

The Spirituality of the Vocation to Priesthood

During his first visit to Germany on the occasion of the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne, Pope Benedict made a point of inserting a meeting with seminarians into his programme "so that the vocational dimension would truly emerge in all of its importance". The gift of ministerial priesthood has, at its heart, the mystery of a vocation. Countless numbers of priests such as saints Vincent de Paul and John Vianney of Ars as well as Pope John Paul II have borne eloquent witness to this mystery and gift.¹ It is good, therefore, as Pope Benedict indicates, to highlight its importance and attend to its spirituality.²

If we take spirituality in the broad sense of living the Gospel from a particular angle, I intend to propose a spirituality of the vocation to ministerial priesthood as follows. Firstly, it is necessary to give due consideration to the nature of the Christian vocation in general, dwelling briefly on the First Testament, then reflecting on what vocation meant in Jesus' own life and, more specifically, outlining some aspects of the spirituality of vocation as it emerges in Jesus' calling of disciples. At that point it will be necessary to recognise and focus on the heart of the spirituality of all vocations: Jesus' death and resurrection that opens up the way of communion as typical of the Christian and so too priestly vocation. Mary will be proposed as a model of the spirituality of the royal priesthood onto which is engrafted the ministerial priesthood. Focusing then more directly on the vocation to ministerial priesthood I will propose a number of contours of this vocation's spirituality.³

A Vocation - Something Beautiful

In his first message for the day of Vocations (April 2006), Pope Benedict rekindles wonder at the marvellous fact of being chosen by God before the creation of the world (cf. Eph 2:3-6). God has a unique, personal plan for each one of us. This wonder, the discovery that God loves you immensely, is at the start of any consideration of vocational spirituality. Admittedly, "the weight of two millennia of history makes it difficult to grasp the novelty of this wonderful mystery of divine adoption." Those called to ministerial priesthood

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of my Priestly Ordination* (New York: Doubleday, 1999). See also Gérard Carroll, *Un Portrait du Prêtre: Le Retraites de 10 Jours pour Les Ordinands*. Paris: Pierre Téqui, 2004.

² The focus of this article will be spirituality but it builds on a theology of priesthood. See Jean Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985); Gisbert Greshake, *The Meaning of Christian Priesthood* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988); Aidan Nichols, *Holy Order* (Dublin: Veritas, 1990); Thomas McGovern, *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2002).

³ There is a wealth of Magisterial documentation available that feeds into this topic: Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*; Pope John Paul II, The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992, following the 1990 Synod of Bishops); The Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory on the Ministry and life of priests* (1994); Pope John Paul's *Catechesis* on priesthood (1st March to 20th October 1993), his Holy Thursday letters and his letters for the Day of Vocations. See also The Congregations for Catholic Education, for the Oriental Churches, for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life, *New Vocations for a New Europe, Final Document of the Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and to Consecrated Life in Europe, 5-10 May 1997*.

need constantly to re-live the inspiring spark of their vocation as a "falling in love" with God who is Love:

...the mystery of vocation. It is part of the life of every Christian, but it is particularly evident in those whom Christ asks to leave everything in order to follow him more closely. The seminarian experiences the beauty of that call in a moment of grace which could be defined as "falling in love". His soul is filled with amazement, which makes him ask in prayer: "Lord, why me?". But love knows no "why"; it is a free gift to which one responds with the gift of self.⁴

The free gift of a vocation is a marvel of love that pierces the heart time and again throughout the history of salvation. For instance, Israel as a whole comes to realise the sheer gratuitousness of love not measured by any calculating equations of worthiness (Deut 7:7-8). Mary sings her Magnificat, the great exuberant vocation song that proclaims: God is everything, I am nothing (Lk 1:46-55). Peter experiences in humility just who Jesus is and who he is in being called (Lk 5: 1-11).⁵

Yes, a vocation is born in love, God's very own love poured into our hearts through Jesus' life, death and resurrection by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). It is this love that draws us towards the centre of the Paschal Mystery where we discover our true "living space" is the eternal dialogue of the Triune God of Love.

In the Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis*, n.12, this Trinitarian foundation of vocation, previously stated in Vatican II's document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* and then taken up also in the Apostolic Letter on the mission of the lay faithful, *Christifideles laici*, is made quite explicit:

The priest's identity...like every Christian identity, has its source in the Blessed Trinity, which is revealed and is communicated to people in Christ, establishing, in him and through the Spirit, the Church as "the seed and the beginning of the kingdom." The apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, summarizing the Council's teaching, presents the Church as mystery, communion and mission: "She is mystery because the very life and love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the gift gratuitously offered to all those who are born of water and the Spirit (cf. Jn. 3:5) and called to relive the very communion of God and to manifest it and communicate it in history [mission]."(*Christifideles Laici*, 8)

Already through Baptism we are transformed into a new creation, enabled to "live the life of the Trinity", the foundation of the spiritual life.⁶ Through Holy Orders, however, those ordained are called to stand before God in the heart of the Paschal Mystery as instruments of the Crucified and Risen Christ, *The Mediator* both between humanity and God and among humanity, in building up the Church as communion through teaching the Gospel and celebrating the liturgy. Living "as Jesus", continuing his mission, the priestly vocation is

⁴ Pope Benedict, Message for Day of Vocations (April 2006).

⁵ See Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's reflections of the priestly image in the accounts of the call in Lk 5:1-11 and Jn 1:35-42 in *Journey Towards Easter*. Middelgreen, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1987, pp. 144-150.

⁶ See Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), n. 29.

shaped in a triple direction - to be immersed in God, to be projected outwards in love of one's brothers and sisters in the Church-communion and to be extended universally towards the whole of humankind.

