

An Address to Seminarians by Bishop Glennon P. Flavin
Given in Arnold Hall, Pembroke, Massachusetts
April 3, 1986

*The following excerpts were transcribed from a tape recording of the address, delivered from notes rather than from a prepared text. Only the main points of the talk have been extracted. Note that this address was pastoral, not academic, in content and in style. The documents to which he refers are: Second Vatican Council decrees *On the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis)*, 1965, and *On the Training of Priests (Optatam Totius)*, 1965; John Paul II, "Letter of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, to all the priests of the Church on the occasion of Holy Thursday 1986", *Letters to My Brother Priests* (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1992), 139-152*

The talk that I was given by Fr. Sal was: "Priests for the Third Millennium: An Overview of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Optatam Totius*." Now the priests for the Third Millennium, I suppose, are you! Last week the "Holy Thursday letter to priests" from the Holy Father arrived. I thought I'd just comment on the highlights of the Holy Father's letter, he presented the Curé of Ars as a model for priests. He reviewed his life and ministry, and he began with a reference to St. John Vianney's difficulty in the seminary. This should be a consolation to all of you. He had a hard time, especially with Latin. In fact, he was dismissed from the seminary because of his difficulty in mastering the subjects. It was only his perseverance in following out what he was sure was his vocation, and the zeal of a good parish priest, that enabled him to get back into the seminary and to be ordained a priest.

I'm convinced that all of the problems of the Church today are in the seminary; and all the solutions to all the problems in the Church are in the seminary. Seminary work is the most important work of the Church because the Church will be what you become as priests.

The Holy Father in one of his talks said there are three characteristics to a good seminary: orthodox doctrine, a sound spiritual formation, and a firm, but reasonable, discipline. If you are in that kind of a seminary, you have been blessed by God in a special way; thank Him for that blessing. I'm sure you've been told this before: "As the seminarian, so the priest." It's true! Make the best use of the seminary that you can—to learn as much as you can, and then deepen your spiritual life as much as you can. And submit to the discipline; priests must have self-control.

Concerning the shortage of priests and sisters, God knows there is a shortage; but there's not a shortage of vocations! The Lord must take care of the needs of His Church, and there is need for many priests and sisters, and only He can give the grace of a vocation. He must be giving the call to many who are not responding. I'm convinced that our young people are not saying "No" to the Lord; they're not even hearing the Lord call them! It's not always their fault. First of all, look at the materialism of our day. We enjoy the best of food, the best of clothing, and the best of transportation. We're saturated with entertainment! When we were kids we went to a movie once a month, maybe, if we had a dime! We rarely got to see a ball game; it cost fifty cents for the bleachers at the professional games. But today, you can watch movies for twenty-four hours in succession by just turning on the TV. You can see the best sporting events in the world by just turning on the TV. It doesn't cost anything – all day long! We are really saturated with the good things in life! So it's no wonder that many of our young people can't hear the spiritual call.

Fathers-to-be, Fathers of the Third Millennium, if there's a shortage of priests; it's going to be your fault. If there's a shortage of priests today, it's our fault, the priests of today; because we have to go out and we have to make these young people hear the call. That's not easy! It takes hours and hours and hours of person-to-person contact. That's why our priests don't do it. It requires too much of their time! As priests, you need to meet with these young people one on one. Many times you have to teach them their Faith, first of all. Then you have to give them personal spiritual direction to build up and develop their spiritual lives to a point where they can hear the spiritual call and have enough love for God to say "Yes." I know this is true. The day is gone when we can wait for them to come to us. You have to go to them, and you have to be willing to spend time with them. I know from experience.

We have been very successful, thanks to God, in the Lincoln Diocese with our vocations. We have a very large number of seminarians, relatively speaking. And the key is our diocesan Director of Vocations, who is also the chaplain at the Newman Center at the University of Nebraska. The key is the amount of time he spends with each individual, one on one, starting with their freshman year. And he may not bring them to the point of saying "Yes" until their senior year. But I'm sure that he averages over a hundred hours per vocation in the time he gives to each one of them individually – and that's the secret! And if you, as priests, will be willing to spend yourselves in that kind of an apostolate, we will have enough priests and sisters to take care of the needs of our people.

