



**Marriage
and the
Priesthood**

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THERE ARE FEW Catholic men with wife and family who have had to face the choice of becoming a priest or remaining a layman. I am one of the few. Late in my thirties and with a number of children, I had to decide whether I could fulfill my vocation as a Catholic more effectively in the clerical or lay state. In other words, I had to choose to be a layman.

Few in the Church are ever presented with the necessity of choosing the lay state. Some, after great prayer and reflection, may choose *not* to become priests. Usually, however, this is a decision that God has *not* called them to the priesthood rather than a decision that he *has* called them to the lay state. It is usually a negative rather than a positive choice. The vast majority of men in the Catholic Church who have never struggled with the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood simply spend their lives as laymen without engaging in a specific

choice to be laymen. They have always been in the lay state and they simply continue in it.

The decisions most laymen struggle with have to do with mundane matters. What should be my major course of study in college? Which graduate schools should I apply to? Do I really want her to be my wife? I've been out of work for three months now; I wonder if I should try the job market in Dallas? All of these decisions are of tremendous importance in the life of a man, and each provides an opportunity for growth in God's grace. But usually a man does not consciously choose that condition within which all those worldly decisions take place—that of being a layman.

The "Pastoral Provision"

In 1982, the Holy See issued a directive known as the "Pastoral Provision" granting permission for certain married clergymen of the Episcopal Church in the United States to be ordained priests in the Catholic Church and to continue in their normal family relationships. Since I had been an Episcopal clergyman before becoming Catholic, I found myself faced with the task of deciding whether I should be a layman or a priest. It was not an easy decision since I had enjoyed the ministry tremendously, but after much prayer and reflection, I decided that God had called me to be a layman. In other words, I *chose* the lay state.

I knew full well that there were occasions when the Holy See permitted the ordination of married men to the priesthood. It was allowed out of esteem for the venerable traditions of the Eastern Churches and out of pastoral considerations for Protestant clergymen who later

came to the Faith. But through my reflections I came to see why this was historically the exception rather than the norm. This period of discernment led me to consider the Catholic vocation to family life and to the priesthood in light of one another and to consider what each vocation demanded of a man. I came to the conclusion that it would be nearly impossible to live both vocations at once.

Centrality of Sacrifice

During my conversion process, one of the things I had found to be most striking about the Catholic Church was the centrality of the notion of sacrifice. In the center of Catholic churches stood the crucifix, the representation of Christ's sacrificial death which brought about the redemption of the world. The principal act of worship was the sacrifice of the Mass by means of which the Church offered the reconciling oblation of Christ to the Father. The culmination of that liturgy was the People of God actually eating the sacrificial victim. Entrance into the Catholic Church was brought about by entering into Christ's own sacrifice, by dying and rising with him in the waters of Baptism. And the ministry of the clergy in the Catholic Church was a sacrificial one. As expressed in the Conciliar decree on the life and ministry of priests, "Through the ministry of priests the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is completed in union with the sacrifice of Christ the only mediator, which in the Eucharist is offered through the priests' hands in the name of the whole Church in an unbloody and sacramental manner until the Lord himself come. The ministry of priests is directed to this and

finds its consummation in it.”¹

Personally priests also sacrificed the opportunity of having a family in order to serve the Church in fuller imitation of Christ. And as I reflected on it, I saw that for Catholics a vocation to marriage was also a sacrificial one entailing a surrender of the spouses to one another and together to their children. So it seemed that sacrifice was at the heart of every Catholic reality. More than that—it seemed the Church was able to see that the cross, i.e. sacrifice, stood at the heart of reality itself.

It seemed to me that the principal characteristic of Catholic life and piety was personal sacrifice joined to our Lord’s own oblation on Calvary. No matter one’s state in Christian life, it was to be characterized by sacrifice. When this is considered in terms of the lay or the priestly state, it is easily recognized that the types of sacrifices called forth will be different, distinct and practically mutually exclusive. If a man lived his married vocation to its sacrificial fullness, it would be almost impossible to live the priesthood with the same sacrificial abandon. A total surrender to one way of life almost precludes the other, even though we know that celibacy “is not demanded of the priesthood by its nature.”² The Church has admittedly permitted married priests over the centuries but invariably as an exception and a concession.