To be called to serve as instruments of the Crucified and Risen Christ is something breathtaking. As the contemporary writer, Pasquale Foresi, puts it, a vocation is "one of the most beautiful things on this earth":

Think of the interweaving of divine and human love involved in a vocation. It lasts for eternity because God is eternity. Hence it is a continuous and deep love affair which will last forever. We cannot imagine or understand what a rare gift a vocation is, because the word vocation has been spoiled by excessive use. What a grace it is to feel the personal love of God who calls us to follow him....the most beautiful moment is not when a person hears the call, but when he says "yes"... It is an allegiance for life, a continual "yes" to God who repeats the invitation for ever.⁷

The First Testament

If we examine the stages of the First Testament we can see the history of salvation as one great vocation story consisting of continuous calls. From the opening pages of the Bible we discover vocation has to do with the very core of what it is to be human because to be human is to be "called" by name. Unlike plants or animals, God has created us "in his image and likeness" as a "you" who stands before God, having the capacity of a personal, direct relationship of love, friendship and communion with God. Commenting on the Genesis account of the creation of humanity, the exegete, Claus Westermann, has written that:

God has created all people "to correspond to him," that is so that something can happen between creator and creature....the uniqueness of human beings consists in their being God's counterparts. The relationship to God is not something which is added to human existence; humans are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship to God".⁸

To live is to stand before God in a relationship with him. It is in responding to this primary call that I discover my true autonomy, attuning myself to the source of all freedom: God. To be called, to be responsive and to be free - that is what God wants for each of us.

The project outlined throughout the Bible is one of humankind being drawn to fulfilment of its primordial vocation in its relationship with God, a vocation that opens up as a calling to journey, ever more deeply rooted in God, towards the world and towards those with whom I am called to build community.

In Adam's "no" we see what not wanting to respond to that call means. In planning and projecting his life to "be like God" but in accordance with his own whim, seeking to defend an apparent autonomy, calculating on his own

⁷ *God among Men*, London: New City, 1974, p. 78.

⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, p. 158.

strengths alone, Adam experiences how his vocation crumbles. And at that very point the original project crashes down upon him as judgement. Adam hides: "But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid.'" (Gen 3:9-10). And in his fear, he risks imprisoning himself within a self-constructed prison.

If we examine the whole history of salvation, however, we see it is made up of many stages, whereby God seeks to open up our human closure, leading us out of our hiding and fears, drawing us beyond our puny calculations. The stages of salvation history revolve around the Covenant that shapes Israel's spirituality. Numerous vocation stories that will impact on the history of humankind provide expressions of this covenantal spirituality. It's sufficient here to advert to some of them: Abraham (Gen 12), Moses (Ex 3), Samuel (1 Sam 3), Saul (1 Sam 9), David (1 Sam 16:11), and the stories of the prophets: Elisha (1 Kings 19:19), Isaiah (Is 6;8), Jeremiah (Jer 1:6-8), Ezekiel (Ezek 2:1-2; 3:15-18), Amos (Amos 7:14-15), Jonah (3:1-3).

Already in the First Testament (and this is valid for all vocation spirituality, including that of ministerial priesthood) we glimpse how our human dignity consists in the fact that God looks at us, visits us, meets us, redeems us and calls us precisely in history, in the midst of our network of relationships and engagement with life. And in our encounter with God we are offered hope, a future and fulfilment. Vocation is a calling by the One who can create "out of nothing" making of each individual story a microcosm of the great story of salvation. Vocational spirituality is a saying "yes" to God and his will for me because God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6).

Jesus' Vocation Story

Perhaps it comes as a surprise to think of it like this but Jesus' whole life can be viewed as a vocation story. Therefore all of Jesus' life is relevant to the issue of the vocational spirituality, especially that of ordained priestly spirituality. He is the "New Adam" that turns the vocation story of humankind around. The Letter to the Hebrews provides us with eloquent testimony of this. Recognising in the words of psalm 40 a prophecy that found its fulfilment in the life of Christ, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews expresses Christ's self-offering upon coming into the world as obediently following that original call and inner-triune decision:

'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God" (Heb 10:5-7).⁹

⁹ See Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*. Petersham, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1980, p. 215.

Jesus Christ is the antithesis of Adam's lack of correspondence to his vocation. Paul's writings and the Gospels all bring this out. For Paul, Jesus, rich in divinity becomes poor, abandoning his own divine glory and emptying himself (Phil 2:6-11) out of love for us (2 Cor 8:9). The compass of his life was always directed, moment by moment, towards doing the will of the Father, obedient "even unto death" (Phil 2:8). We see Jesus surrounded by a human constellation of persons who form the immediate community to which he relates (Mary his mother, John the Baptist, the apostles, the disciples, the sisters of Bethany, the women who accompany him in his ministry). The Gospels also present Jesus reaching out beyond the frontiers to those "other sheep" beyond the fold (Jn 10:16).

John's Gospel outlines the vocational aspect most vividly. It presents Jesus as one who finds his food in doing the will of the Father (Jn 4:34). Jesus' whole identity revolves around being "sent" on "mission" in a dialogue with the Father in the Holy Spirit in whom Jesus loves, obeys, gives (Jn 3:16;-17; 5:19-24, 30, 8:42;10:1-18, 25-30;12:27, 49; 14-17; 18:37; 20:21).

He is the Word of God that from eternity contemplates and responds to the Father (Jn 1:18). And since, in him, the prototype of creation, humanity and history, all was created (Jn 1:3), everyone finds their spiritual way in him. He is the Way (Jn 14:6). He is the Word became flesh, the Word become silence on the Cross, the Word that opens the Triune life of God for us so that we can enter into the divine Being-for-One-Another. In him, we discover our high calling.¹⁰

Each one of us is "called" into that eternal dialogue of love (see Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Jn 4 and the Farewell Discourses of Jn 14-17). We are called both in our particularity and in communion together. Jesus, the Incarnate Word, has united all of humanity and so each one of us to himself. He has taken us onto himself, lived our lives and with a human heart, responded with the answer that humanity, in Adam, did not give. Jesus now acts on our behalf because our freedom was created and born in him. So each vocation finds its origin and possibility of response in Jesus Christ, the One sent into the world:

"I in them and thou in me...Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world" (Jn 17: 23-24)

The Cross

It is, of course, above all on the Cross that Jesus fulfils his mission, his vocation "to the end" (Jn 13:1) of redeeming us and establishing each one of us in our specific vocation.¹¹ As the Mediator between God and humankind