The Holy Father talks about priestly zeal and Saint John Vianney. He gives the example that when he was ordained, he was sent to this little parish in Ars the bishop said to him, "There's very little love there; you must put some there!" He started off with 230 souls. The year before he died, 80,000 people came to him from all over France and around the world to go to confession to him. What drew them? His own priestly zeal! He was always going after the lost sheep, always ready to take care of the needs of the people who came to him. That's all zeal is! "Zeal for souls" is just another term for "love of God." If you love God enough, you'll want God to have what He wants. That's the nature of love; and more than anything else in the entire world, God wants souls. That's why Christ died on the cross. A priest without zeal is like an eight-cylinder new car, a powerful machine, without gasoline. Please God, you won't just look like a priest, but you'll be priests full of zeal for souls. Imitate our Lord, for the first words He mentioned, as quoted in Scripture, were: "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" Some of His last words spoken on the cross were: "I thirst." He spent His life seeking souls. That's what you must do. You don't become a priest for your own benefit! The Lord calls you and ordains you to spend yourself for others.

The Holy Father then mentions the Curé's apostolate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He tells how the Curé would spend sometimes ten or fifteen hours or more a day hearing confessions. This is kind of a test of a priest's zeal for souls: his love for the confessional. It's not easy; it's difficult hearing confessions! First, it's boring when you sit there for hours at a time. It's frustrating sometimes when you seem to be getting nowhere. It's even depressing, perhaps, when you're hearing sins being confessed that are being committed against Almighty God day after day. The test of your zeal for souls, as priests or seminarians, will be your love for the confessional. And believe me, there's many a reward!

There are many consolations in hearing confessions, even for your own spiritual benefit, like when you hear confessions of saints, and you think to yourself, "My, with all the advantages I have, I don't have a *fraction* of the holiness of this person going to confession to me now!" It's a

source of edification to the priest. When he hears the confession of sinners, sometimes people say, "Oh, Father, if you only knew! I just can't go to confession!" But, if they only knew what the priest was thinking! He's probably thinking: "If I were in that person's position, would I have the courage and depth of sorrow for sin that *this* person has to go to confession and make *this* kind of a confession?" He's edified just as much by the sinner as by the saint!

Think of what you're accomplishing! Here's a soul that a few moments ago was destined for hell and had lost God's life. He comes in and kneels down before you, and you're able to say, "I absolve you from your sins." And then he goes on his way, and he's a Child of God again and an heir of heaven! What compares to a reward like that in anything you might do in your lifetime? Oh sure, it's hard, and it's draining. That is, if you're really wanting to *help* people and to give them some kind of spiritual advice to assist them in their spiritual lives. So, love the confessional! You don't have to like it. It's hard, but love it! And realize what you're doing when you go there.

Now, today there's a lack of appreciation for the Sacrament of Penance. As priests of the Third Millennium, you've got to do something about that. One reason, as the Holy Father says, for the lack of appreciation for the Sacrament of Penance is the lack of a sense of sin. Sin doesn't bother some people anymore. They can live with sin! They can sleep with sin! It doesn't bother them. That's an awful state to be in!

Make confession available to our people. A priest may put in his Sunday bulletin that confessions will be heard from 3:30 to 3:45. What does that tell his people about his own appreciation for confession and the value of the Sacrament of Penance? Be in the confessional, not only on Saturday, but why not before Mass during the week? And, above all, appreciate the Sacrament of Penance yourselves. Go frequently, and be absolutely open with your confessor. This is important!

The Holy Father then talks about the Curé and the Holy Eucharist. Here we're getting to the very heart of priestly ministry and sanctity. The Curé had a great love for the Mass. People came from everywhere to be at his Mass. He spent hours and hours, in spite of his busy schedule in dealing with people, before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. I hope that you young men will come to be known as priests who love the Eucharist. You must; this is your life! The Eucharist is Christ! The Eucharist is not a power or a thing; the Eucharist is a person! As a person, Christ can love and be loved. He's the One who calls you friend, a *closest* friend. You must develop an intimate union with Him, and that's what you're doing when you spend your hours in intimate communion with Him in the Blessed Sacrament.

Love the Mass as the principle of your ministry and your holiness. This is a danger because it's something that you do day after day after day, and it could become just a habit. We mustn't let it! One thing we must always do is make a preparation for Mass – fifteen minutes. Realize what you're about to do. This is the greatest thing that any human being can do: to offer to Almighty God an act of adoration that is completely adequate to His Infinite Majesty and, with Christ, to offer to the Father our Lord Himself in the Sacrifice of Calvary in an unbloody manner all over again! Remember what you're doing every time that you offer Mass. That's why you need that time before Mass to recollect. If nothing else, meditate upon that sign you often see in sacristies, "Priest of God, offer this Mass as if it were your first Mass, as if it were your last Mass, as if it were your only Mass." Make that your fifteen minute meditation every day, and the Mass will not become something just ordinary.

And then, dear seminarians, you've got to teach your people to love the Blessed Sacrament. I don't know if you've noticed, but I think that our Catholic people have fallen down in their devotion and reverence and awe for the Eucharist. You've got to put reverence back there!

