

In a world torn asunder by strife and disharmony, the priest is called to build relationships by being a minister of reconciliation. He becomes a breach-mender and a bridge-builder between individuals and communities. He seeks to build community by bringing people together. Here it is very important that he is prepared to reconcile himself with those he himself estranges or distances through his words and actions.

John Paul II considered the capacity to relate to others as being specially important to the priest:

This is truly fundamental for a person who is called to be responsible for a community and to be a ‘man of communion.’ This demands that the priest is not arrogant, or quarrelsome, but affable, hospitable, sincere in his words and heart, prudent and discreet, generous and ready to serve, capable of opening himself to clear and brotherly relationships and of encouraging the same in others, and quick to understand, forgive, and console. (#43)

The priest needs to have also relationships that satisfy his own affective needs. A priest has the same basic human emotional needs as all other normal men, especially the need for acceptance, belonging, love. It is in friendship that he mostly meets these needs. It is his friendships that sustain a priest in moments of loneliness and difficulties. Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, CEO of *St. Luke’s Institute* in Maryland (USA), a residential treatment facility for priests and religious in difficulties, refers to comments from a bishop and a psychiatrist on the negative impact of priests having no close friends. The bishop of Syracuse, New York, once spoke with his presbyterate about his interviews with priests who were on the verge of leaving active ministry. He mentioned that he always asked these priests one question: “Do you have any priest friends?” The bishop said that the answer was always “No.” Rossetti once asked psychiatrist Frank Valcour about priests he sees in treatment. “Is there any one factor you see as common among them?” Valcour responded after a moment of reflection, “They have no friends” (Rossetti, 1997, p. 29).

Father Donald Cozzens also places much emphasis on the priest's need

for intimate friendships with both men and women. He observes:

What is missing for many priests, I believe, is the experience of union, the intimacy of holy communion with a few good friends. By itself, without deep and authentic human friendship, their intimacy with God made experiential through prayer, sacraments, and devotional practices leaves their spirits slightly out of balance. (quoted in Egan, 2000. #11).

The priest cultivates close relationships especially within the presbyterate. Building a support group from members of the presbyterate can be a powerful means that can sustain, encourage, inspire and guide the priest in difficult times. *Lumen Gentium* states:

In virtue of their common sacred ordination and mission, all priests are bound together in an intimate brotherhood, which should naturally and freely manifest itself in mutual aid, spiritual as well as material, pastoral as well as personal, in meetings and in a community of life, of labour, of charity. (#28)

Col. 3, 12-14.0. “*Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness...And above all these put on love...*”  
Sirach 6, 14-17: “*A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter...is a life-saving remedy...*”

*How do I treat people? Do I have some good friends, especially among fellow priests?*

### 3. Spirituality of Active-Contemplation

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago defined the priest as “bearer of the Mystery of God” and “doctor of the soul” (Bernardin, 1995, p. 10). The priest’s vocation is to reveal to people the God who has revealed himself as love and leads them to an ever more intimate contact with him. He helps his people to become a praying community. He is called to be a spiritual guide. To respond to that call and fulfil that task he has himself to be seized by that Mystery. He has to come to know God intimately. It is in prayer that he comes to know, enters deeply and is captured by that Mystery. Father Sartain’s (1994) comment is pertinent: “Any priest who dares to take responsibility in the name of God and the church without a simultaneous commitment to daily prayer will soon find that he is an empty well” (p. 682).

But his spirituality is not that of the monk. His spirituality is one of the market place. Immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, he meets God through those he encounters. He has to be aware of God’s presence, be united to him on the run, as it were, as he traverses the length and breadth of his parish ministering to his people. He needs to hear the God who speaks to him in the existential realities of his daily grind, in the moment-by-moment unfolding of his and his community’s lives. He has to make his own the words of the Alternate Opening Prayer of the Mass on the 21st Sunday of Year: “Lord God...Give your people the joy of hearing your Word in every sound...”