¹⁰ See Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

¹¹ Each Gospel will present this loving to the end in a different way. In John, the love "to the end" results in Jesus' "thirst" as he desires so utterly to conclude his mission of love, being deprived even of that

and so also between humankind itself (cf. 1 Tim 2:5) he is the universal man that "divinises" us. Living the nothingness of love, Jesus Christ is also reduced to radical individuality on the Cross even to the point of feeling our distance from God, feeling forsaken (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34). He reaches each of us in our singularity and particularity. From within our self-enclosure, He who is the Word of God in whom each of us is a word, the New Adam, Jesus, redeems us, opens us and unites each of us with God and with one another, endowing us with personhood, mission and a vocation that shapes our life as a gift of ourselves to God, to one another and to everyone.¹²

As the Letter to the Hebrews brings out so clearly, it is both as priest and victim that Jesus does this.¹³ It is a priest offering his life for us to the Father and being himself the "victim" of love that he enables each of us uniquely to be that specific word in the Word that God wants to speak through us in the world. Priestly spirituality itself is intimately rooted in this mystery of Jesus' gift of self on the Cross. Chiara Lubich expresses this truth as follows:

Jesus crucified and forsaken is the One who opened up the way for humanity towards universal brotherhood. It was in that moment that he became the mediator between humankind and God. It was there on the cross that he presented himself to the Father as priest and victim for all of humanity. And since men and women, because of Jesus crucified and forsaken, were able to establish their rapport with God again, they were also able to be in relation with one another: Jesus forsaken is the bond of unity also among people... he is the priest par excellence!... May the Church today be enriched by priests-Christ, priests-victims for humanity; authentically Christ, ready to give their lives for everyone.¹⁴

All vocations, and in particular the priestly vocation are shaped by the triple direction of Jesus' mission, made most manifest on the Cross, namely, his love towards the Father in the Holy Spirit (cf. Heb 9:14), his love that reaches out towards the circle around him, his disciples, and ultimately his universal love that extends outwards towards the world (Jn 19: 25-27).¹⁵ Regenerated anew through Jesus' death and resurrection as living words, each unique but in communion, we form an ecclesial chorus of his Mystical Body that proclaims the infinite richness of God who is Love.

And this explains why love is so central to priestly spirituality. It is the living out of that triune love into which Jesus' triple mission has brought us, forming priests as men of communion, men who "live the Trinity" finding their model in Jesus Crucified and Risen. Since Jesus gave his New Commandment of love first of all to his apostles, it is incumbent upon priests to shape their spirituality on the "practise" of love. In his encyclical, Pope Benedict writes:

very union with God that he wants to transmit to us. In Matthew and Mark's Gospel we hear the cry of abandonment on the Cross (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34). Paul depicts this by speaking of Jesus becoming "sin", being "cursed" (Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21), in other words, identifying with our closure, darkness, self-imprisonment in refusing our essential vocational relationship with God.

¹² See Hans Urs von Balthasar's extensive treatment of this theme especially *Theo-Drama III: Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992, pp. 149-282.

¹³ See Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest passim*.

¹⁴ Message to Meeting of Diocesan priests, deacons and seminarians, *The Church Today - Spirituality of Communion and Dialogue*. Castelgandolfo, 23-25 April 2005.

¹⁵ See Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus*. Middelgreen, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1989.

"If you see charity, you see the Trinity"... The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man... Love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practise love .¹⁶

When Jesus Calls

At this point we can look again at the Gospels to see just how vocation "happens" and what it "involves" in terms of spirituality. As we read the accounts of people called by Jesus, we recognise firstly the vocation stories of those disciples called personally during his earthly life as he passed by. We recognise also, however, that these accounts witness to how the Risen Christ continues to pass by, look at each one of us and love us, calling us to himself. What happened to Andrew and Peter one day in Galilee, happened too for Paul when he encountered the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and continues to happen today for those called to ministerial priesthood.

Just as in the First Testament it is God who takes the initiative in calling, now too in the Gospels in those very personal encounters with Jesus Christ, it is his glance, words and gestures that touch the deepest recesses of the hearts and lives of those he meets, opening them to a whole new, unforeseen adventure. Ignatius of Loyola invites us to contemplate the life of Jesus as the contemplation of his call.¹⁷ A brief meditative review of some episodes helps us to pinpoint key features of vocational spirituality.

Change

Mark's Gospel tells us of the day Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee seeing Simon and his brother, Andrew, casting a net into the lake. They were fishermen.

And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him (Mk 1:16-19).

In this theological account of a vocation,¹⁸ itself echoing the call of Elisha by Elijah (1 Kgs 19:19-21), Matthew shows us James and John in a normal network of relationships and work. They loved their people and had a career. As fishermen they owned a boat and so were *koinonoi* (see Lk 5: 1-11), business partners, proprietors!. As Jesus passed by, he takes the initiative. He looks at them and calls them. They must have felt very deeply moved.

¹⁶ Pope Benedict, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, nn.19-20

¹⁷ *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. New York: Image Books, 1964, p. 67.

¹⁸ See Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark*. Dublin: Veritas, 1979, pp. 13-15.

Immediately (and Mark emphasises this sudden intervention) they feel their personality being fulfilled and the whole of their lives taking on a new meaning. It is the call to discipleship that immediately matters. Apostolate comes in the future. Jesus is calling them and giving them a reason for living: all their lives are now to revolve around one decisive value: Jesus and his Kingdom.

