

Here is my homily on the importance of priesthood and religious life from. I post it at the encouragement of a parishioner:

Many of you know by now that last weekend I was in the ER twice for severe nose bleeds. It was my first nose bleed in twenty years, and it was a gusher. I would never have thought to go to the ER until a nurse who was helping me said I should because of how severe it was. This worried me. One always wonders when these things happen, "Maybe something more serious is wrong." I thought, "Maybe I did contract a brain eating parasite in West Africa back in 2013." That was something we briefly thought in 2013, although it was ruled out at the time. And then when I was at the hospital, they looked up my nose and said, "We don't see anything." See, this confirmed it! My brain was gone! Actually, they told me I had a beautiful nose... something no one has ever said. My point is that we are fragile beings. We heard back at the start of Lent, "Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return."

Let me tell you about a saint: Saint Francis Borgia. He was a Spanish nobleman, a duke, who worked in the court of the Emperor and Empress. When she died, this woman renowned for her beauty, he was called to identify the body. Seeing that such beauty passes away, he is said to have remarked,

"What shall we do, Soul, what shall we seek? Have you not seen, Soul, how the brightest and most precious things of earth end? If death treats earth's splendor so, who can resist it? That same death has his arrow directed at you. Were it not well to die to the world in life in order to live with God in death? Give me, O God, give me Your light, give me Your Spirit. ... Nevermore will I serve a master who can die on me."

He had a conversion and began to live for God. When his own wife died, Francis went on to become a Jesuit priest and eventually the Superior General of the Jesuits, the Jesuit in charge of the order. Life is short. Eternity is forever.

This is why Christ came, that we might have eternal life. In today's Gospel we are told that, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." God sent his Son to make eternity possible for us, but in order for people to accept this give, God has always sent messengers to proclaim it.

"Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers,

send his messengers to them,  
for he had compassion on his people..." Messengers in the time of the Israelites.  
Messengers in the time of Francis Borgia. And he still sends messengers today.

Because our diocesan vocations retreat is a few weeks away, I have chosen this weekend to ask all of you to promote vocations, to pray for vocations to priesthood and religious life. Both the priest and the religious, such as sisters like our very own Sister Agnes, are indispensable to the life of the Church.

Only the priest can say to someone who is racked by guilt for decades over some horrible sin he has committed, "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace." Only the priest can arrive at the hospital and say to the dying, "I grant you a full pardon and the remission of all your sins." Only the priest can offer the Sacrifice of the Mass for the dead that they might enter Heaven. And only the priest can make present the sacrament of charity, the Eucharist, that we might know, even in the worst of moments, that Christ is with us. When people call for a priest, ultimately in these sacramental moments, they do not care whether it is Father Bob or Father Jonathan or Father Mark or Father Nick or Father Donato that walks in. They see that little piece of white around the neck and they know that God is present, that God has sent his messenger. What they want is Christ, who speaks to them through the priest.

People often wonder why I put such an emphasis on what religious sisters do, since they do things that "anyone can do." It is not what they do, but it is how they do it as consecrated persons. When I was in seminary, I was assigned to work at a home for emotionally disturbed youth. Originally run by sisters, it now had only one: a sister who served as a type of chaplain, someone who ran religious education and made sure that a priest was lined up to come visit each week for Mass. The staff was now all paid people who came in for eight hours a day, five days a week, in various shifts. They did good work. But on First Communion Sunday, one of the men who had lived there forty years ago, when it was still primarily run by sisters, said to me, "It's different now. It used to be a real home, and the sisters, who never left, were our mothers. The paid staff, as good as they are, can never be this for the children. The emotional issues do not get healed here like they used to." It is not about what the sisters do. It is about the way they do it because of who they are as consecrated persons. That is just one example. There are many more things that could be said. Likewise, many people try to go to their priest for counseling, even though I am not a trained counselor. I've had a workshop on it. Why do

people come to me? Because of pastoral charity. They say, "You aren't paid to do this. You do it out of love of God, so I know you want what is best for me." So, does the sister.

Priests and religious are indispensable in the Church, but fewer people are choosing these vocations. This past week I was on the phone with a woman from another part of the country who is home-bound. She knows from Father Bob from a previous assignment in this area. She cannot receive adequate pastoral care having to wait months, where she lives because her spiritual problems are quite large and the number of priests in her area quite small. A similar situation will eventually reach our part of the country if we do not pray for and encourage vocations to priesthood and religious life. Encourage: to instill courage in someone.

Every young person should at some point ask God, "Are you calling me to do this?" The answer might surprise you, and if God is calling you, why would you want to do anything else? God knows you better than you know yourself, and he loves you more than you love yourself. If he calls you, it will ultimately fulfill you. People say, "But I'm inadequate." Yes, we all are. "But I could never be celibate." If God calls you, he will give you the grace to live this life. He will use you. Yes, celibacy is a sacrifice. It is not natural. It is supernatural. But no matter what our vocation, whether priest, or teacher, or counselor, or parent, it is when we live out sacrificial love in accord with our calling that we find joy. That's the law of the cross. Loving others costs us and brings joy.

As Saint Teresa of Calcutta once said, "'We are at Jesus' disposal. We must say, I belong to you. You can do whatever you like.' And this is our strength, and this is the joy of the Lord." This is a perfect message on Laetare Sunday, in which our hearts rejoice. Or as Saint Ignatius Loyola said, "All the pleasures of the world are nothing compared with the sweetness found in the gall and vinegar offered to Jesus Christ." As we approach holiness, crosses become sweet because we know we are loving.

After Mass today, there are prayer cards available for you to take home to pray for vocations. I invite every family or household to take one to pray for vocations. There is also information on the back regarding the annual diocesan vocations retreat for men, high school age and up. I invite every young man to go on this retreat at least once. It does not mean that you are going to end up being a priest, but at least you will be able to say, "I was open to God's call, I met some very

dedicated Catholic men from all around our diocese, and I learned a little bit more about what it is priests do.” Or you discover your life’s call. I invite the young women, if they want to find a similar experience, to speak to me, and I will help them find an appropriate vocation retreat for them as well. These are indispensable vocations in the life of the Church.

May God bless you.