The Priesthood Today: We’re All in This Together
by James Martin, S.J.

Most Catholics understand that the well-being of our priests depends on the whole parish community. That’s one reason why the Catholic Church is observing a special “Year of the Priest,” which started on June 19, the Feast of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Pope Benedict XVI called for this special year to focus our Church on the priesthood and to encourage priests’ yearning for what he called “spiritual perfection,” the keystone for effectiveness in their ministry. To paraphrase the Holy Father, it’s a good time to strengthen and appreciate our understanding of this ordained ministry.

But what is the state of the priesthood today? In this Update, we’ll take a quick look at that ministry, how it has changed in recent years and what the future may hold.

The Second Vatican Council, which convened in the early 1960s, beautifully described the role of the priest by noting three functions: “preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful and...celebrate divine worship” (Lumen Gentium, 28). Interestingly, most Catholics may be most familiar with “celebrating divine worship,” for example, the Mass. But the Second Vatican Council gives renewed priority to the ministry of the Word, which makes for a Gospel-based priesthood, and to the pastoral care of the faithful, which makes for a service-based ministry.

Many priests find themselves drawn towards one or another of the many models of priesthood that have been popular since Vatican II. For me, one that works well is the “servant leader.” Jesus shows us what a servant leader ought to be when he washes the feet of the apostles at the Last Supper: “For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15). That’s part of the ministry of the bishop, too: the pope himself is traditionally described as the “servant of the servants of God.”

The priest has a special kind of service to the faithful as the preacher of the Word, as the one who celebrates the sacraments and also, perhaps in a more hidden way, in his day-to-day actions: the quiet way he lives his own Christian life, for example, by being kind, loving and charitable. In all this he serves the faithful, and so serves God and the Church by being a servant leader.

We see that role of service clearly when we consider that priests in the Catholic Church are first ordained as deacons. The word deacon, as most of us know, comes from the Greek word diakonos, which means “servant.” Service is a key element of priesthood.

Another helpful model is “preacher of the Word,” which is explicitly mentioned by Vatican II. The priest, like all followers of Jesus, is called to live the Gospel message. But, in a special way, he is asked to be one of the “experts” for the community on the Scriptures, helping to break open the Word for people to enable them to actualize it in their own lives.

Call to Service
Let’s return to another role mentioned by Vatican II: the shepherd. Now, the traditional image of “shepherd” may turn off some people either because they’re not from a farming culture—or because they don’t like thinking of themselves as sheep! But it nonetheless describes well the person who cares for everyone.

Let me illustrate that with a story. In the early 1990s I lived in Kenya and worked for the Jesuit Refugee Service. One day, while driving my Jeep in the countryside, a sheep ran out in front of me, crossed the road and headed off down a hill. Then, from out of nowhere, it seemed, a teenage shepherd, a Maasai boy, ran after the sheep. He clambered all the way down a steep rocky hill, found the sheep and pulled him back up. I couldn’t help but think not only of the image of the lost sheep—which I literally saw in front of me—but also the image of the Good Shepherd, who is Christ. That’s who the priest is supposed to emulate: the one who cares that much for his people, just like that young African boy.

So while for many people the shepherd image may be antiquated, for me it’s a beautiful one, not so much because it talks about the faithful as sheep, but because of the great invitation it offers to the priest—that is, to love.

Those three roles of priest as preacher of the Word, shepherd of souls and celebrator of divine worship are intimately related—because each is a service.

Let’s return to “preacher of the Word.” All Catholics are called to understand and meditate on God’s Word day and night, as the psalms say, but the priest is especially to be immersed in the Gospel. From this immersion he breaks open the Word and guides the faithful through the Gospels, helping to bring God’s Word alive for them. “Shepherding souls” is also a service, in terms of caring for people’s spiritual needs—not only through the sacraments, but also by counseling them, helping them through difficult times and helping them to pray. Finally, the “celebrator of divine worship” leads the community in prayer, especially while presiding at the Eucharist. All these priestly roles flow not just from Vatican II, but fundamentally from the example of Jesus. In short, these are models of service.

