

## **“The Gift of the Priesthood in the Missionary Cenacle Family”**

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Both Father Judge and Mother Boniface were convinced that the Missionary Cenacle needed priests of its own, men shaped by the same spirit and tradition as the Sisters who would safeguard its vision and spirit and together, with them, foster the growing Cenacle Lay Apostolate. Today, when we speak of our ST Brothers we are conscientious about including our Missionary Brothers along with our priests. This leads us to think of our two religious branches as distinguished by gender—the men’s community and the women’s community. When we consider the entire Missionary Cenacle Family, we often distinguish between our religious and lay branches.

However, the Year of the Priest invites us to consider another distinction within our Family, namely, the distinction between the ordained and the non-ordained—or, since some Missionary Brothers have been ordained as permanent deacons—between those ordained as priests and all the rest of us. What, then, is the gift of the priesthood in the Missionary Cenacle Family?

In some circles it’s unfashionable to call attention to the prerogatives of the ministerial priesthood. Priests are repeatedly warned about the dangers of clericalism, and those of us who are not priests are accustomed to reminding those who are of the equal dignity of our vocations! In addition, many things have changed since the early days of the Cenacle. The Sisters, Lay Associates, and Missionary Brothers are now able to pursue advanced degrees in theology, canon

law, and pastoral ministry; they can be called upon to exercise various liturgical and ecclesial offices, give retreats, offer spiritual direction, and assume many other leadership positions in the Church. Only a priest could acquire the necessary preparation to fulfill most of these functions in Father's time, so we can understand why having our own priests was a matter of urgent concern to him. Why is it still important to us?

No doubt Father Judge would be dismayed if anyone in the Cenacle asked that question! The story is told that a Vincentian confrere at St. John's University once accused him of being "a Martin Luther" because he had organized devout lay women and men to undertake "work that is the work of the priest." (Ecclesial People, p. 87) But Father was no "Martin Luther"! Although he sometimes told his disciples that they were doing "the work of priests," he knew that he was inviting them to fulfill their own vocation, the priesthood of the baptized, when he formed them as missionaries. Father understood very well that men called to Holy Orders had received a distinct vocational gift to preach the Gospel, offer the sacrifice of the Mass, hear confessions, celebrate the other sacraments, and shepherd the faithful in the person of Christ. Father held the ministerial priesthood in very high esteem.

Father's esteem for the priesthood is evident in the Constitutions he wrote in 1913 for the Outer Missionary Cenacle: the associates are to respect priests and support them with their prayers. In an early draft of the Rule for the Sisters' community, he put "to be the prayerful allies of priests" among the characteristic "devotions" of the Cenacle; it is included right up there with spreading devotion to

the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Incarnation, the Mental Sorrows of Jesus, and prayer and labor for the unity of the Church. As the “prayerful allies of priests,” the Sisters are to offer constant prayer for priests, encourage vocations to the priesthood, and provide priests with the help of spiritually trained lay apostles. The 1928 version of the ST Constitutions likewise directed the Brothers to cherish a particular devotion to the Priesthood.

The same exhortation to revere the priesthood has been carried forward into our common Rule of Life, art. 15. Here, the idea is explicitly linked to our devotion to the Eucharist. The article begins referencing the Eucharist as “the sun and center of our lives,” and then continues: “We are to have reverence for the sacramental presence of the Lord Jesus, and for all that is related to the Eucharist, especially the priesthood.” In other words, it is because of the special relationship priests have to the Eucharist that we are to honor them.

Priests are the ones who can give us access to the objective, sacramental, personal and real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in Holy Communion; they are the ones who make it possible for our Lord to dwell in our chapels in the Blessed Sacrament of his love. It is through the ministry of priests that the rest of us can join our sacrifices to Christ’s one great sacrifice on the Cross and give God perfect worship in the Eucharistic Liturgy. We know how highly Father valued Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction; these, too, required the ministry of a priest in his day. We recall that he longed for “the greater eating of the Body of our dear Jesus and the greater drinking of his Precious Blood,” that he rejoiced when the Mass was

offered for the first time in some desolate place or in one of our chapels, and that he followed the sacrifice of the Mass around the world, mentally, during his last illness. Surely his intensely Eucharistic spirituality explains his devotion to the priesthood, and his desire that we share this devotion.