Marriage is seen as an obstacle to the fullness of the priestly life and to the witness which it can offer the world. Conversely, one can say that the priesthood can constitute an obstacle to a full living out of the vocation of husband and

father and to the witness it provides the world.

The priest’s sacrifice

The priest’s life is linked inextricably, indeed mystically, to our Lord’s sacrifice. Jesus came as the sacrificial Victim to be offered as a ransom for many. As such, he was a perfect oblation, offered in its entirety, without any equivocation, without any reservation, without spot or blemish, to the Father. The priest, by God’s grace and the efficacy of the sacrament, joins himself to that sacrificial Victim. He foregoes, as did our Lord, family and wealth and worldly ambition so that there will be no equivocation, no compromise, in his total surrender to the Father in union with the Paschal Lamb.

It is this very abandonment and total surrender of all he has and is which bears the greatest fruit. Through it, he raises up other priest/victims, not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. According to the Council Fathers “The Shepherd and Bishop of our souls set up his Church in such a way that the people whom he chose and acquired by his blood should always until the end of the world have its own priests, for fear Christians would ever be like sheep that have no shepherd.”³ So the celibacy and renunciation of family life of priests are not conditions of sterility, but the source of tremendous fertility.

The fruitfulness of priests is seen not only in raising up sons to follow them in their vocation, but preeminently in their applying to the world the redemptive fruits of Christ’s sacrifice through their very lives. “They are consecrated

to God in a new way in their ordination and are made the living instruments of Christ the eternal priest, and so are enabled to accomplish throughout all time that wonderful work of his which, with supernatural efficacy, restored the whole human race."⁴ Priests themselves, in their very lives in union with Christ, effect his salvation in the world. This is why their lives center around the offering of the Mass. "In the mystery of the eucharistic sacrifice, in which priests fulfill their principal function, the work of our redemption is continually carried out. . . So when priests unite themselves with the act of Christ the Priest they daily offer themselves completely to God. . ."⁵

It is this moral, personal, and sacramental act of complete self-sacrifice which most characterizes the life of the priest. "This sacrifice is therefore the center and root of the whole life of the priest, so that the priestly soul strives to make its own what is enacted on the altar of sacrifice."⁶

If his is a life of complete surrender in Christ to the Father in service to the world, how can the priest compromise it with wife and children? By uniting himself with Christ, the world itself has become his family and everyone in it has a claim on him as they do on Christ himself.

We all know that such a life of complete abandonment is difficult. The forswearing of the joys and satisfactions of family life can at times lead to loneliness, frustration and pain. Yet these difficulties, too, are to be offered to the Father by the priest in his life of sacrifice and can add to the perfection of his offering. The priest renounces wife and family precisely

because they are so good. The state of celibacy does not reflect negatively on the state of marriage. As we are told in *Familiaris Consortio*, "Virginity or celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God not only does not contradict the dignity of marriage but presupposes it and confirms it."⁷ As we know, there is no merit in the rejection of evil; however, there is merit in forswearing a good out of love for God. The Apostolic Exhortation quotes St. John Chrysostom to the same effect, "Whoever denigrates marriage also diminishes the glory of virginity. Whoever praises it makes virginity more admirable and resplendent."⁸

The married man's sacrifice

Marriage is a great good, instituted by God out of love for the crown of his creation, man. Something so beautiful and excellent is renounced only for something more beautiful and excellent still. But as with the priesthood, the real beauty of marriage is seen reflected in the cross. To embrace with abandon and without equivocation the Catholic vocation to marriage is to embrace the cross; it is to enter freely and joyfully into the mystery of Christ's paschal sacrifice; it is to declare one's readiness to sacrifice all for the beloved, even to the point of one's own life.