The Universal Call to Holiness

None of this means that the priest has any monopoly on holiness or in imitating Christ! The Church speaks of a common call as “priest, prophet and king” that we all receive at our Baptism. One of the Church’s greatest modern scholars, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., wrote in his 1997 book, The Priestly Office, “The common priesthood belongs to the whole people of God....Lay persons share the common priesthood with clergy and religious.”

The ordained priest is the public representative of the Church and has specific functions within the ministry of all believers. But each of the priestly roles can, in a sense, also be seen as the roles of the laity, who are also called to preach the Gospel, to care for one another and gather, under the presiding of ordained priests, to participate in the Eucharist.

A key difference is this: The priesthood of the laity flourishes in the secular world. All Christians are called to be disciples who follow and share in the ministry of Jesus. This means that each of
those roles is broadly shared: In the formal, sacramental life of the Church they are the service of the ordained; in the secular world they are the service of laity. That’s how I like to think of our “common priesthood.”

A Priesthood in Crisis

The decline in ordained priestly vocations has been a deep concern in recent decades. You can attribute that to several reasons. As we discussed in the preceding section, Vatican II reminded people that it’s not simply priests who have a vocation—everyone has a baptismal call. Catholics today see more than one way to follow the discipleship of Jesus. This may have led to less of a desire for the priesthood and religious life.

The second reason may be the decline in religiosity in Western culture. That naturally affects priestly vocations.

The third reason may be a lack of desire for long-term commitment. Divorce rates have risen, couples marry later and it’s harder for young people to make lifelong commitments.

Finally, there is a decline in the respect given to celibacy, which today is seen more as a negative than as a positive—that is, a way of loving many people freely and deeply.

The priest, in recent decades, is also no longer seen as the only mediator between the people and God. Happily, the faithful appreciate more their own participatory role in Mass. Prior to Vatican II, the priest and altar, for example, faced the same way the people faced as a sign of deep reverence to God. The turning around of the altar—which expressed that reverence in a new way by reminding us of the presence of God in the faithful—was an important symbol for the Second Vatican Council.

Some years ago, Bishop Kenneth Untener, of Saginaw, Michigan, when speaking to a group of soon-to-be-ordained Jesuits, mentioned that he liked to play the piano. Then he sat down at a piano and said, “I’d like to play you a song.” The bishop sang (on his own) a familiar hymn. Then he said, “Now I’d like you to sing along with me.” We obliged by singing along. Then he said, “What did you think of the first version?” Wondering where this was all going, we said, “Well, it was enjoyable listening to you!”

He continued, “And what did you think about the second version?” And we said, “Well, it was fun to participate with you and to sing along.”

Then the bishop said with a smile, “The first version is the priesthood before Vatican II; the second version is the priesthood after Vatican II.” It was a good illustration of what happened after Vatican II: The faithful became more involved in not just the Mass but also the Church; they have a greater role; they participate more with the priest.

They were certainly participating before, but now it’s more overt. The same is true in our broader understanding of vocation and the “universal call to holiness” (see Lumen Gentium, Ch. 5).
Occasionally there is talk about ordaining married men, a practice of the first millennium that was stopped for various reasons. (Remember, even St. Peter was married—we know this since Jesus healed his mother-in-law; see Mk 1:29-31). Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of priestly celibacy is the thousand-year-old tradition that we believe is guided by the Holy Spirit. Also, debates over ordaining women to the priesthood have been ruled out explicitly by Pope John Paul II. But one thing is certain: If priestly vocations continue to fall, we will become a less eucharistic Church. Without people to celebrate divine worship, how can we continue to be a Church that is centered on the Eucharist?

The interesting development of accepting married Episcopal priests into the Roman rite, and the presence of married clergy in Eastern-rite Catholic churches, may prompt people to think in a new way about some of these questions.

Let me say that I believe that the most difficult job in the hierarchical Church today is that of parish priest. Think of the tireless work of St. John Vianney, the patron of parish priests. I have unbounded respect for priests who are on call 24/7. They labor with one half to one quarter the staff that they had 40 years ago. They are responsible for Baptisms, weddings, funerals, as well as Masses, as well as administrative functions, as well as confessions, as well as having to drop everything and counsel someone in crisis, or visit people in the hospital whenever someone falls ill—emergencies never come on a schedule.