The "fulfilled time" opens up for them (Mk 1:15). Presumably even the negative of their lives suddenly fitted into this new meaning given by Jesus' call. Everything must have begun to look different. Family, the job, the future no longer had the same value as before. We know from other parts of the Gospel that they would return at times to fishing, but they did so with a different outlook. They were changed. A new life had entered them that went beyond their merits or virtuous choices (cf. Mk 2:17; Jn 15:16). It was a deep transformation. Simon even takes on a new name and a new aptitude. He becomes Cephas (in Greek, Peter) meaning rock (Jn 1:42). Von Balthasar has written:

It is not by inquiring into his own aptitudes and inclinations that the Christian...comes to know the personal and loving will of God in his regard or the mission God has decreed for him. In the last analysis, his fate is determined by the "holy calling" (2 Tim 1:9) that God utters to every person from the depths of his own freedom, and that every person is obliged to serve with all his strength as soon as he becomes aware of it. Sometimes, as if by accident, God's call corresponds to the personal inclinations and expectations of the one who receives it. But it can also happen that...it will be at cross-purposes with his nature...After all, who has ever had a natural aptitude for the Cross?¹⁹

Free Response

The vocation requires a response of freedom. When Jesus passes by, he loves but with a love that leave us free. In fact, among the various questions asked by Jesus as recorded in the Gospels such as "who do you say I am?" (Mk 8: 27-30) or "Do you love me?" (Jn 21: 15-19) there is also that amazingly humble word spoken by Jesus, the Son of God, to Peter and the other disciples: "Will you also go away?" (Jn 6:6:59-69). He leaves us free.

We see this in the poignant account of the rich young man whom Jesus looked upon and loved but who "went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions" (Mk 10:17-22). Jesus had wished to enter his life completely and fill it with his love that pours over into love for the neighbour and a sharing of goods. The "way of life" was on offer. But for this to happen, the young man would have to have no other love but that of Jesus. That was what was contained in the glance of love that we read in Mark's Gospel: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him" (Mk 10:21).²⁰

¹⁹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983, p. 396.

²⁰ See Harrington, *Mark*, pp. 158-161; On rejection of the call, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, pp. 493-504.

No "ifs" or "buts"

Perhaps the implications of Jesus' call to follow him in the triple direction of his mission only begin to dawn over time. Gradually, the one called comes to recognise that a vocation involves the abdicating of one's will, the renouncing of one's possessions and the giving of oneself totally including one's body. It's a radical calling, allowing of no "ifs" or "buts". Luke's Gospel provides us with a number of vignettes of "would-be followers of Jesus" that clarify the radical demands inherent in vocation in terms of sacrificing security, filial duty and family affection.²¹

In the first of these we come to realise how the core of a vocation should never be confused with aspects that may be associated with the embodiment of vocation in particular forms to which we may be accustomed but which are not really the core of a vocation. After all, a vocation is not a calling to a comfortable life style or simply to go to a particular place or to add something "extra" onto one's life:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'(Lk 9: 57-59).

The second vignette deals with family ties. Unlike Elijah's permission to Elisha to go and say good-bye to his father and mother (1 Kings 19), Jesus affirms that the kingdom can tolerate no distractions, transcending even ordinary family affection. In the light of this, vocation could perhaps be compared to a marriage between the one called and God, between the person with a vocation and Jesus. Married people leave everything to form a new family. In similar fashion, to follow God's call to bring the Kingdom of God requires an exclusive and vital love:

To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God' (Lk 9:60).

In his third depiction of a "would-be" follower of Jesus, Luke reminds us that a vocation is something permanent. It's not a question of a few months or years. It's a total gift of self:

Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God (Lk 9:61).

Not our own Effort

Jesus promises those who follow the call "a hundredfold", although we can never presume to make God calculate according to our ways:

Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when

²¹ See Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*. New York: Anchor Bible, 1979, pp. 833-837.

the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first (Mt 19:27-30).²²

Setting out to follow Jesus is not simply the results of our own efforts. It means letting ourselves fall into his arms, be borne by him, trusting in him. It's question of being in him and letting him be in us. It requires communion with Jesus, living with him, in a certain sense, "being" him (through abdicating ourselves in love) and letting him introduce us into his relationship with the Father. That explains too why Jesus, the Mediator who is Wisdom, invites us to study him, his attitudes, his words, his mind, in short, his Person and heart so utterly given to God:

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mt 11:29-30).²³

Jesus invites his disciples to "come and see" (Jn 1:39). It is said that this phrase could be translated more exactly as "Come, and you shall become people that see!".²⁴ In following they will be made capable of seeing.

The Shadow of the Cross

The "coming" and seeing," essential to the spirituality of vocation is, as we have seen, directed towards the "hour" of elevation on the Cross.²⁵ All the Gospels present vocation under the shadow of the Cross. In Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus tell his disciples:

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Mt 16:24-25).

The heart of the vocation is configuration to Jesus in his death and resurrection. What the first apostles and disciples discovered and countless others since then is that vocation is about journeying the pathway towards Easter with Jesus Christ.

In the Gospels we recognise ourselves in the limits and failures, betrayal and rejection that those called by Jesus experienced. Increasingly, they came to grasp that vocation is a matter of letting oneself be drawn by Jesus into that emptiness that he wants so that all who are called, united in the Holy Spirit, do the will of the Father. And that means that today too those called experience constantly new detachments and changes. Drawn onwards by an ever-greater love they grow in communion, in reciprocity, in a self-giving that eventually, through Jesus' death and resurrection, brings them into a new

²² See John Meier, *Matthew*. Dublin: Veritas, 1980, p. 221-226.

²³ See John P. Meier, *Matthew*, pp. 125-128.

²⁴ See Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Journey Towards Easter*, p. 144.

²⁵ See Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus*. Middlegreen, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1989.

reality of communion: "with me in you and I in them". And, in encountering the Crucified and Risen Christ, they hear again the call to move towards the Father, towards one another and towards the world in order to call God's people together from all corners of the earth.

Living the Counsels in loving Jesus among Us

There was one specific direction in which the apostles were pointed in the Resurrection. They were drawn towards the Lord in the midst of his people, among his brothers and sisters, his mystical body (cf. Mt 18:20; Lk 24:1-35; Jn 21:15-19; Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:32). For the first Christians, being called resulted in a poverty that was not merely a negative renouncing, in an obedience that was not merely attentiveness to God speaking within them, or in a purity that was denial of affection. No. The first apostles and Christians understood their poverty, obedience and purity in terms of the new life of communion in the Risen Christ who united them.