Such an openness to the working of God in his life is not going to be there, unless he cultivates it in quiet personal prayer. The priest has to set aside time daily for this. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the Vatican

II Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests, observes:

That they may discharge their ministry with fidelity, they should prize daily conversations with Christ the Lord in visits of personal devotion to the most Holy Eucharist. They should gladly undertake spiritual retreat and highly esteem spiritual direction. In manifold ways, especially through approved methods of mental prayer and various voluntary forms of prayer, priests should search for and earnestly beg God that Spirit of genuine adoration by which they themselves, along with the people entrusted to them can unite themselves intimately with Christ. (PO, #18)

Lk. 10, 38-42. *Martha and Mary*  
Col. 4, 2-3. “*Continue steadfastly in prayer being watchful in it with thanksgiving, and pray for us also...*”

*How much time do I devote to personal prayer? How conscious am I of God as I go about doing my ministry? How do I experience God in my ministry?*

### 4. Spirituality of Meaningful Sacramental Celebration

It is through the meaningful celebration of the sacraments for the people of God that the priest is called to holiness. In the Liturgy he nourishes his people and the Liturgy nourishes him. He brings all of his activity as “bearer of the Mystery of God” and “doctor of soul” into the Liturgy and from the celebration of the Liturgy he moves out into the daily life of parishioners to minister to them.

It is through the Sacraments that the priest mediates God for his people. He is a man who blesses, who baptizes, forgives, marries, anoints, buries and above all breaks bread at the altar. It is

through these actions that he encounters God and sanctifies himself.

From the various Sacraments, and in particular from the specific grace proper to each of them, the priest's spiritual life receives certain features. It is built up and moulded by the different characteristics and demands of each of the Sacraments as he celebrates them and experiences them (John Paul II, 1979, #26)

Because of the central place the sacraments hold in the life of the priest as the bearer of the Mystery of God and in the spiritual life of the community, it is very important that the priest gives due importance to the preparation and celebration of the sacraments. He does not reduce them to mere ritual, carried out perfunctorily, but strives to make them profound encounters with God for the participants and for himself.

Among the sacraments one to which the priest has to be specially devoted is the Eucharist. He makes it the central act of his day. He takes time to prepare for it and he takes care to celebrate it in such a way that it truly becomes a meaningful and nourishing experience of God for him and for the congregation. Vatican II highlights the significant place the Eucharist has in the life and ministry of the priest: "Priests fulfil their chief duty in the mystery of Eucharistic Sacrifice" (PO, #13).

Father Sartain's (1994) reference to the symbolic value of kissing the altar is very expressive of the meaning and value of the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist for the priest himself. The priest is the one who kisses the altar every day and in that kissing reminds himself who he is—one wedded to Christ, the church and the people of God. It is an act of public proclamation

of who he is. His kiss symbolizes his daily acceptance of his identity as mediator between God and God's people.

The priest kissing the altar each day is not only a public gesture of his identity, but a very private gesture—a personal act of affection for, of submission to, of trust in, and of intimacy with Christ whom the altar represents. (In our adapted Indian ritual, venerating the altar by touching it with our palms and bringing the palms to the forehead unfortunately removes this rich symbolism and meaning inherent in kissing the altar.)

The Eucharist is intimately linked to sexuality (see Radcliffe, 2005, ch. 5), and celibacy. At the central moment in the Eucharistic Liturgy the priest, holding the host in his hands, tells the congregation: "This is my body, given for you." We know that the "body" here refers to the body of Christ given for our salvation. However, in that gesture the priest is also saying to the people "I give *my* (the priest's own) body to you."

Giving one's body to another is a profoundly personal act. The total giving of one's body to another happens uniquely in sexual intercourse. The priest's body is given exclusively to no one woman or man as happens in sexual intercourse. His body is given to all. Thus, the priest's pronouncement of the words of consecration, "This is my body, given for you" is also a public statement, and a daily renewal, of his commitment to celibacy.

"This is my body, given for you" is also an expression of the priest's total commitment, availability to God's people. He does not give his body in sexual intimacy, but he breaks it in wholehearted service to God's people.

