

# Complacency about negative caricatures of priesthood needs to change

One of the privileges and blessings given to a priest is that of presiding at the celebration of the sacraments. Whether it be a sacrament of initiation or of healing or of Christian community, serving in the name of Jesus and being the instrument through whom the Holy Spirit is made present and strengthened in the lives of the faithful both energizes and gives meaning to the life of the individual priest.

Recently, as we were assembling for a baptism, I was asked a probing question by one of the guests that touched on a matter of concern for the Church in many parts of the world today. The individual phrased it in this way, “Father, what do you think is the one thing that the Church could change so that more men might choose to become priests?”

Without presuming to read the person’s mind, I had little doubt that I was expected to answer by identifying one of the laundry list of issues peculiar to American society: the possibility of making celibacy optional, ordaining married men, welcoming women into the ordained ministries,

accepting openly gay men as candidates for priesthood. Because none of these is done in the Catholic Church, each and every one is cited time and again by the public media as reasons for the decline in vocations, and sources of alienation of young people from the Church. However, I personally do not believe that any of these issues is pertinent to the fact that so few men are answering the call to offer their lives in service to the Church as priests.

A number of years ago in a discussion on this very issue a person remarked that he did not think that God has ceased calling men to the priesthood. But rather that the community of the faithful had slackened off on encouraging them to hear and answer the call. I believe his insight is spot on, and something we need to ponder in this “Year for Priests.”

Serving in parish ministry I have the opportunity to be among various and diverse groups of people and to hear what is often said about priests in particular and priestly ministry in general. Suffice it to say that it is often



## *Year for Priests*

By Father Dennis Mende

less than complimentary and encouraging. I am convinced that it is this, more than anything else that is affecting the choice that a person who might sense a call to priesthood will make.

Despite the sins and scandals of recent years, the priesthood is an honorable state of life established by Christ himself and necessary for the Church to be the Church. In every age the Risen Lord calls men to take up this ministry so that they can be instruments of His grace in the lives of the faithful. If there is one thing that ought to change in the Church I believe it is the all too prevalent tendency to be complacent in the face of negative caricatures of priests and the priesthood.

Certainly young people need good role models to inspire them to con-

sider a particular career (in this case, calling) as their life’s work. Yet they also need to hear their families and the faith community speak positively of the place of the priesthood in the Church and the value of good and holy priests in nurturing their faith.

I believe that if all a young person hears about the priesthood is the morbid fascination of the media with scandal or the grousing by parishioners about an individual priest’s characteristics or approach to the duties of ministry, it will only serve to discourage the possibility of one hearing the call to priesthood.

This is why my answer to the question of “the one thing that the Church could change so that more men would choose to become priests” is a change of attitude on the part of the faithful. I believe that the more the People of God speak positively of the value and necessity of the priesthood in the life of the Church, the more will young people who are being called by Christ be encouraged to answer that call.

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