Poverty was lived in view of a communion of interior and material goods from which communion is born (cf. Acts 4:42). Obedience to God was a listening to the voice of God in those brothers and sisters alongside them in the community (cf. Acts 15; Rev 2:7; Mt 25). And their purity was the gift of their whole lives in complete dedication, building up the one body, the family that is the community, the holy Temple at the centre of which the Risen Christ resides in mutual love (cf. Mt 19:10-12).

The Eucharist

All of the spirituality of vocation that emerges in the Gospel is made manifest in the Eucharist. That explains why throughout the generations the Eucharist has remained the constant source of renewal for those who follow Jesus in his triple mission in the Holy Spirit towards the Father, towards the community and towards the World. At the Eucharist, each priest hears anew his vocation.

It is at the Last Supper that Jesus showed the full meaning of vocation to the apostles, those he called his friends. He summed it up in his words, his institution of the Eucharist and priesthood, but above all in the washing of feet (Jn 13: 1-17). Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that, at the end of the Year of the Eucharist, Pope Benedict emphasized how for priests "the secret of their sanctification lies precisely in the Eucharist":

By virtue of sacred Orders, the priest receives the gift of and commitment to repeating in the Sacrament the gestures and words with which Jesus instituted the memorial of his Pasch at the Last Supper. This great miracle of love, which the priest is called ever more faithfully to witness and proclaim...is renewed in his hands. This is the reason why the priest must be first and foremost an adorer who contemplates the Eucharist, starting from the very moment in which he celebrates it. We are well aware that the validity of the Sacrament does not depend on the holiness of the celebrant, but its effectiveness for him and for others will be all the greater the deeper the faith, the more ardent the love and the more fervent the spirit of prayer with which he lives it.

As well as mentioning John Chrysostom "doctor of the Eucharist" and Padre Pio, St Pius of Pietrelcina who edified the faith and devotion of all in his celebration of the Eucharist, Pope Benedict concluded:

Thinking of priests in love with the Eucharist, we cannot in addition forget St John Mary Vianney, the humble parish priest of Ars at the time of the French Revolution. With the holiness of his life and his pastoral zeal, he succeeded in making that little village a model Christian community, enlivened by the Word of God and by the sacraments.²⁶

Mary as Model, Priesthood and the Marian Principle in the Church

In his first message for the day of prayer for vocations (April, 2006), Pope Benedict summarised much of what we have seen up to now and concluded by pointing to Mary:

Already on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, many allowed themselves to be conquered by Jesus: They were in search of healing in body or spirit, and they were touched by the power of his grace. Others were chosen personally by Him and became his apostles. We also find persons, like Mary Magdalene and other women, who followed him on their own initiative, simply out of love. Like the disciple John, they too found a special place in his heart. These men and women, who, through Jesus, knew the mystery of the love of the Father, represent the variety of vocations which have always been present in the Church. The model of one who is called to give witness in a particular manner to the love of God, is Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who, in her pilgrimage of faith, is directly associated with the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption.

Mary is the prototype of those who are called as well as the model of fidelity to vocation. Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, with her "fiat" ("behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done unto me according to your word" [Lk 1:38]), Mary lets the Word become flesh in her. Mary's initial "yes" is not simply a one-off event. It begins a journey towards a second "yes" spoken at the foot of the Cross. It is the Fourth Gospel that presents us with the core of Mary's vocation in its embrace. Opening not only to God (cf Lk 1:38), her motherhood now stretches towards all of the Church and humanity (Jn 19:25-27).²⁷ In "losing", as it were, "her" God (her divine Son, Jesus), and welcoming in the place of Jesus one of his disciples (the Beloved Disciple), she opens without reserve to others, to all of us, to the whole of humanity. It is her vocation fully disclosed.

The Spirit, Church and Mary are intimately linked.²⁸ Mary's "journey of faith" can be described as a "Way of Mary", a *via Mariae*, that all Christians, but especially those called to priestly ministry, can follow under the prompting of the Holy Spirit.²⁹ It is made up of stages of a spiritual journey that priests too travel:

Mary is the woman through whom the Lord came into this world. Conceiving as a virgin out of obedience, receiving the Son of God as a gift to then loose him and,

²⁶ The Angelus Message, Casel Gandolfo, 18 September 2005.

²⁷ Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus*, pp. 132-152.

²⁸ See Karl Rahner, *Meditations on Priestly Life* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973), pp. 249-264.

²⁹ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (16 October 2002), n.24.

with empty hands, simply wait for Pentecost - that was her journey. The Church is in her, all of us are in her. In her is the life of those called by Christ and gathered by him; in her too there's the vocation to the perfection of love in the "imperfection" of the form of life; the calling to pure totality that is to be found in pure provisionality and in pure emptiness. Mary is and remains the pre-history of Christ who comes. All those who are called to witness with their life to the Christ who comes, find themselves in her.³⁰

It is significant to note that Pope Benedict, in his homily on March 25, 2006, at the Eucharistic celebration with newly created cardinals, spoke of the Marian principle of the Church, pointing out that it is "even more fundamental" than the Petrine (ie ordained ministerial and hierarchical) principle of the Church. He emphasised how the importance of the Marian principle in the Church was particularly underlined at the Second Vatican Council and in the teaching of John Paul II.³¹ Any consideration of the spirituality of the vocation to ministerial priesthood needs to recover this fundamental "Marian" dimension of all ecclesial vocations.

Though they "differ from one another in essence and not only in degree", as *Lumen Gentium*, 10 puts it, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood are nonetheless interrelated. The call to ministerial priesthood is engrafted onto the primary common or royal priesthood in which we participate through baptism. Taking our lead from Pope Benedict's comments and Vatican II's indications, we could say that the spirituality of the vocation to ministerial priesthood builds upon and is fruitful to the degree it is engrafted onto the Marian priesthood of the perfection of love. In imitation of Mary and, then too, of the first apostles, it is in coming and seeing, living love, living Jesus, following him right to the Cross, living the life of the Trinity, making Love be loved, that we discover the true meaning of priestly vocation.