Heb. 5, 1-4. *“For every high priest chosen from among people is appointed to act on behalf of people in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices...”*

*How do I prepare for the Sacraments? In what spirit do I administer them?*

## **5. Spirituality of Devotion to the Word of God**

The priest is minister of the Word. His primary duty is to proclaim the Word (PO, #4). It is in his preaching that his spirituality has its roots and its clearest expression. Each day he is shaped and formed by the Word he preaches. For him, the Word, listened to with faith, is a source of spiritual life, food for prayer, light to see God’s will in the events of his life and ministry and strength to live out his vocation faithfully.

People want good preaching from their priests. In his preaching the priest must be experienced as one set on fire by the Word of God and not merely as one who knows how to quote chapter and verse. For this, the priest has to be a life-long student and lover of the Scriptures. With the Scriptures daily in hand, he welcomes the Word as Mary did and ponders it in his heart, so that he can proclaim it with power and allow it to bear fruit in his life and that of the community. “Since they are ministers of God’s Word, they should every day read and listen to that Word which they are required to teach others” (PO, #13).

In *Pastorem Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II (1979) observed that

The priest himself ought first of all to develop a great personal familiarity with the Word of God. Knowledge of its linguistic or exegetical aspects, though certainly necessary, is not enough. He needs to approach the Word with a docile and prayerful

heart, so that it may deeply penetrate his thoughts and feelings and bring about a new outlook in him—“the mind of Christ” (1Cor 2:16)—such that his words and his choices and attitudes may become ever more a reflection, a proclamation and a witness to the Gospel. (#26)

Fr. Donald Cozzens considers the call to daily preaching to be at the heart of the priest’s spirituality.

It requires, day after day, the reading of the Lectionary, prayer and reflection on the readings of the day, and the crafting of the homily itself. Taken seriously, this responsibility to preach God’s word becomes the ground and foundation of the diocesan priest’s spirituality. Conversely, the call to preach the Gospel at Sunday and daily liturgies becomes an intolerable burden to the spiritually shallow. (1992, p. 66)

The great Protestant preacher, John Wesley (in Bernardin, 1995), described his preaching this way: “I set myself on fire, and people come out and watch me burn.” Bernardin points out that “The priest...is someone who at the core of his being, has been set on fire by God and who invites others to catch the flame” (p. 12). His preaching becomes powerful and provides nourishment to the people of God to the extent he himself is set alight by the flaming God.

Lk. 2, 51: *“His mother kept all these things in her heart.”*

*What’s the importance I give to the Word of God? How much effort do I put into preparing for and giving the homily at Mass?*

## 6. Spirituality of Sustaining Faith

The grace of ordination involves the promise and assurance of God's continued support and guidance. "My grace is sufficient for you." "He who began the good work in you will bring it to completion" (Phil. 1,6)

The priest has high ideals and lofty goals; at least he starts out with them. He also lives in a world of imperfection and failure—his own, those of his co-workers, of his superiors, of the people he is called to serve, and of the Church and society at large. It is easy to fall prey to disenchantment and discouragement. As *Presbyterorum Ordinis* observes, "For the modern obstacles blocking faith, the seeming sterility of their past labours, and also the bitter loneliness they experience can lead them to the danger of becoming depressed in spirit" (#22). It is in those moments that the priest is called to remember who he is and who God is. It is only the abiding faith in the God who has called him and who he knows loves him and walks with him that can sustain the priest in the drudgeries and weariness that is part of his priestly journey.

2Cor. 4, 1. "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."

*How strong is my faith in God? How much do I rely on God?*

## 7. Spirituality of Filial Devotion to Mary

Mary of Nazareth plays a unique role in the life and ministry of every priest. She is the one who formed the Eternal Priest, Jesus Christ, who gave him flesh and blood, who sustained him with her maternal care and concern. She is a model of prayer and pastoral love, a teacher and a guide.

The priest intercedes with her to form him into the likeness of her son, and seeks her maternal protection and guidance. He contemplates and imitates her faith, her concern for the needy, and her fidelity at the hour of the cross, and turns to her in humble faith.