Familiaris Consortio teaches this very pointedly: "The [revelation of God] reaches its definitive fullness in the gift of love which the Word of God makes to humanity in assuming a human nature, and in the sacrifice which Jesus Christ makes of himself on the cross for his bride the Church. In this sacrifice there is entirely revealed that plan which God has im-

printed on the humanity of man and woman since their creation, the marriage of baptized persons thus becomes a real symbol of that new and eternal covenant sanctioned in the blood of Christ.”⁹ A married couple not only interiorly embrace the cross when they marry, they also show it forth to the Church and the world. “Spouses are therefore the permanent reminder to the Church of what happened on the cross; they are for one another and for their children witnesses to the salvation in which the sacrament makes them sharers.”¹⁰

Although any human life entails suffering, it is not the suffering of Calvary to which marriage gives witness, but rather to the deeper reality even of Calvary’s suffering—i.e., sacrificial, self-giving love. As Pope John Paul II has stated insightfully, “Looking at it in such a way as to reach its very roots, we must say that the essence and role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church, his bride.”¹¹

Just as the Catholic vocation to the priesthood is characterized by sacrifice, so is the Catholic vocation to family life. To embrace marriage and family as a faithful Catholic means a willingness to surrender oneself entirely to that reality and to hold nothing back, just as the priest must do in his vocation. This abandonment to family life manifests three principal characteristics: the indissolubility of the marriage bond, a generous openness to God’s gift of life, and service to the world and

to the Church. And all of these must be fostered and nurtured, formed and informed, by sacrificial love. When these characteristics are acknowledged and lived, Catholic family life is guaranteed of supernatural fulfillment.

Indissolubility

The indissolubility of the marital bond which provides the bedrock foundation for Catholic family life requires sacrifice—a notion not at all congenial to the modern, secular, hedonistic mind. Although it is a characteristic of any marriage in the light of natural law, indissolubility has come to be associated today almost exclusively with *Catholic* teaching.

Woody Allen, in his movie *Manhattan*, deals with the fragile nature of human relationships in our modern world. As he strolls through Central Park with the girl he loves he bemoans the fact that relationships no longer have any permanency to them and remarks ruefully, “The only ones who mate for life any more are Canada Geese and Catholics.”

Unfortunately, we know that that is no longer statistically the case—but even when the Catholic population falters in living this reality, the world knows what the Catholic reality is. But to live this reality means sacrifice; it means a total surrender to the spouse and to the common project of building up a family; it means a setting of the mind and will to exclude the possibility of a dissolution of the relationship, ever, under any circumstances, and thus calls forth a resolve to sacrifice whatever is necessary of one’s own to maintain that union. There simply are no other options. I remember

being told one time by a woman who was not in the happiest marriage, "I could no more cease being his wife than I could cease being my children's mother."

On the natural plane this indissolubility exists ultimately to serve the good of children. Just as the child before birth needs the womb of the mother for protection and nurture, so the young child and adolescent needs the environmental womb of the family. The preservation of the marriage sometimes requires sacrifice on the part of the spouses, but it is embraced for the sake of each other and of the children. As the Holy Father has said "Family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice."¹² It is the institution of the family which gives meaning to the teaching of marital indissolubility.

On the supernatural plane the indissolubility of marriage exists as a partaking of the unbreakable covenant Jesus Christ has forged with his Bride the Church. This, too, manifests the character of sacrifice, because that covenant was effected by, sealed with, and ratified in the blood of Christ. "Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility that binds Christ to the Church, his bride, loved by him to the end."¹³

If Catholic spouses in their fidelity to one another do not bear witness to the unconditional and irrevocable sacrificial love of Christ for his Church, who in this world remains to do so? We virtually stand alone in the field, upholding this banner of the truth of Christian marriage, a truth which should be known by all simply through the use of their

reason. Thank God Catholics are still able to do so through the gift of his grace. "Just as of old God encountered his people with a covenant of love and fidelity, so our Savior, the spouse of the Church, now encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of marriage. He abides with them in order that by their mutual self-giving, spouses will love each other with enduring fidelity, as he loved the Church and delivered himself up for it."¹⁴ The source of our ability to remain faithful then, is Christ's sacrifice of love which binds him to the Church and us to one another forever.

Openness to life

The second characteristic of the Catholic vocation to marriage and family is openness to the gift of life. Again, this should be a natural virtue acknowledged by all persons of right reason and good will. The truth of the matter is that in today's world even Catholic laity themselves would be entirely bewildered and led astray on this point were it not for the firm and unwavering voice of the magisterium, "the one authentic guide for the people of God," in the words of *Familiaris Consortio*.