The Spiritual Contours of the Vocation to Ministerial Priesthood

We have already mentioned several aspects of priestly spirituality, but at this point of the article, we can begin to focus more specifically on typical traits of the spirituality of those called to ministerial priesthood. In his commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews, Albert Vanhoye reminds us that "the only priest, in the full sense of the term, is Christ himself. This is the great Christian innovation".³² Indeed, the First Epistle of Peter indicates that all Christians as a single entity possess a common priesthood that is exercised before God on behalf of humanity. This common priesthood is exercised through the

³⁰ Bishop Klaus Hemmerle, *Scelto per gli uomini*. Rome: Città Nuova, 1995, p. 43 (*translation mine*)

³¹ Since the Council, there has indeed been a new emphasis in the Catholic Church on the fact that all Christians form "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him" (1 Peter 2:9). A whole chapter of *Lumen Gentium* was dedicated to the universal call to holiness and Mary was presented in that document as the model. For this theme of the Marian Principle in the Church see B. Leahy, *The Marian Profile of the Church*. New York: New City, 2000.

³² See Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*. Petersham, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1980, p. 222.

mediation of Christ who alone is the mediator in whom we all find an immediate relationship with God.

Ordained ministers act as instruments of Christ's mediation at the service of the common priesthood of all the faithful. Ordained ministry is essential to the self-offering exercised in the common priesthood of the People of God. We cannot make ourselves a priestly people. We have to be formed by Christ's own mediation mediated to us. This explains the importance of ordained ministry in the Church.

It is a gift from Christ for the Church, a gift born "from above". The texts of the New Testament that describe the characteristics of the apostolic or pastoral ministry "present the ministers of the Church as the living instruments of Christ the mediator and not as the delegates of the priestly people".³³ Ordained ministry services the common priesthood of all the faithful:

A system of sanctification by ritual separations has been replaced by a dynamic of participation and communion, set in motion by the priestly offering of Christ, with the result that now all are invited to approach God without fear and to offer him their whole existence, while at the same time placing this existence at the service of communion among human beings... The priesthood of the Church does not consist in carrying out ceremonies, but in transforming actual existence by opening it up to the action of the Holy Spirit and to the impulse of divine love. From this specifically Christian point of view, the ordained ministers are at the service of the common priesthood, and not the reverse.³⁴

In what way are they at this service? And how does this service shape their spirituality? We could say that already throughout his life, but more clearly after the Resurrection, Jesus calls men to be his living story continuing to reach out to all times, places, generations. He calls men to be his witnesses, of him who has come, to spread his call and mercy (cf. Jn 20: 21-22; Acts 1:8). The basic form of this call is the Apostles. In a neat expression Klaus Hemmerle writes ordained ministers are "called to transmit the call".³⁵

They are to spread the message to the ends of the earth. They are to gather the people of God together so that the *one* body of Christ is made up in the reciprocity of gifts and services. They are to render the Lord himself present while the people offer the sacrifice of praise. They stand before the Father in the name of Christ and in the name of the Church and all humanity.

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* n.16, sums this up as follows:

The relation of the priest to Jesus Christ, and in him to his Church, is found in the very being of the priest by virtue of his sacramental consecration/anointing and in his activity, that is, in his mission or ministry. In particular, the priest minister is the servant of Christ present in the Church as mystery, communion and mission. In virtue of his participation in the 'anointing' and 'mission' of Christ, the priest can continue

³³ Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, p. 316.

³⁴ Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest* pp.314-315.

³⁵ Hemmerle, *Scelto per gli uomini*, p. 43

Christ's prayer, word, sacrifice and salvific action in the Church. In this way, the priest is a servant of the Church as mystery because he actuates the Church's sacramental signs of the presence of the risen Christ. He is a servant of the Church as communion because -- in union with the bishop and closely related to the presbyterate -- he builds up the unity of the Church community in the harmony of diverse vocations, charisms and services. Finally, the priest is a servant to the Church as mission because he makes the community a herald and witness of the Gospel.

It follows that the vocation to ministerial priesthood involves a fundamental identification with Jesus Christ who, as Mediator, became a "nothingness" of love in order to generate and build the Church as mystery, communion and mission. Priestly spirituality is a matter of shaping one's life in love as "priest" and "victim", letting Jesus, himself *The* priest and victim live and work in one's life and ministry.

Those called to serve as instruments of the Crucified and Risen are required to be channels that let the One Mediator, the Crucified and Risen Christ, shepherd, teach and sanctify. It is clear, therefore, that while, on the one hand, what we have already reviewed above holds true for those called to ministerial priesthood, it is also the case that their response will take on its own particular hue in conformity with their calling to be priests-Christ, priests-victims for humanity, priests ready to give their lives for everyone, priests builders of the Church communion.

At least four basic contours of the spirituality of vocation to ministerial priesthood can be outlined at this point.³⁶ It should be underlined that all the points mentioned below can only be lived under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the great and self-effacing protagonist in every vocation story.

Leave everything and be immersed in God! The one called to ministerial priesthood is drawn outside himself to leave the network of relations that his direction heretofore in life presented. He is being called to put God in the first place in his life. God first, not family, not priesthood nor ministerial success. It is easy to become attached to family, things, one's ideas, studies, successes, "treasures". But for those called to follow Christ in the form of letting him, the Priest among the community, work sacramentally through them, it is necessary to take a step and leave everything behind and have the courage to start life again from scratch. And this is a primarily spiritual step that has constantly to be renewed. It's a question of not "having" all that we think we possess or, perhaps more accurately, not simply using everything in accordance with one's own whim and needs but rather in view of that for which God has need of us.³⁷

³⁶ See Bede McGregor and Thomas Norris, *The Formation Journey of the Priest: Exploring "Pastores Dabo Vobis"*. Dublin: Columba Press, 1994.

³⁷ As Canon 1029 of the Code of Canon Law reminds us the Church does expect that candidates to the priesthood have certain qualities: sound faith, right intention, requisite knowledge, good reputation, moral uprightness, proven virtue and other physical and psychological qualities appropriate to ministerial priesthood. All these qualities are to be put to the service of Jesus and his Kingdom.

This leaving all is actually a leaving everything in the hands of God. It is an abandoning of oneself to the call of God. It is immersing oneself on God. And this is poverty, not understood as a miserable deprivation but rather as total gift of self to God and to the Church and humanity.

