

A Noble Task

Rev. Prof. Harold L. Senkbeil

One thing about pastoral work: it's never dull. In the course of one day, you tag along with your parishioners on one of the wildest rides imaginable: the rollercoaster of life. Twists and turns, right side ups and upside downs, the peaks and pinnacles of joy and those precipitous downward plunges into darkness and despair—you'll find them all, most every day, somewhere among the sheep and lambs you are called to tend and nurture.

And you're the man; people are looking to their pastor to do and say something that will help them hang on during all that, to help them maintain stability in a chaotic and confusing world, to keep a grip on God when everything around them seems to be in flux.

Now who in his right mind would sign on for such a job? "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer (pastor), he desires a noble task," writes St. Paul (1 Timothy 3:1). Was he a glutton for punishment? Did he know what he was talking about?

I think so. No, I know so.

For thirty-six years now, I have held this office and I've observed the full gamut of human emotions in the people I have served—up close and personal. You get a front row seat on these things in the ministry. Actually, you get in on these things yourself. I have wept tears of joy with those who rejoiced, and I have wept other tears as well—tears of remorse, and fear, and grief—you find them all among the baptized. I have carried the tiny casket of a newborn to its burial, trailed by parents whose hearts were breaking. I have fed the dying with the living Bread from Heaven, and held their hands while they breathed their last.

And I can tell you there's nothing like it in the world. When every other resource dries up, the Gospel and the Sacraments keep on giving. When all earthly possibilities are set aside, the promises of God stay put. When physicians have done their best and it's not enough; after medical technicians turn off their machines and say: "I'm sorry," the pastor still has plenty to give. He's Christ's man, you see, and after

everything else in this world is set aside, Jesus Christ remains.

"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life," says He. And so He is. For those who've lost direction in a confusing, troubling world, He lights the path and leads the way. For those who have come to believe the seductive lies all around them, Jesus Christ gives courage to face the truth of His sure Word. For a world obsessed with death, Jesus Christ alone brings Life—for He Himself has burst the bonds of death and now lives forever in His own resurrected flesh to bring life and immortality to all who trust in Him.

And guess who stands at all those crucial intersections of life? That's right—the pastor! It is every pastor's privilege to be an emissary of life amid death, to proclaim truth to those who've come to believe a lie, to show the way out to confused and hurting people who've lost their bearings—and lost their hearts as well.

But that Way, that Truth, and that Life is not of human origin: it's the work of Christ. He is the bridegroom of His Church on earth. He has gifts for His bride. And when He wants to shower His bride with gifts, He sends them by way of His best man—the pastor. He gives pastors His words to speak; He gives them His bath with which to wash and cleanse; He hands them His flesh and blood with which to feed and heal. Divine and royal gifts they are, each of them and all of them. Yet Christ condescends to give them from His free grace to His beloved bride. And these gifts are the very essence of pastoral ministry.

Best men, that's who pastors are, "best" not because of who they are in themselves, but because of the gifts they bring.

I think St. Paul was right; the ministry is a "noble task." Give it your prayerful consideration, will you?

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