First of all, you teach them by your own reverence for Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. In the way you handle yourself, the way you make your genuflection, the way you make your thanksgiving after Mass, the way you conduct yourself in church when no ceremony is going on, simply because Christ is present and you know it and you're acting accordingly – by all these things you are teaching your people.

Secondly, preach to them about it. One thing that you have to preach to them about is the danger of sacrilege. Ought our people to be going to Communion every Sunday? Well, maybe they're not subjectively guilty; they don't know any better, many of them. ~~But~~ you have to remind them of the importance of being in the state of grace. It's very fundamental, isn't it? I think that it's necessary that we remind them again Who the Eucharist really is, and how we should act in regard to the Holy Eucharist.

Introduce perpetual adoration in your parishes wherever it's feasible. What better way could we teach our people to love our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament than to preach perpetual adoration day and night? You think it's impossible? It's being done in hundreds of parishes throughout our country! In the Cathedral in Lincoln they've had perpetual adoration for twenty-six years. I didn't start it; it was there when I came. Day and night, during blizzards and everything else, they come. And the priests are drawn into it. This is telling people again Who the Eucharist is! Seminarians, start now to develop your great love and awe, and your reverence for the Holy Eucharist.

May I suggest something about vocations and the Eucharist while I'm at it? Our young people have to come to love Our Lord before they will leave all things to follow Him. One of the ways to bring them to that point is to ask them to make a five or ten minute visit with Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament every day. Just to sit in His presence and talk with Him and listen to Him. As they get to know Him, He will begin to reveal Himself to them more and more. How their love for Him will grow in their souls! Then, when he calls them they will say yes. It's a simple practice, but it's effective. Tell them to trust Him and say, "Dear God, tell me what you want me to do with my life and I'll do it." Vocations will come!

In talking to the priests, the Holy Father reminds them, in very practical words, about their devotion to the Eucharist. He says: "Dear brother priests, the example of the Curé of Ars invites us to a serious examination of conscience: what place do we give to the Mass in our daily lives? Is it, as on the day of our Ordination – it was our first act as priests – the principle of our apostolic work and personal sanctification? What care do we take in preparing for it? And in celebrating it? In praying before the Blessed Sacrament? In encouraging our faithful people to do the same? In making our churches the House of God to which the divine presence attracts the people of our time who too often have the impression of a world empty of God?"

A very old priest made a tremendous impression upon me forty years ago. I don't know the conversation; I was just a young priest listening in. This old priest, who must have been past his fifty-year golden jubilee, was saying to the others, "If I could say Mass ten times a day, I'd say Mass ten times a day." That made a great impression on me. Have that kind of a love for the Mass, my dear seminarians!

The Holy Father talks then about preaching and teaching. Let me just say this: you may not take this seriously, but your first duty as a priest is to teach. The Council tells us that my first

duty as a priest is to teach. The Lord knows how we need to be teachers today! Preach the truths of the Church – our people need that – and apply them to their lives, to how they can live them. Don't just try to satisfy them, but have the intention of building them up. Bring them closer to God in their hearts and in their lives.

There is a great need for that today. This is something that you can begin to do right now in the seminary, especially in the seminary, when you have time to study the techniques of preaching. Of course, be holy and you'll preach well. Build up your talents for teaching. Learn the Faith and learn how to put it in words that our people will understand. Make your presentation interesting to hold the attention of your people so that you can give them the Truth, and they will hear and take it and apply it to themselves in their lives. But spend some time studying homiletics. I think it's neglected in many of our seminaries today, but it's so important!

This brings up the subject of evangelization. I think that you priests are going to be right in the middle of the great thrust of the Church, which is going to be evangelization. It's a time-consuming task, and you can't just have classes of converts. You can do that, but part of that preparation must be one-on-one because you must not only teach them the truths, you must also develop their spiritual lives and teach them how to pray. You do that best one-on-one. You have to spend time. Priests say, "I don't have the time." Well, priests don't have much time. I agree. Good priests are always busy! But why can't we begin to train our laity to give instructions under the priest's supervision? I think that we have to do it! We don't have enough priests. Our laity consists of many intelligent and holy lay people who could be giving courses and instruction. Let this be their work, instructing converts under the supervision of the priest.

The identity of the priest: Who are you? There is no doubt, as far as the Curé was concerned, about who he was and what his ministry was and what his rule was. And there must be no doubt in *your* minds about what a priest is either. A priest is a man who, through ordination, shares in the very ministry of Christ Himself. It's not that there's the priestly ministry of the human priest and the priestly ministry of Christ. There's only one: the priestly ministry of Christ. You share in that priesthood of Christ, which is the mediatorship between God and man.