In putting God who is Love in the first place and not our own resources or weaknesses we become capable of becoming instruments of the love of the Risen Christ working in us and through us. Pope Benedict in the 2006 message for Day of Prayer for Vocations reminds us of this:

In order to answer the call of God and start on our journey, it is not necessary to be already perfect. We know that the awareness of his own sin allowed the prodigal son to start on his return journey and thus feel the joy of reconciliation with the Father. Weaknesses and human limits do not present obstacles, as long as they help us to make us more aware of the fact that we need the redeeming grace of Christ. This is the experience of St. Paul who confessed: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). In the mystery of the Church, the mystical Body of Christ, the divine power of love changes the heart of man, making him able to communicate the love of God to his brethren.

Receive your view of life from God. The spirituality of the vocation to ministerial priesthood requires placing one's desire, will and time at God's disposal and receiving one's view of life from him. It's a question of moving from saying "I" would like to go here or there or do this or that, to what "God" needs me to be or do. It means learning to say not so much "I like this or that" but rather "Jesus in me is happy with this or that...". It's like being on a team in a football game. When the ball is passed to me I need to be mindful of the needs of the overall game rather than my desire to play the ball.

In following Jesus I am called to abandon "comparisons" with other notions and calculations of life I may have had until then. I become who I am to the degree I live a new life. It's a question of being told, as it were, in a new way who I am. In this way I become realised as a person inasmuch as I am "de-constructed". I am myself in being "un-selfish", in letting God re-create me in the everyday life of my circumstances through which his call emerges. I hear his will by launching myself in concrete love of my neighbours, putting the Word of God into practice in the myriad ways offered by life's daily agenda.

As well as poverty, therefore, priestly spirituality also needs obedience, the obedience of letting the Word live my life and so shape it day by day in the circumstances and relationships that mark my existence. At the 2005 World Youth Day meeting with seminarians in Cologne, Pope Benedict commented:

The seminary years are a time of journeying, of exploration, but above all of discovering Christ. It is only when a young man has had a personal experience of Christ that he can truly understand the Lord's will and consequently his own vocation. The better you know Jesus the more his mystery attracts you. The more you discover him, the more you are moved to seek him. This is a movement of the Spirit which lasts throughout life, and which makes the seminary a time of immense promise, a true "springtime".

A young man I know once told me of how, just a month before his ordination as a deacon he had an accident while playing football. While lying on the ground waiting for an ambulance, a lot of things passed through his mind, but by the grace of God he managed to stay calm and he began to realise this accident was Jesus crucified who'd come to visit him. At the hospital it became clear that he was in a serious condition and that he'd have to have an operation. His thoughts immediately went to his deaconate ordination and the possibility it'd have to be put off, but looking at the crucifix on the wall he felt that, beyond everything, what counted was Jesus Crucified alone and nothing else. When he eventually was ordained, even though his leg was in plaster, one idea resounded within him: 'I've given myself to God, I can expect everything...'

It is precisely in following Jesus Crucified and Risen that priests know the fruitfulness of the Cross for their ministry and life. Difficulties and obstacles come, both personally and in terms of ministry in both big and small ways. But all of this negativity, if lived in love of the Crucified Christ who transforms suffering into love, can become an experience of being directed by God in ways we ourselves would not have imagined. Nothing worthwhile, lasting or authentic happens in priestly ministry without the Cross: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). The daily Eucharist as well as frequent confession celebrates this reality.

Bring the whole of yourself into the following of the call to ordained ministry. Priestly spirituality requires that I give of myself not only in terms of my possessions, my will, but my whole life, including my body. It's a question of expressing my decision to base my life on Love through priestly ministry also bodily. And that means my whole body with all its possibility of a future beyond my human life, my body also in its sexual energy capable of giving love and life. All of this is touched by a vocation and transformed by it.

This is an insight that the Latin rite of the Catholic Church has esteemed from earliest times and it continues to underscore the fittingness of celibacy for those called to ordained ministry.³⁸ It is the spousal capacity to love and form a family that most clearly images the God who calls us. Calling another by name out of love and opening up a new future with another, calling new life into existence is a particularly intimate and profound dimension of life that is taken up and transformed spiritually in the call to ministerial priesthood because this call leads to a new spiritual paternity.

³⁸ See Christian Cochini, *The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990); Ignace de la Potterie et al, *For Love Alone: Reflections on Priestly Celibacy* (Maynooth: St Pauls, 1993); Alfons Maria Cardinal Stickler, *The Case for Clerical Celibacy: Its Historical Development & Theological Foundations* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995); Raniero Cantalmessa, *Virginity: A Positive Approach to Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven* (New York: Alba House, 1995).

The theme of the spousal aspect of the human body that results in a man being a gift of himself in self-less, unconditioned service in celibate ministerial priesthood was taken up in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. n. 12:

In his spiritual life, therefore, he is called to live out Christ's spousal love toward the Church, his bride. Therefore, the priest's life ought to radiate this spousal character, which demands that he be a witness to Christ's spousal love and thus be capable of loving people with a heart which is new, generous and pure -- with genuine self - detachment, with full, constant and faithful dedication and at the same time with a kind of "divine jealousy" (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2) and even with a kind of maternal tenderness, capable of bearing "the pangs of birth" until "Christ be formed" in the faithful (cf. Gal. 4:19). (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n.22)

The vocation to ministerial priesthood is not simply a professional training for a job. Life and ministry are linked. Spousal love for the Church, sharing in Jesus Christ's own spousal love for the Church and humanity, is the key. It is not a question of narrowing one's heart but rather expanding it to a love that generates the new universal family of the children of God.

By giving oneself in love, loving the neighbour that passes by in the present moment of life, one's ministry finds fulfilment. Vatican II's decree, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n.14 highlighted how priests "in the practice of pastoral charity...find the bond of priestly perfection, which will bring about a unity in their life and activity." Charity, love is the key. Love, of course, is not sentiment. Pope Benedict's encyclical on love, *Deus caritas est*, provides us with a profound meditation on this theme.