If a Catholic fully embraces married life and is open to God's inestimable gift of new life within it, chances are that tremendous sacrifices will be called for. Marriage is basically a vocation to children. The Council tells us that "whenever Christian spouses in a spirit of sacrifice and trust in divine providence carry out their duties of procreation with a generous human and Christian responsibility, they glorify the Creator and perfect themselves in Christ."¹⁵

The Pope and the Council speak of marriage and family in terms of courage, generosity, surrender, and sacrifice. They do not want to delude the People of God with cheap sentimentality about this holy estate and do not flinch from addressing it for what it is—an occasion for calling forth the greatest and noblest sacrifices of which the human person is capable. To present it as something less would be to render God's people less equipped to make the most of it, less ready to see it as an opportunity for heroism and sanctification through suffering. The popes, out of love for us, have been brutally frank and non-sentimental about the nature of this calling. John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* makes the words of Paul VI his own, "To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls." One of the most difficult tasks Paul VI ever undertook was the writing of *Humanae Vitae*, but it was out of his eminent love for our souls that he would in no way diminish the saving teaching of Christ, no matter the personal cost and pain to him.

The sacrifices of parenthood

Tremendous sacrifices are required of those who embrace the Catholic vocation to marriage and an openness to children; sacrifices just as great as those embraced by men who enter the priesthood. The woman goes so far as to risk her very life fulfilling her vocation. She endures the pain and discomfort of carrying the child in her womb; the distended stomach, the leg cramps, the morning nausea, the stretch marks on belly and breast. She suffers inci-

sions, scars, and the shedding of her blood. All of these she bears as proudly as a warrior wears the scars of battle endured out of love for his neighbor and homeland. Each of us is indebted to our mothers for the sacrifices they endured in their vocation to life. The debt is more than we could ever begin to repay. Our mothers have given their blood to bear us, their milk to nourish us and their tears to save us. Their life is one of sacrificial surrender to their husbands and their children in union with our Lord's own life of surrender.

The vocation of a Catholic father calls for no less, whether on the battlefield, in the factory, deep in the mines or in the corporate office. Actuarial tables testify to the shortening of their lives through the rigors of working for their family's welfare. They worry about earning enough to meet their children's needs, to provide them with opportunities they never had. They sometimes take on one, two, three additional jobs to augment the income. They know of the struggles to succeed, the loneliness and temptations of business trips, the fear of unemployment and rejection. But a large, generous family means sacrifice. The pain of a father is deep as he has to watch his son open an envelop Christmas morning with the picture of a bicycle cut from a catalog and the promise that it will be his as soon as enough money can be saved to purchase it. The pain of a father is deep as he sees the disappointment on his daughter's face when she is told he will miss her confirmation because of an important business trip. The pain of a father is profound when the family budget will not permit such luxuries as

soft drinks, ice cream or bacon, or when his wife will not entertain in the home because she is embarrassed by the worn condition of its furnishings.

Being generous with the gift of life brings joys beyond words, but they do not come without sacrifice. It seems that the changing of dirty diapers will never end as it literally stretches on for years. The point is reached where one's greatest desire is for just one full night's uninterrupted sleep without having to walk babies back to sleep, cold-sponge the feverish brow and limbs of a young child, clean up the vomit of another at bedside or sit awake late at night worrying about the adolescent who had promised to be home two hours earlier. The very evening the father had planned to prepare his presentation for the morning sales meeting is the very night his daughter pleads with him to help her finish her science project which is due the next day. He helps her until three in the morning and still has to prepare his sales presentation. Such a life is taxing and hard but filled with joyful rewards which surpass words. Such a life is in imitation of Christ who endured the cross, despising the shame for the glory which lay ahead.