In a very special way, you are going to be "other Christs", but not as an ordinary Christian is another Christ. There's going to be a different kind of identification between you and Christ through your ordination. You are going to take bread and wine in your hands and you are going to say: "This is my body; this is my blood." And then you're going to genuflect and adore on your fingertips, not your own flesh and blood, but the Body and Blood of the God-Man! In the Sacrament of Penance, you are going to say: "I absolve you from your sins." And you're going to teach and preach and guide; and the Lord will say to you, "He who hears you hears Me."

Now, this is a tremendous mystery, isn't it? But the truth remains; in the priesthood, you'll identify with Christ the Priest and you must never forget that! You know, our people who have the Faith sense that. They know that there is a difference between you and them. First of all, they call you "Father," and they are three times your age! You were the brat down the block with the dirty face and the runny nose a few years ago, and now a neighbor will kneel at your feet and say, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." They recognize who you are, as another Christ in a very special way. This is what the priesthood is; this is the identity. This is what you are going to be in a few short months. Never, therefore, be unaware of the awesome dignity of the priest!

The Holy Father, in making a distinction between the priest and the sharing of the priesthood of Christ in the laity, put it this way: “Attempts to make the priest more like the laity are damaging to the Church. This does not mean in any way that the priest can remain remote from the human concerns of the laity: he must be very near to them, as John Mary Vianney was, but as a priest, always in a perspective which is that of their salvation and of the progress of the Kingdom of God. He is the witness and dispenser of a life other than earthly life. It is essential to the Church that the identity of the priest be safeguarded, with its vertical dimension. The life and personality of the Curé of Ars are a particularly enlightening and vigorous illustration of this.”

Dear Fathers-to-be, as “another Christ” you must be genuinely holy. It’s not enough that you just imitate Christ in your priestly ministry; you must be conformed to Christ in your hearts and souls. You must live a life of holiness. What is that? What is holiness? Well, it’s the love of God, isn’t it? Unless you are a holy priest, you are a useless priest! If you’re not a holy priest, you won’t survive in the priesthood. Or, if you happen to survive, you will just vegetate in spiritual mediocrity. I don’t know which is worse! You will be effective as a priest in the degree that you are holy.

You will be as holy, my dear seminarians, as you are faithful to your daily spiritual exercises, your practice of mortification and your devotion to the confessional. Check yourselves on that! Are you making your preparation for Mass every day? Are you offering a thoughtful, reverent and devout Mass, and making your thanksgiving after Mass because you appreciate what Mass is? Are you growing in your intimate friendship with Christ in your visits to Him in the Blessed Sacrament? Are you learning how to live a holy life by reading the saints, other spiritual reading, and Scripture? Are you staying close to the Lord and honoring Him in the name of His people through the recitation of your Office day after day? Are you saying it devoutly, slowly, reverently? Are you practicing mortification, as you must, for your own sins and for the sins of the world? Are you going to confession yourselves frequently, and opening yourself to your confessor so that you never deceive yourself?

Be faithful to your daily spiritual exercises, dear seminarians, and you will be effective priests. You must start that right now. I’m sure you all have. There are many other things we could say, but let’s end it here. And let’s end it as the Holy Father ended his letter to priests with reference to the Curé’s devotion to the Mother of God. How better could we end? The Holy Father says: “We entrust our Priesthood to the Virgin Mary, the Mother of priests, to whom John Mary Vianney ceaselessly had recourse with tender affection and total confidence. This was for him another reason for giving thanks: ‘Jesus Christ,’ he said, ‘having given us all that He could give us, also wishes to make us heirs of what is most precious to him, his Holy Mother’.”

It’s nice to be with you. I’m edified by your presence, to think that you have given your holidays to come and spend this time with our Lord and with each other. You’re going to be good priests, and as good priests you’re going to live the happiest life in the entire world. There’s no doubt about it, none whatsoever! Oh, it’s a great gift!

You know, our Lord must have a special love for those who would follow Him when He calls them, who leave all else and follow Him. Didn’t He promise Saint Peter that He’d give him a hundredfold reward and everlasting life? He said a hundredfold reward *and* everlasting life. They’re different, then! Everlasting life is given when this life ends. The hundredfold reward, therefore, must be right here on earth! What is it? Is it fame or fortune or pleasure? Well, that’s

what you give up! Thus, it can only be that inner peace of mind and heart that is God's gift of love in gratitude to you who left all things to follow Him. Saint Therese was right. She said: "I live the happiest life that can be." Dear seminarians, any priest or sister who really lives his or her commitment without a doubt lives the happiest life that can be!