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“The Self-referential Seminarian/Priest”

In his reflections to the College of Cardinals prior to his election to the Papacy, Cardinal Bergoglio reflected upon the fact that the Church is not herself when she becomes “self-referential”, that is self-centered and turned in on herself in a kind of “theological narcissism.” He continued, “When the church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick.”

Pope Francis is very clearly painting us a picture of what kind of seminarian and priest we are to be, and one thing that we should not be is self-referential. The world does not revolve around us; this is the way a child lives their life. While we are called to be childlike, we are certainly not called to be childish or as one author writes, the priest can fall into the trap of remaining a *puer aeternus* - an eternal child or a Peter Pan who never wants to grow up, thus avoiding real responsibility.

We must be careful of narcissistic/individualistic behaviors and tendencies - a real danger for each of us. Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

Today we are seeing in many pastoral workers, including consecrated men and women, an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity. At the same time, the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization. As a result, one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour. These are three evils which fuel one another (EG 78).

Please read up on the increasing problem of narcissism in our society and thus the priesthood by association (article attached). We are not lone rangers; we need to work together as a team and not in isolation (fraternal collaboration is key). We are called to serve the needs of the parish as enunciated by the pastor - serve your pastor and try to build him up in front of his people, remember he stays for the long-haul and you are there for a much shorter assignment. Don't fall prey to divisions in the parish; with parishioners keep your opinions to yourself, especially regarding the pastor. There is an arrogance in our fallen human nature that if not kept in check can take over our personality and lead us to believe that we have all the answers and that everyone around us is leading the Church in error. At times I hear of newly ordained doing their own thing and taking as their motto that of Frank Sinatra, “I did it my way!” Priests and seminarians are assigned by the bishop to serve a particular parish community as their first responsibility, not as a “priest at large.” Never take on anything outside of the parish without

talking it through with your pastor to ensure that it does not conflict with your responsibilities at home. Be humble enough to get denied at times – don't be a crybaby. Trust those in authority over us and do what we are supposed to do in both the little and in the big things (2 examples: Our Father and singing at Mass).

On Holy Thursday, Pope Francis spoke to us about the pitfalls of being “unctuous, sumptuous, and presumptuous” - in other words, becoming self-referential pastors. Tonight I will elaborate on these three vices.

1) Unctuous: We are anointed in baptism, confirmation, and priesthood to become Christ to the world. The Chrism is meant to sink deeply into our souls and transforms our lives. However, sometimes the oil remains only on the surface and does not penetrate to the core of our being. Being unctuous happens when our anointing goes awry. The Sacred Chrism is meant to affect us in the deepest recesses of our hearts and souls; to be Christ at all times. If the oil remains only on the surface, we remain insincere and lacking in integrity. We are to be the same on the inside as we are on the outside. Or do we have as the TV show is called, “Arrested Development”? Or stunted growth in the area of human formation? Do we simply play a role and wear the mask of being a holy person without really desiring to have the Heart of the Good Shepherd? Use your time wisely while you are in formation to allow the risen Christ to heal you: of family of origin dysfunctions, of sinful memories and habits, of unresolved issues. Delve deeply into all of this in prayer, spiritual direction, and at times growth counseling if needed. If not, we will operate out of our own hurts, angers, and we will perpetuate the same dysfunctions in the lives of our parishioners that originally hurt us. The self-referential, oily, smarmy, or unctuous priest lacks the sincerity and integrity needed in the mature Christian and minister of the Church.

2) Sumptuous: We become sumptuous when we become too comfortable in our lifestyle. Pope Francis speaks of this spiritual worldliness in his apostolic exhortation:

Spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being. It is what the Lord reprimanded the Pharisees for: “How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (*Jn* 5:44). It is a subtle way of seeking one's “own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (*Phil* 2:21). It takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be. But if it were to seep into the Church, “it would be infinitely more disastrous than any other worldliness which is simply moral” (*EG* 93).