Father came to see that the Missionary Cenacle needed priests of its own, men shaped by the same spirit and tradition as the Sisters who would safeguard his vision and spirit and together with them serve the growing Missionary Cenacle Apostolate. He even thought it desirable, for the stability of the charism, that the General Custodian of the men's community to be the superior of the Sisters' community, in accord with the pattern adopted by the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity. This proposal was eventually abandoned, but the fact that it was attempted shows how vitally important Father thought the priestly service of men with the same charism would be to the Sisters. He encouraged Margaret Healy to look to "Holy Trinity Heights" (the men's Cenacle at Silver Spring), promising that the future of the Missionary Cenacle Apostolate would be assured once we had our own priests. According to the "Cenacle Plan" that he laid out in various places, our priests were to take the initiative in opening new missions, then invite the Sisters to join them and they would provide for the spiritual and apostolic formation of the laity in that place.

From the beginning, Mother Boniface and our Sisters shared this dream and were closely involved with its realization. The rather proprietary way in which we typically refer to "our priests," as if they belonged to us as a group, can be traced to

Holy Trinity. It reflects the early relationships at Holy Trinity, where the Sisters knew the candidates for the priesthood as high school boys and young men. The Sisters were more numerous than the Brothers, they had longer training in the charism, and many of them were mature women with considerable life experience. Some Sisters were among their teachers, and others nurtured them with good food, sisterly attention, and affection. Mother Boniface, in particular, is remembered as having a warm relationship with the students on St. Joseph's side, and as having been the "mother of their priesthood." The first young man to attain the priesthood, Fr. Eugene Brennan, was ordained in the chapel of the Sisters' motherhouse at Holy Trinity (1926). Fr. Eugene was "ours" in a special way. As the Sisters who knew him attest, his departure from the men's community (described in Sr. Mary Tonra's *Led by the Spirit*) dealt us a severe blow. It is said that the vigil light kept burning in a small niche in the stone wall of our old retreat house on Solly Avenue was placed there for Fr. Eugene. (I recall how the older Sisters at the motherhouse greeted the news of his return with fervent prayers of thanksgiving and great rejoicing.)

There have been many ST priests since then, of course, and we Sisters have claimed all of them as "ours." We are conscious of the blessing it is to have priests in our own family and to be able to count on their ministry. We feel fortunate that we can count on them to preside at the Eucharistic celebrations for our Cenacle feast days, our professions and jubilees, our retreats and important community gatherings, and of course our funerals. We are grateful when their preaching

appeals to familiar Cenacle themes. We are glad that they understand and appreciate our particular vocation, and that they can encourage and strengthen us with the fruit of their meditation on our mysteries and devotions. They are able to touch our hearts because they know who we are and what we're about. When they preach God's Word, preside at our liturgies, hear our confessions, or offer spiritual direction they speak to us as brothers and friends. We rejoice with the newly-ordained when they come to the motherhouse for a "first Mass," when one of our priests comes to the motherhouse for Christmas and Easter, and in recent years, for their service as our chaplains there.

We are grateful for their companionship and priestly ministry over the long haul. Because our priests are also our "brothers," we experience our Lord's kindness in a special way from their ministry. When they preach, we hear God's Word filtered through minds and hearts formed by our cherished ideals and devotions, and this refreshes and renews our commitment to our charism. Because these brothers of ours are priests, we are able to receive Christ's gifts from men we know well, and to celebrate the Church's worship in its fullness together. In other words, because of their priestly ordination, we are able to "be Church" in the intimacy of our Cenacle Family.

If we Sisters feel entitled to have high expectations of our priests, we also feel bound to support them with our prayers, encourage them, and collaborate with them in ministry wherever possible. We have an intense sisterly interest in their growth in holiness and in the success of their priestly ministry. Their priesthood is

a great blessing for us as we too strive to grow in apostolic holiness in the tradition of the Cenacle, and we thank the Triune God for this gift.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Call to mind the names of our ST priests who have helped you on the path to holiness or in your missionary work. What specific helps did they provide?
2. Think of the particular contributions our ST priests have made to our knowledge of Cenacle history and the preservation of our charism. Make a list, and pray for the priests who did this work for us.
3. What do you think of as the characteristics that distinguish our ST priests from other priests? How do they show themselves the sons of Father Judge?

December 2009