*The family in service to its members,
the world and the Church*

The Council Fathers in *Gaudium et Spes* tell us that "Outstanding courage is required for the constant fulfillment of the duties of this Christian calling; spouses therefore, will need grace for leading a holy life: they will eagerly practice a love that is firm, generous, and prompt to sacrifice and will ask for it in their

prayers."¹⁶ Family life is not easy, and no one knows this better than the Catholic Church which has been the defender, nurturer and sustainer of the family for centuries. But the rewards and joys of family life are so great that one will eagerly sacrifice anything for it. Family life will be enthusiastically embraced out of love for spouse and children as Christ embraced the cross out of love for his Father and for us. As John Paul II tells us "....the function of transmitting life must be integrated into the overall mission of Christian life as a whole which, without the cross, cannot reach the resurrection ... sacrifice cannot be removed from family life, but must be wholeheartedly accepted if the love between husband and wife is to be deepened and become a source of intimate joy."¹⁷

The realities of Christian life in general and the marital vocation in particular are so intimately interrelated that they cannot exist independently. The father is known in the Son and both are loved in the Spirit. Similarly, the spouse cannot be fully loved but in and through the children; the children cannot be fully loved but in and through the spouse. As is said, the greatest thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother. It is in the home that the moral education of humankind begins with its opportunities for mutual expressions of sacrificial love.

One aspect of the primary purpose of marriage is the education of the children who have blossomed forth from their parents' love. They are to be educated both for this life and the next. As the Council said, "....human life and

its transmission are realities whose meaning is not limited by the horizons of this life only: their true evaluation and full meaning can only be understood in reference to man's eternal destiny.¹⁸ But the education for this life and the next is most adequately provided at the foot of the cross. The sacrificial love the child sees in his parents' relationship with one another and with him and his brothers and sisters provides the guiding model for what will bring true joy and peace in his own life. The husband will place himself at the service of his wife and children to the point of offering his life for them as Christ poured out his life for the Church. The wife, knowing that her husband will be sensitive to her every need, gladly submits herself to him as the Church is docile to her Lord. The children learn that giving is the essence of human relationships and naturally begin sharing among themselves and preparing gifts for others.

It is true that family life consists of giving and taking. And if the ratio between the two is 90% giving and 10% taking, it will be a happy, fulfilled home. It is instructive that when *Familiaris Consortio* speaks of the rights and obligations of various members of the family it does so invariably in terms of sacrificial giving. In the section on the rights and role of women, it states, "Above all it is important to underline the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men. This equality is realized in a unique manner in that reciprocal self-giving by each one to the other and by both to the children which is proper to marriage and the family."¹⁹ In other words, the equality of men and women is preeminently an equality of self-sacrifice.

James Coleman, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, has specialized in the study of the American family. He has written that in the past it was customary, when parents ranked those for whom they were most concerned, that the children came first, the spouse second, and themselves last. In recent years, however, there has been a shift in the priorities with people listing themselves first, their spouse second and their children last. The alarming incidence of divorce and abortion today are clear indications of this inverse set of priorities. Professor Coleman has stated that this shift in priorities will have more devastating long-term sociological effects in our country than any other contemporary development of which he is aware.

A family, then, which is tightly knit together on the foundation of the parents' indissoluble union in Christ and their openness to God's gift of life will be prepared to place itself at the service of the Church and the world. In fact, just as the Church extends our Lord's redeeming sacrifice throughout time and space, so, too, does the family. By virtue of their baptism, the members of a Catholic family are members of a royal priesthood and are charged with the task of redeeming the world. Just as Christ is encountered in every sacrament, so the world encounters him in the sacrament of Catholic marriage. Jesus Christ has saved the members of the Catholic family and through them works to save the world. The members of the Christian family "not only receive the love of Christ and become a saved community, but they are also called upon to communicate Christ's love

to their brethren, thus becoming a *saving* community.²⁰

Furthermore, Christian families gather to offer with the priest Christ's redemptive sacrifice in the Mass. Christian families are the source of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Christian families are the fields from which doctors, teachers, lawyers, craftsmen and laborers are harvested, all making their contribution to society. The family fulfills itself by giving itself to the Church and to the world.

***Marriage and priesthood,
different vocations***

If this total sacrificial abandon is characteristic of the vocation to family life, how can it be combined to the vocation to the priesthood? We know that the two vocations are not essentially incompatible, but they are pretty nearly so practically. Both the Catholic priest and the Catholic father are called to a life of sacrifice in imitation of Christ. But not imitation simply in the sense of providing a moral example of the type of life Christ led. Their imitation of Jesus means being taken up into Christ's own sacrifice and offering their lives with his for the redemption of the world. Their respective states in life mean that the one unique sacrifice of Christ takes on a different configuration in each. But if each lives Christ's sacrifice to the utmost within his respective vocation it is difficult to imagine living both in one life.

