**A Reflection on Twenty Years of Priesthood**

**For the People of St. Bavo Parish**

**April 29, 2020**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

The date was April 29, 2000. Twenty years ago, two Holy Cross religious were ordained to the priesthood at Sacred Heart Basilica, on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. I was one of them; the other was my classmate Terry Ehrman. Until a few weeks ago, I was looking forward to a joyful parish celebration of my 20th anniversary. Although COVID-19 ended that plan rather abruptly, I wanted to at least share with you some of my thoughts upon reaching this milestone.

During my five years in the seminary, I learned many things to equip me for ordained ministry. I studied a great deal of philosophy and theology, and tried very hard to develop a wide array of pastoral skills. After completion of the seminary, I was assigned to a very challenging, multicultural parish, where I had an opportunity to hone those pastoral skills and develop still more of them over a period of nine months as a deacon. Then, after all of that time and hard work, I *finally* got ordained to the priesthood, and I quickly discovered, to my chagrin, that *I was not nearly as well-prepared as I thought*. Celebrating Mass, preaching, and teaching the faith were the easiest parts of my job, even when I had to do them in Spanish. For me, those abilities seemed to come naturally. The real challenges came in the spontaneous one-on-one encounters with the faithful. All of a sudden, people expected me, *a newly ordained priest*, to be an expert spiritual advisor for people of all ages and all walks of life. They would catch me at the most inopportune times and present me with every sort of problem imaginable, and they expected me to listen patiently and have a sage answer at the ready *every time*. For a zealous and idealistic young man like me, who thought that he *should* be able to take care of everybody’s needs and be a perfect model of Christ for them at all times, that kind of pressure was overwhelming at times.

I thought that in order to be a *good priest*, I needed to acquire wisdom far beyond my 33 years of age and reach a state of moral perfection that I had scarcely even approached in the past, and I had to do it *right away*, because a lot of people were depending on me. I wasn’t sure how to do either of those things, but it seemed to me that I was not going to live up to either of my vocations, as a priest or a consecrated religious, until I succeeded. I always felt that I was falling far short of the mark, no matter how hard I tried. Yet, most of the people whom I served seemed to appreciate my efforts and my dedication. They never seemed to judge me as harshly as I judged myself. I reasoned that people would not hold me in such high esteem if they could see all of the carefully hidden flaws which were so apparent to me. However, as time went on, I became more comfortable sharing my weaknesses with people, as well as my strengths. To my surprise, rather than being scandalized or disappointed, they seemed to relate to me *better* and respect me *even more*. They were teaching me an important lesson about priesthood.

As an extreme introvert and quite a capable scholar, I always presumed that my *intellect* would be my greatest asset in my service to the People of God. So, it has been quite a revelation for me to discover that the qualities which people value most in their priests are those which emanate from the *heart*, rather than the *head*. Knowledge and wisdom are certainly important, but not as important as *compassion, humility, sincerity and love*. These are the qualities which allow the priest to speak to the hearts of his people, and allow the people to touch his heart, as well. If the people cannot see how much their priest loves them, and how much he genuinely empathizes with their human weakness, then his words will always ring hollow, no matter how erudite, eloquent or spiritual they may be. That lesson was brought home to me in a powerful way a couple of years ago, when I led a conversation about personal prayer with 45 ladies from our WINGS group. As we discussed our difficulties with distractions in prayer, I shared my own struggles to be quiet in God’s presence and mentioned some techniques that have helped me over the years. Afterwards, many of the women commented that of all the insights that were shared that evening, the one that stood out the most for them was that I, a person whom they regard as a spiritual leader and a man of prayer, struggle as much as they do to pray. That simple, honest admission on my part inspired them to want to pray more, and to implement the strategies that I recommended.

As I have grown older, I think I have become a better priest, not so much because I have acquired more knowledge, wisdom and pastoral skills, but because I have *learned to love* more deeply and more transparently. The change has been gradual, but every once in a while the Lord gives me an unmistakable sign that something new is happening inside me. For example, years ago I established a simple ritual for renewing my vows each morning, as I put on my necklace bearing the symbol of Holy Cross. I ask the Lord to strengthen and protect me to be faithful to my commitments, and to strengthen my trust both in his faithfulness to me and in his loving care for the people who mean the most to me. Among these I include my immediate family and a few close friends, as well as the people whom I am presently serving in my apostolate. As I said that prayer during my first two years in Mishawaka, I always referred to my parishioners as “the people of St. Bavo’s.” Then, several months ago, I found myself spontaneously referring to you as “*my beloved children* at St. Bavo’s,” instead. That subtle change of wording revealed a transformation that had happened within me, without my even noticing.

The current circumstances, when I am unable to celebrate the sacraments with you, have only deepened my affection for my beloved children at St. Bavo’s. Nearly every day, I lament that I cannot do more for you and your families during this difficult time, other than pray for you and post Sunday homilies and weekly meditations on our parish website. As you can probably tell, I put a great deal of thought and prayer into those reflections. From day one, this community has impressed me with your longing for spiritual nourishment. So, I’m still trying my best to “feed my sheep,” without physically entering into the pasture. Through e-mails, cards and other means, many parishioners have expressed their appreciation for these efforts at remote pastoral care, and have indicated that they *are* being fed.

As much as priesthood is a blessing for those whom the priest serves, it is perhaps an even greater blessing for the priest himself. *Every single day* that I get to work in the Lord’s vineyard is a tremendous privilege – one that I try never to take for granted. Most of that service fills me with joy. However, many of the most grace-filled moments that stand out in my memory are the *saddest* ones, when my vocation enabled me to *be Christ* for someone who desperately needed to see *his* face, hear *his* voice, and be touched by *his* mercy. Some of those experiences have been so profound that I later found myself overwhelmed with both *gratitude and grief* as I reflected on them in prayer. Sometimes, through tears, I have even cried out to the Lord, “*This* is why you made me a priest – *for this moment* and *for that person*. Thank you so much!”

For the prayer card that I sent to family and friends twenty years ago to announce my ordination, I chose the words of Psalm 116:12-14 to express beautifully and succinctly my feelings about both ordained ministry and religious life:

*How can I repay the Lord*

*for his goodness to me?*

*The cup of salvation I will raise;*

*I will call on the Lord’s name.*

*My vows to the Lord I will fulfill*

*before all his people.*

For me, profession of religious vows and priestly ordination were both *responses* of gratitude and love to the Lord who had been so good to me. Today, as I look back on twenty years of priesthood, I am even more filled with gratitude. I am grateful that the Lord called me to this life and these vocations, despite (or, perhaps, because of) my unworthiness. I am grateful for all of the spiritual, intellectual and pastoral gifts that the Lord has given me, that I might use them to serve his people well. I am grateful for the formation directors and counselors who helped me during the seminary to mature and heal from some deep emotional wounds. I am grateful for all of the spiritual directors who have guided me over the years, and the many holy priests and religious men and women who have inspired me by their example. And, I am grateful for all of the people whom I have served, for many of them have instructed and inspired me and touched my life more deeply than they could ever imagine.

 I am astonished at how quickly the first twenty years of priesthood have flown by. I can only hope and pray that the Lord gives me many more years of service to share with his people. May God bless you all.