He promotes authentic devotion to Mary among the people he ministers to. "With the devotion and veneration of sons, priests should lovingly honour this mother of the supreme and eternal Priest, this Queen of the Apostles and protectress of their ministry" ( PO, #18)

Jn. 2, 1-5. *Mary at the wedding feast at Cana.*

*What role does Mary of Nazareth play in my life and ministry?*

## 8. Spirituality of Professional Competence

Priestly ministry is not only a vocation but also a profession. As a vocation, it is a free response to God's call in and through the community to commit oneself to serve others. As a profession, it is a commitment to be a good moral character and to acquire special competence pertaining to the service of God's people (Gula, 1995, p.5). This means training oneself in compassion, sensitivity, empathy, respect for persons and their rights, learning the skills of effective communication, becoming well versed in the moral and social justice teachings of the Church, constantly updating oneself in those areas of knowledge and skills that have bearing on one's ministerial responsibilities. Particularly, one follows an ethical and moral lifestyle expected of those called to a special role in the Church. It is very important not to give in to the subtle seduction of power. The priest guards against the temptation to exploit the trust

and dependency of those who seek his services as means to meet his own needs.

The priest seeks to excel in every thing that pertains to his life and ministry. Keeping himself updated through ongoing formation is very important. This does not mean only attending programmes organised by the diocese. He takes personal initiative to use opportunities and resources whenever and wherever available. In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II (1979) emphasised that this ongoing formation is something

demanded by his own continuing personal growth....It is also demanded by the priestly ministry seen in a general way and taken in common with other professions, that is as a service directed to others. There is no profession, job or work which does not require constant updating, if it is to remain current and effective. (#70)

*Col. 4, 5-6. "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one."*

*How do I update myself? What do I do to improve my ministerial competence?*

## **9. Spirituality of Personal Care**

To maintain a healthy spirituality and to be able to sustain pastoral service, the priest has to take care of his physical, mental and emotional health. For anyone who works long with people, compassion-fatigue (a phenomenon in which progressive loss of idealism, energy, and purpose experienced by caring people which makes them become cold and callous because they are exhausted by all the demands people make on them) is a real danger. A priest who is passionate about his ministry and

who goes all out to minister, making himself available to all and sundry at all times, and does this for a long time, can get burned out (experience emotional exhaustion, loss of idealism and diminished sense of personal accomplishment) unless he also attends to his own needs. Compassion fatigue and burn-out can lead the priest to lose "the love you had at first" (Rev. 2,4) – the energy and enthusiasm, the passion and fire -- with which he set out to minister to God's people. It is important for the priest to renew and replenish himself to keep the passion and fire going.

Proper nutrition, adequate rest and sleep, moments of relaxation and efficient time management are necessary for this. The priest's life is not all work and service. Like any human being, he has to recharge his batteries through recreation and fellowship, especially with his brother priests. He has to manage his time in such way that he is available to his people, and has also time for himself. He has to learn to set priorities, delegate, and ask for help when needed rather than doing everything by himself or relying only on his own resources.

*Mk. 6, 31. "Come away by yourself to a lonely place."*

*How do I take care of myself?*

## **10. Spirituality of Gratitude and Generosity**

The priest is grateful—for his vocation, for his ministry, for all that God accomplishes through him in the lives of the people entrusted to his care. He marvels at the mysterious ways he becomes an instrument in the transformation of lives--nourishing, comforting, forgiving, healing.

Gratitude is expressed in generosity. A fitting response to God's goodness and generosity is giving oneself and what one has more generously. Hence the priest strives to be more and more generous with his time and resources. He is generous not only in the context of his ministry to his community, but develops generosity as a characteristic attitude expressed in the way he lives and relates to people.

The importance of gratitude in spirituality is well expressed by Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century mystic, who wrote: "If the only prayer you say in your entire life is 'thank you,' that would suffice" (in Svoboda, 1995, p. 370).

Col. 3, 16-17: "And be thankful...do everything...giving thanks to God..."

*Are gratitude and generosity characteristic of my lifestyle? How do I express gratitude and generosity?*

### Conclusion

This article has highlighted the importance of a mature spirituality for the authenticity and efficaciousness of the priest's life and ministry. Spirituality of the priest is one that flows from his identity as minister of Word and Sacrament and doctor of soul. The article has delineated ten salient characteristics of this spirituality and described the attitudes and behaviours that express them.

Developing these attitudes and practicing these behaviours can enrich the priest's life and ministry and help him grow and mature in his spiritual life.

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