My own former pastoral ministry within the Episcopal Church bore ample illustrations. There were often conflicts between duties to

one's natural family and to one's parish family. On one occasion I was called to the hospital to baptize a new-born. The baby had meningitis, a highly contagious and potentially deadly disease, and was in isolation. I was dressed in gown and mask before being admitted. However, just prior to entering, I hesitated. What if I carried the disease home to my own children? What if I contracted the disease myself and deprived my young family of a husband and father? Of course I baptized the child, but a celibate priest would not have had even to hesitate. He could go anywhere in service to God's children in need without worrying at all about conflicting obligations.

On another occasion, after becoming a Catholic layman, I was taking care of my sick wife and two of the eight children. My wife was running a very high fever, and so I fixed the evening meal, got all the children ready for bed, cleaned the house and helped my daughter with her homework. I finally dropped into bed exhausted at midnight, but was awakened at 2:00 a.m. by the baby whose fever had risen. That was the last I slept that night. The remaining hours were spent dispensing aspirin, cleaning up diarrhea and walking two crying children. My professional duties still awaited me the following morning despite the disruptive night. When I attended Mass that day the priest apologized for not having prepared a homily. He had been involved in counseling until midnight, he said, at which point he had fallen into bed dog-tired only to be roused at 2:00 a.m. to go to the hospital to minister to a family which had just had a premature baby in

danger of death.

I thought of my own experiences the previous night and how it would have been impossible to have responded as did the priest. And I realized that the night before, that priest had been father to that premature baby and husband to its mother. He was able to bring the grace of the sacraments and the love and encouragement of his ministry into their lives. Because of his priestly celibacy he was free and able to be spouse, father, friend and brother to anyone he encountered in a way in which I could not.

Total vocations

Both vocations are total. No father would have an unlisted telephone number kept from his children. No priest would do so either. No father would hesitate to cancel a golf outing if his children needed him. No priest would either. No husband would dream of not visiting his wife in the hospital. No priest would dream of not visiting a sick parishioner. No husband and father would hesitate to sacrifice all he had for his family's welfare. No priest would hesitate to do the same for his flock.

Presbyterorum Ordinis states that "the priestly soul strives to make its own what is enacted on the altar of sacrifice."²¹ The lay person obviously has a lay vocation but he can carry it out with a priestly soul, making also his own what is enacted on the altar of sacrifice. In the words of the Council, "since He wishes to continue his witness and his service through the laity also, the supreme and eternal priest, Christ Jesus, vivifies them with his spirit and ceaselessly impells them to accomplish every good and

perfect gift."²²

Both the Catholic priest and the Catholic family man have the vocation of sharing in Christ's eternal priesthood, but each according to his state. "Christian spouses and parents can and should offer their unique and irreplaceable contribution to the elaboration of an authentic evangelical discernment in the various situations and cultures in which men and women live their marriage and their family life. They are qualified for this role by their charism or specific gift, the gift of the sacrament of matrimony."²³

The priest, in his life and with his charism of celibacy, witnesses to that eschatological age when men and women will no longer be given in marriage. In him that eschatological age has already broken in upon us. The Catholic couple on the other hand witness to the way in which marriage should be lived in this world. The Catholic priest witnesses to the beauty of marriage by renouncing it completely out of love for God. The Catholic couple witnesses to the beauty of marriage by embracing it totally, with all its heavy demands, out of love for God.

The Catholic priest witnesses to the fact that sexuality is to be placed at the service of the human person by showing that it is possible to renounce its use altogether for a higher good. The Catholic couple witnesses to the proper role of sexuality by using it rationally, placing it at the service of the spouse and of new life. The priest witnesses a life of sacrifice by placing himself entirely at the disposal of his people and his people at the disposal of the world. The Catholic family witnesses a life of sacrifice by

all the members placing themselves at the service of one another and the family at the service of the Church and the world.

The Catholic priest and the family man have parallel vocations, the priest raising up sons and daughters according to the spirit, the father according to the flesh and the spirit.