In our hierarchical Church, I know few people who work as hard as parish priests do. (In the secular world, I would compare them to the on-call schedules of parents of young children.) The responsibility of being on call constantly is something that some people may not know or appreciate about parish priests. Parish priests can hardly say no to visiting the hospital, celebrating a funeral Mass or many other of their duties.

So the Holy Father has wisely asked us to help our priests to grow in holiness. And let’s face it: The scandals of recent years, through the misdeeds of a small percentage of priests overall, have demoralized many of the dedicated, good men who make up the vast majority of the Catholic priesthood. Anything that helps them strengthen a sense of their spiritual call is welcome. After all, we’re all in this together! Our priests need all the help our people can provide, including, and perhaps especially, prayers.

Father James Martin’s Journey

The priesthood is my way of life. But I didn’t have much experience with priests when I was growing up—other than seeing them every Sunday (more or less!) at Mass. As a boy, I didn’t go to Catholic schools. In fact, it wasn’t until my late 20s that I started to think about entering a religious order. At the time, I was working in finance at General Electric. The “fast track” had led me into a job without much reflection, without thinking about what I wanted to do in life or what God’s desires for me were.
Though many people find business a fulfilling calling, deep down I knew I hadn’t made a good choice. After a few years, I grew dissatisfied with the work, and eventually became miserable. I felt I was stuck in the wrong place, and even started to get stress-related stomach problems.

One night I came home, flipped on the television and saw a documentary about Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk. That prompted me to think about life in a religious order. Being a priest in a religious order seemed so beautiful—certainly more enjoyable than what I was doing. It seemed a better “fit.”

But I didn’t know what I was getting myself into! So I jumped in blindly. But from that rather unformed desire, God was able to work. Following some initial explorations and contacts, I joined the Jesuits just two years after seeing that television show. It was the best decision I’ve ever made.

But it wasn’t until I was in the Jesuits for a year or two that I started thinking seriously about what it meant to be a priest. And it’s something I pray about even today: What does it mean to be a good and holy priest? The priesthood, like all vocations—as a parent, a married person, a vowed religious, a single person, as well as any professional vocation like being a doctor or a lawyer—is a beautiful mystery, something to be reverenced for the gift it is in our lives.

St. John Vianney: Patron of All Priests

Born near Lyons, France, in 1786, John Vianney longed to be a priest despite the many odds against him, including his humble origins (as a young boy, he worked as a shepherd) and his limited schooling. As he began his seminary studies, he found the lectures in Latin especially challenging.

Whatever limitations he may have possessed, he did not lack for zeal. He won the battle with the books and was ordained a priest in 1815.

His bishop assigned him to Ars, a remote village in France. The new Cure (one who cares for souls) of Ars, as he came to be known, plunged into his work—restoring the parish church, visiting his new parishioners, teaching catechism. He urged his people to take their Sunday obligation more seriously.

His sermons were simple but fiery. He conducted campaigns to end offensive language, to put a halt to public dances, to close the village taverns.

He was a blend of strictness and gentleness—but he required more of himself than of others. He lived an austere life: sleeping little, fasting often, praying constantly.

John Vianney developed a reputation as a compassionate confessor with a special ability to “read souls.” Perhaps that was his greatest gift: his ability to understand the struggles of penitents and help them come to know and love God in a deeper way. He used that gift sometimes up to 18 hours each day. As his reputation grew, so did the lines of penitents eager to spend time with him in the Sacrament of Confession.
As his life came to an end, in 1859, John Vianney was at peace. For him, there was no more beautiful calling than the one he had answered as a young man. He was canonized in 1925 and named patron saint of parish priests. For the 2009-2010 Year of the Priest, Pope Benedict XVI has named him the patron of all priests. His feast is August 4.—Judy Ball

The Sacred Heart of Jesus

“It is the redeeming love, which is at the origin of salvation, of our salvation, which is at the origin of the Church. Now still, today, the living Christ loves us and presents his heart to us as the source of our redemption....We are called not only to meditate and contemplate on this mystery of Christ’s love; we are called to take part in it....The mystery of the Holy Eucharist [is] the center of our faith, the center of our worship of Christ’s merciful love manifested in his Sacred Heart....”
—Pope John Paul II
(Basilica of Montmartre, 1980)

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