The Gospel love that those called to ministerial priesthood seek to practice has specific characteristics. It requires we see Jesus in each person; take the initiative in love, love our enemy; love one another; love our neighbour as ourselves; make ourselves one with others. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcuta once wrote:

Let those who are called to follow Jesus in priestly celibacy and to share in his priesthood, pray and ask for the courage to give – "to give until it hurts". This giving is true love in action and we can do it only when we are one with Jesus...How completely the priest must be one with Jesus for Jesus to use him in his place, in his name, to utter his words, do his actions... You must continue your Mass after its daily celebration during the Liturgy, by your sincere fidelity to the little moment-to-moment things of life...Yes, the world is in great need of priests, of holy priests, of priestly celibacy, for the world is in need of Christ...³⁹

In the contemporary climate, those called to ministerial priesthood in the Latin rite of the Catholic Church need to be helped to recognise that celibacy is not so much a legal obligation as "a precious gift of God which they should

³⁹ See Mother Teresa of Calcutta, "Priestly Celibacy: Sign of the charity of Christ" in Ignace de la Potterie et al, *For Love Alone: Reflections on Priestly Celibacy*. Maynooth: St Pauls, 1993, pp. 210-219, here, pp. 213-217.

ask for humbly and to which they should hasten to respond freely and generously, under the inspiration and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit".⁴⁰

I recall a priest who works in a minor seminary telling me of how one day a sixteen year old junior seminarian came up to him in the corridor and began to chat. "Father", he said, "You must have a woman!". "What ever made you think that?" the priest replied. To which the seminarian responded, "Because whenever I see you, you are always happy even early in the morning when you come into the refectory". "Don't you believe that God could make me that happy?" the priest asked him. The young man became silent, and reflective. Celibacy is a gift that can be lived with joy. It needs to be witnessed to in joy both in example and in word. True love, lived in the priestly vocation, brings joy.

Be United. A fourth particular aspect of the spirituality of the priestly vocation is community. Jesus came from a divine community to established a human-divine community and live in the midst of this community. This was central to his priestly mediating role. It is clear that those called to ministerial priesthood will necessarily need to keep in view the communitarian dimension of the call. Priests need a home!

A vocation is never for oneself but rather in service of others, of the entire community. God calls a man to be available and at the service of his people. Not only that but he is called to be a member of a community, the presbyterium around the Bishop.

Priests are not isolated solo runners. *Presbyterorum ordinis* insists very much not only on the necessary unity between priests and bishops "with sincere charity and obedience" (n.7), "if they are not to run in vain" (n.14) but also on "communion with their brothers in the priesthood" (ibid.), declaring that "priests are all united with their brother priests by the bond of charity, prayer, and total co-operation, thus manifesting the unity with which Christ wanted his own to be perfectly one" (n.8). Indeed Jesus Christ presented such unity as a condition for the apostolate: "so that the world will know that the Son was sent by the Father" (Jn 17:23).

The marvellous definition of a seminary given in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is noteworthy in this regard: "a continuation in the Church of the apostolic community around Jesus, listening to his Word..." (n.60). A clear criterion of an authentic vocation is the desire to be men of communion, men who make of the New Commandment their way of life. After all, in asking himself why it was that Jesus had sent his disciples out two by two to announce the Kingdom, Gregory the Great replied: "Because it is not possible for there to be love between less than two". (*Quia...minus quam inter duos caritas haberi non potest*).⁴¹

⁴⁰ Vatican II's Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatum Totius*, 10

⁴¹ *Homilies on the Gospels*, 17,1.

Presbyterorum Ordinis recommends there be among priests "a certain community of life" so that priests can "find mutual help in cultivating the intellectual and spiritual life, co-operate better in the ministry, and avoid the possible dangers arising from loneliness" (n.8). And for this reason it is not slow to speak of the need to consider highly and encourage "the associations (among priests) which promote, thanks to fraternal assistance, the holiness of the priests in the exercise of their ministry and which aims in this way to be at the service of the whole order of the presbyterate". Such associations and movements can become nurseries of vocations and can be vital support to those pursuing a vocation and nourish the spirituality both of seminarians and priests.⁴²

In the third millennium that has just begun, the spirituality of the priestly vocation will need particularly to focus on the Church's spirituality of communion. It is sufficient to recall Pope John Paul's blueprint for the third millennium in his apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* n. 42:

To make the Church the home and the school of communion that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning.

To create lively pockets of true, living communion among priests, between priests and bishops, between priests and lay faithful requires promoting and living a spirituality of communion at all levels. The ecclesial spirituality of communion as set out by Pope John Paul clearly resonates in the lives of priests as foundational for their spiritual life:

It is our "heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us".

It means 'an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as "those who are a part of me".'

It makes us "able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship".

A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a "gift for me".

A spirituality of communion means...to know how to "make room" for our brothers and sisters, bearing "each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2).⁴³

Today, if there is one thing in which a priest must be a specialist, it is in *communion*, in unity.⁴⁴ The spirituality and way of life of priests are based on

⁴² See *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 68.

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n.43.

⁴⁴ Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 17.

unity at many levels. To live united in communion together, with their gaze constantly fixed on the Crucified and Risen Christ among the community, in the constant commitment to have him among them through their mutual love, and so radiate his presence to those who are near and those who are distant: this is what it means to be priests today and this is why the heart of the spirituality of the priestly vocation is a communitarian spirituality. Priests, more than ever today are called to live with Jesus the Priest among them (cf. Mt 18:20) through their mutual love.

Conclusion

This article has sought to open up aspects of the spirituality of those called to ministerial priesthood. Above all, it is the lives of those who have found happiness in living out ministerial priesthood that best teaches this spirituality. They make their own and radiate their conviction of the words of the letter to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Eph 1:3-5).

Priestly spirituality lived out in joy attracts. It serenely answers those questions that contemporary men and women ask: Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you really preach what you live? The authentic witness of a priestly spirituality lived out in daily life brings fulfilment not only personally to ministerial priests but also to the world that has such a nostalgia for Jesus, the Priest.