A priestly vocation

The discussion of the priestly vocation of the family constitutes one of the most beautiful passages of the Apostolic Exhortation. "In effect," the document states, "the baptismal priesthood of the faithful exercised in the sacrament of marriage constitutes the basis of a priestly vocation and mission for the spouses and family by which their daily lives are transformed into spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."²⁴ In the domestic church, which is the Catholic family, prayers and sacrifices are constantly offered to God by way of living the life of Christ in the world. "Only by praying together with their children can a father and mother—exercising their royal priesthood—penetrate the innermost depths of their children's hearts and leave an impression that the future events in their lives will not be able to efface."²⁵ The royal priesthood of the family exercised *not* by doing clerical things, but by being a family, by doing those things proper to family life.

The family, in its own unique way, bears witness to Christ's sacrificial love. While the priest bears graphic witness to the next world by renouncing so many of the goods of this one, the family is fully integrated into this world,

drawing attention to its true goods properly regarded. The mother at the poolside watching her children play in the water on a summer's afternoon bears Christian witness to the young woman sitting on the grass beside her in a way in which a priest never could. The father taking his son and one of his son's friends sailing or rabbit hunting can bear witness to the Christian role of a father to the other boy's father in a manner in which a priest never could. This is what the Decree on Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) calls the "apostolate of like to like." "The apostolate in one's social environment endeavors to infuse the Christian spirit into the mentality and behavior, laws and structures of the community in which one lives. To such a degree is it the special work and responsibility of lay people, that no one else can properly supply it for them."²⁶

As Catholics we live in the temporal as well as eternal order and "laymen ought," in the words of the Decree, "to take on themselves as their distinctive task [the] renewal of the temporal order."²⁷ The family is the principal means of our insertion into society and the means through which we laity make our witness to the world. "The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God himself."²⁸ As such, all social relationships and the virtues which regulate them ideally have their source in the family.

The Church has always borne witness to the primacy of the family as the basic social unit. Relationships within the Church are patterned after familial relationships. Even the common language of the Church illustrates this. Priests are addressed as Father, religious as Brother

and Sister, women religious superiors as Mother. It is no accident that the Counter-Faith of our modern world would reject titles drawn from, in its opinion, outdated social institutions like the family and substitute them instead with the title "Comrade," a title which denies distinctions between male and female and the natural hierarchy of relationships which exists in the family.

Everyone within the Body of Christ is called to holiness, each according to his or her own state. The path to sanctity requires total abandonment and an embracing of the redeeming cross of Christ. The wild abandon characteristic of the committed Catholic allows for no compromise. It remembers with dread the words of our Lord, "You are neither hot nor cold; therefore I will vomit you out of my mouth."²⁹ Each vocation, the priestly and the lay, is glorious and each calls for the totality of the person. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, "It is true that the historic Church has at once emphasized celibacy and emphasized the family; has at once (if one may put it so) been fiercely for having children and fiercely for not having children. It has kept them side by side like two strong colors, red and white, like the red and white upon the shield of St. George. It has always had a healthy hatred of pink."³⁰

Notes

1. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, No. 2, *Documents of Vatican II*, Austin P. Flannery, Ed. (Grand Rapids, 1975), p. 865.
2. *Ibid.*, No. 16, p. 892.
3. *Ibid.*, No. 11, p. 883.

4. *Ibid.*, No. 12, p. 885.
5. *Ibid.*, No. 13, p. 888.
6. *Ibid.*, No. 14, p. 890.
7. *Apostolic Exhortation "Familiaris Consortio,"* Pope John Paul II, (Washington, USCC, 1982), p. 13.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
14. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 48, *Documents of Vatican II*, Austin P. Flannery, ed., p. 950-951.
15. *Ibid.*, No. 50, p. 954.
16. *Ibid.*, No. 49, p. 952-953.
17. *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 34, p. 33.
18. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 51, p. 955.
19. *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 22, p. 20.
20. *Ibid.*, No. 49, p. 46.
21. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, No. 14, p. 890.
22. *Lumen Gentium*, No. 34, *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 391.
23. *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 5, p. 4.
24. *Ibid.*, No. 59, p. 54.
25. *Ibid.*, No. 60, p. 55.
26. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, No. 13, *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 781.
27. *Ibid.*, No. 7, p. 774.
28. *Ibid.*, No. 11, p. 779.
29. *Apocalypse* 3:16.
30. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (Image edition, 1959), p. 97.