Jesus desires us to experience the “joy of poverty” (Homily of Holy Thursday) rather than the elusive sumptuousness of lavish and expensive living. I have previously addressed simplicity of life, but it is good to remember that the danger of things or lifestyle can get in the way of our service to God's people; a possessiveness even of our time, which is not our own in the first place. Poverty of time is a part of our death-to-self as a parish priest. The life of any adult is very busy - for instance, parents working and then going to extra-curricular events (sports, ballet, school activities) without any free time for themselves. The “new normal” for those of you who have gone right from high school to college to major seminary is to realize that our lives of service as “fathers” will likewise take on a busy-ness about the Lord's affairs. Embrace poverty of time as a way of life - the days of two hours of play-station are over; of a movie every night

are over; of being able to be free and spontaneous on a whim are over - but trust me, they are not over because you are a seminarian or a priest, but because you are an adult - please learn to accept this as your “new normal.” If you need to whine about it (and we certainly do at times), talk to our Lord about it in prayer, and with your spiritual director, and with your best friend, but do not wear it on your sleeve and please do not burden the faithful with “how busy father is.”

I would like also to say a word about the so-called sacredness of our day off. Pope Francis writes about “priests who are obsessed with protecting their free time.”

This is frequently due to the fact that people feel an overbearing need to guard their personal freedom, as though the task of evangelization was a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God’s love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive. Some resist giving themselves over completely to mission and thus end up in a state of paralysis and acedia.

The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable. As a result, work becomes more tiring than necessary, even leading at times to illness. Far from a content and happy tiredness, this is a tense, burdensome, dissatisfying and, in the end, unbearable fatigue (*EG* 81-82).

We certainly need to take some time off on a weekly basis, in order to find balance and rest in our life as seminarians and priests; but not more than one day. Too often the day off becomes a “sacred cow” or an idol that obscures our call “to serve and not be served.” Talk with your pastor about his guidelines and expectations regarding your day off. Uncommunicated expectations by either of you are a recipe for disappointment.

We have been reminded to have the “smell of the sheep” – our hands were meant for chalices, yes, but calluses too! (exs. parish work days, K of C fish fries, setting up Holy Week, picking up bathrooms on Saturday night). Get your hands dirty serving the faithful. We are ordained to be the servant of all in imitation of Christ. Our identity *in persona Christi* does not put us over the faithful but orders us to their service. Hierarchy does not mean that I am HIGHER than them, but HIER - coming from the Greek *hierus* (a holy ordering). Think of the *Mandatum* of Holy Thursday night when Christ took the form of a slave giving us the example of washing the feet of those entrusted to his care. Pope Francis spoke at the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday of how we are to live this sense of servitude and littleness:

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that priest is very little indeed: *the incomparable grandeur of the gift granted us for the ministry sets us among the least of men*. The priest is the poorest of men unless Jesus enriches him by his poverty, the most useless of servants unless Jesus calls him his friend, the most ignorant of men unless Jesus patiently teaches him as he did Peter, the frailest of Christians unless the Good Shepherd strengthens him in the midst of the flock. No one is more “little” than a priest left to his own devices; and so our prayer of protection against every snare of the Evil One is the prayer of our Mother: I am a priest because he has regarded my littleness (cf. Lk. 1:48). And in that littleness we find our joy (17 April 2014).

Being Christ, *in persona Christi*, demands us to be Christ at all times, therefore we must know Him, encounter Him in our prayer, in our *Lectio Divina*, and in our way of life. The teenagers of my Parish used to wear bracelets with the letters WWJD on them. Do we, who are “professional” religious people, strive to do this in our daily lives? Right now at the seminary? *Christ the Ideal*

of the Priest is the title of a book by Blessed Columba Marmion that I am giving to all of the newly ordained this year. Do we strive to allow Christ to be our ideal deal at all times? Do we know Christ Jesus in order to imitate Him? Again, WWJD?

