

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Next weekend is our annual seminarian appeal, where the Diocese asks for money to help with the education of our seminarians... our future priests. While this has always held a special place in my heart (and my checkbook), this year it holds an even higher place for me. For those who may not have heard, as of October 1, I was appointed Assistant Vocation Director for the Diocese of Manchester (in addition to my responsibilities as pastor... don't worry, they're not moving me).

Earlier in 2017, the bishop announced the formation of a "Priest Shortage Action Team" (PSAT) which would look at concrete actions that we could take to deal with the current situation of priests, and future extreme shortage for New Hampshire. In case you were unaware, things are bad... and looking worse. Looking across cultural trends, changing the nature or understanding of priesthood would not solve the shortage problem (meaning, we can't just redefine what priesthood is and how it is lived out), nor would it uphold the dignity of what we believe the priesthood to be. In a just a few years, many who have devoted their lives to the Christ and His Church will be retiring. The Bishop, at the recommendation of the PSAT, appointed a fulltime Vocation Director (Fr. Matthew Mason), and two Assistant Vocation Directors (Fr. Marcos Gonzalez, who will work with the Hispanic communities, and your truly, who will be working with the young adult communities). The hope is that we can inspire men to be open and respond to God's call to be priests. We have begun our work, and pray that God will call laborers to the harvest.

Why do we need priests? The priesthood is not simply the one who leads the prayer of the congregation. If that were the case, really, anyone could do it. Rather, there is something incredible that happens when the gift of Holy Orders is bestowed upon a man – he becomes conformed to Christ, and he acts *in persona Christi capitis* – in the person of Christ, the head. When he gives absolution in Confession, it is not the priest who absolves, but Christ who absolves. When he celebrated Mass, he doesn't say, "This is Christ's body," but "This is my body," because it is Christ who is speaking, Christ who is acting in the priest. Without the priest, there is no Mass – which brings the grace of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross to our time here and now. Without the priest, there is no Eucharist. St. Mother Teresa spoke about her work of caring for the poorest of the poor and the dying by saying, "I couldn't continue my work for a single day or a single hour without the Eucharist." Without the priest, there is no Eucharist!

The priest is necessary for the Confession and the Anointing of the Sick, these two Sacraments that bring God's healing love to the world in a most powerful way! I read a story recently that took place following the French Revolution and "Reign of Terror" in the eighteenth century. The Catholic Church was very much persecuted, and many priests, nuns, and Catholic lay faithful were murdered because of their faithfulness. There was a man who bragged that he killed thirty priests with his own hands. After the Revolution, in his old age, he was dying, and his wife, a secretly practicing Catholic, asked a priest to come and minister to him. He entered wearing plain clothes and identified himself as a Catholic priest. The old man, livid with rage, screamed, "If I could get up, I would cut your throat!" And the priest calmly replied, "You already did. But God saved me so that I could save you." The priest then showed the long scar across his throat, reaching ear to ear. The old man was touched by the courage and care of this priest – who had almost died before at the hands of this man, and was now risking death again to try to save this man's soul from hell – and he made his Confession and repented of his sins. (Taken from *To Save a Thousand Souls: A Guide for Discerning a Vocation to the Diocesan Priesthood* by Fr. Brett A. Brannen, pp. 61-62.)

This is just what priests do. They come to heal. They come to forgive. They come to save. They come to bring forth God's grace. They come to pray. They come to offer sacrifice to God for the people of God. They stand as mediator between God and humanity. The priest cares for the sick and the dying. It's just what priests do.

Next weekend, we will have the Diocesan collection for our seminarians. The money collected goes to helping pay for their education and formation to be priests. I don't know how much it costs to send them through seminary, but when I was going through (1998-2003) it cost about \$17,000 per year for my schooling. I can only guess that it has not gone down over the last fifteen years! We need priests! I ask you to be as generous as you can to help us continuing to form good men to be the holy priests that we need.