

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This week is Vocation Awareness week. A vocation is God's calling for our lives. The universal calling is to holiness – God created each of us to be holy. This is important to remember: *you* were created to be holy. No one is exempt from this. Whether we choose to be holy or not is up to us. After the universal call to holiness, we each have different callings. God calls some to married life, others to consecrated religious life, some to holy orders, and some to single life in the Church. My vocation is not yours, nor is yours mine, but we all have a call from God.

The beautiful gift of the priesthood – through which we receive the Sacraments – has been wrought with controversies. At the heart of the matter, though, is that the priesthood is a gift to the Church. Even if we, weak men, have failed to live up to our calling, *the Lord* (and it is always about Him) still provides infinite grace to the Church and the world through the Sacraments. Even from the very beginning, we have seen the failures of the priests and bishops (Judas betraying Jesus, Peter denying Him, Thomas doubting the resurrection, and all of the apostles abandoning Jesus in Gethsemane), Jesus still chose to use these weak men as a means of His grace. (As an aside, please pray for us priests, for we are much under attack of the evil one who wants to take us down... for in taking down one priest, many people leave the Church... it's a most efficient battle plan of the evil one.)

In the midst of these controversies lies another one: why can't women become priests? It seems that the Church is being unjust in not allowing women to have this place of authority and prestige in the Church, hold them back by that "glass ceiling." Such holy Popes as St. Paul VI, St. John Paul II, and even in our day Pope Francis have stated that this is not a matter up for discussion, but is beyond the Church's authority to change. Why? I will answer this question to the best of my ability, but I pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten our hearts so that my words are not only *true*, but also have the power of the conviction of the Gospel.

First, I want to say that no one is owed the gift of Holy Orders – no one deserves it: not me, not Peter Libasci, not Jorge Bergoglio (Pope Francis). This means that there is no injustice, for justice means that we get what is our due – but the priesthood is due to no one, for it is total gift, a calling (vocation) from God.

The most convincing argument I have heard is this: when Jesus, who is God, in union with His Father, chose the Apostles, **He chose only men**. This was not because of a shortage of good women candidates (His Mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and others), but because He chose for it to be so. Some will claim that it was because of the culture and societal pressures that Jesus chose only men at that time – that the culture forced Him, or that the world would not be open to women priests. When looking at this, we recognize how Jesus constantly went against societal norms, and, as God, was not bound by culture – He acted in complete freedom. The other piece is that virtually all pagan religions had priestesses at the time of Christ; the world was used to having women in this role. For some reason, Jesus – who is God, who knows all, and has a beautiful plan for our lives – chose only men to be the priests and bishops. With this as the background, we have to say that it was not a mistake, and knowing God to be ultimately reasonable, He had a reason.

I don't claim that I know the reasons why Jesus chose to do what He did, but the Church has pondered over why Christ chose only men to be priests. At the heart of the reflection, it is not because "men are better at it than women." Actually, when I think about the different aspects of my "job" (the things I do), I know plenty of women that could do it far better than I do. Priesthood, though, is not a job, nor a list of tasks to do, but our faith tells us it goes to the depths of who the person is – it gets into ontology: the being of the person. Jesus, through the sacrament of Holy Orders, changes the person on the level of *being*. When reflecting on this change, the Church looks at Ephesians 5, where St. Paul speaks about relationship between husbands and wives and says that it is in reference to Christ and His Church, which is a great mystery. St. Paul says that Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church is His Bride (remember my oft spoken mantra: "God wants to marry us"). Our theology teaches us that the priest is *alter Christus* (another Christ) and acts *in persona Christi capatis* (in the person of Christ the head), in Holy Orders Jesus changes the man into Himself as *husband*. In this we see the depths of the mystery – that priest is bridegroom, and the Church is bride, that the priest truly is acting as "Father," not just in title, but that's the relationship he is called to have with the people of God.

Our reflection on this reveals that the priesthood *must* be male, because this is the revelation of how Jesus wants the priest to relate to the Church, in being the bridegroom who says to the Church, "This is my body given up for you." The priest acts in the person of Christ in that moment when He is husband to the Church – giving His Body for us.

I know this won't answer all questions or struggles. I hope, though, that it will help to shed some light onto this issue. If you continue to struggle with it, *keep struggling*, but ask God for insight, to know and accept His loving will.