In our lives is there a sense of radical availability, self-sacrifice, and pastoral presence? These are the hallmarks of real masculine spirituality. Our truest meaning and fulfillment are found in pastoral ministry! Why is it that so many little boys want to be firemen? Because a fireman rushes into dark buildings engulfed with smoke to save people – this is the rescue mission that we are on! Real men rush into the darkness to bring light. We are not afraid to go to an accident scene where there have been fatalities, or go to the hospital to comfort parents who've lost a small child, or enter into the murkiness of families breaking apart to try and bring healing. We are on a rescue mission and it is precisely here that the *puer aeternus* is conquered and our manhood is discovered. Manhood is not found in chopping down trees or running Tough Mudders (however good these activities might be!), but our manhood is discovered and actualized in our pastoral ministry; in laying down our lives in imitation of Christ. As Pope Francis said on Holy Thursday: “unless you ‘exit’ from yourself, the oil grows rancid and the anointing cannot be fruitful. Going out from ourselves presupposes self-denial; it means poverty” (17 April 2014). This kind of poverty of time and possessions draws us out of a self-referential vantage point and gives us the perspective of Christ.

3) Presumptuous: It is evident that the Holy Father is not speaking of presumptuousness in reference to taking the grace of God for granted, but as a behavior or an attitude which is boldly arrogant and offensive. This is clericalism at its worst – thinking that we are superior to everyone around us and that we don't owe anyone an explanation of our behaviors or actions. A perfect example of how not to be presumptuous in the parish is by practicing good communication with your pastor and the parish staff. We are accountable to these good people who are our coworkers in the vineyard; don't be secretive. Let the staff know what you are doing: “I am in the church praying my holy hour”; “I am headed to the hospital for an anointing”; “I am going over to the school”; “I will be in the rectory working on my homily”; “I am going to exercise and I will be back in an hour” (I still tell Minnie where and what I am doing all the time when I am not in the office - we must work as a team with those around us). The point is, our life is one of availability, and the staff help make it possible for us to be out of the office and simple communication goes a long way. At the same time make sure to spend time in the office to be available to the people that you work with and the people who simply walk-in (especially if you are the priest on duty), and take appointments in your office since it is place that is visible and generally there are always others present. Seclusion and isolation are deadly! If you communicate well with the staff they will be your biggest advocates. “Well I am a priest and they don't need to know what I'm doing.” I believe that this kind of attitude expresses the presumptuous and boldly arrogant attitude that Pope Francis is talking about. We are a family and are called to work together. Families who do not communicate well are dysfunctional – and how often does this happen and rectories and Parish offices. The members of the staff are not our personal servants but our coworkers. Talk things through with your pastor, turn to him for advice, ask him every once in a while how you are doing. Be humble enough to take correction even after seminary formation is long over. This is a part of our ongoing formation and conversion to be evermore shepherds after the Heart of Christ.

It is also presumptuous to think that I can miss events or simply show up late for scheduled liturgical celebrations (“they can't start without me!”). I hear of occasions in which priests oversleep and miss required parish events sending the sacristans and the other priests of the

parish scrambling at the last minute - this is simply not fair to anyone! The self-centered/self-referential seminarian or priest doesn't see the needs of others before his own. This is precisely why we take seriously our need to be at seminary events - as they say "so the seminarian so the priest!"

The seminarian/priest whose life is unctuous, sumptuous, and presumptuous is not experiencing the fullness of Gospel joy. The Lord wants each of us to experience his "oil of gladness." This conference should prick each of our consciences on some level - the Pope certainly wants it to! But avoiding being self-referential is not the end in itself, but a pathway to our being more free to live our lives joyfully in relationship with Jesus and the people to whom He sends us to serve. I am very proud of you, and I have great hope for our Church because I believe that you will bring health and healing to our people as you live out your anointing with humility, joy and radically in love for the whole Body of Christ. As Pope Francis said: "The Lord anointed us in Christ with the oil of gladness, and this anointing invites us to accept and appreciate this great gift: the gladness, the joy of being a priest. Priestly joy is a priceless treasure, not only for the priest himself but for the entire faithful people of God: that faithful people from which he is called to be anointed and which he, in turn, is sent to anoint" (Holy Thursday Homily, 17 April 2014).

I wish to close with the paragraph from *Evangelii Gaudium* which I feel sums up the vision of Pope Francis and which will keep us from becoming self-referential seminarians and priests:

Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (*Mk 6:37*) (*EG 49*).

Brothers, let us go forth to our parishes this summer and even out to the peripheries, anointed with the "oil of gladness," and give the hungering world something to eat - the joy of the Gospel!