
Introduction



My brothers, these are difficult times. I do not need to tell you. No doubt, for the Church, every age has its joys and its challenges. But I sense a time, rapidly approaching, that will be particularly difficult. Washington's Cardinal Donald Wuerl recently spoke of a tsunami of secularism sweeping across our land. Have entire populations of people ever distanced themselves so far from God? For we who are "men of God," this can be especially trying and, at times, painful.

This is the reason for my letters. For a couple of years now, I have felt a growing desire to speak to you as one brother to another, from my heart to yours. I share with you my own reflections on our lives as priests today, as the tsunami washes over us. As one simple priest, these reflections are not the voice of authority, although I hope that the Spirit is somewhere in these letters, no matter how hidden. Nor are these letters the result of any external prodding. They are only the insights and inspirations arising from my heartfelt

prayers for you. May they help prepare us both for the trials ahead.

Embodied in these letters is my vision of what is taking place these days on the surface and some of what might be hidden from first glance. It is the vision of a priest. I see much that is troublesome and, at times, alarming. But I see much more that consoles, encourages, and, at times, even elates. Ultimately, the work of God can never be thwarted. At root, there is in us a confidence and an optimism born of the Spirit. These can never be extinguished.

The majority of my priesthood has been spent with you—for over twenty years as a therapist, confidant, consultant, formator, and spiritual director for priests. When I stepped down from the leadership of a healing program for clergy, the Apostolic Nuncio publicly said, “Only God can reward you for your ministry.” I responded as I truly felt: “He already has.”

We have already been through a lot together. These have not been easy days. But through it all, I think we have gotten stronger. Perhaps it is because we have seen where secularism and sin lead. Before them is only the darkness. We must cry out. Perhaps a few hearts will turn and return. Conversely, we have witnessed where grace and holiness lead. This has filled our hearts with increasing joy. Tasting such truth, we are ever more strongly convicted in our priestly life and in our faith.

This must be the role of the priest today. You and I can see what is happening. It is becoming ever clearer and ever more apparent. The choice before the people is coming ever more sharply into focus. We, like the

prophet Jeremiah, are impelled to speak out (see Jer 20:9). Like St. Paul, we say, “For an obligation has been imposed on me. Woe to me if I do not preach it!” (1 Cor 9:16).

In the midst of such darkness, the light inevitably shines more brightly. “But, where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more” (Rom 5:20). Perhaps this is why our time is so graced and so blessed. A few of our brothers would harken us back to some “golden age” of the priesthood and the Church, variously identified. But if there has ever been a golden age, it is now.

At times, these years have been harsh. And they are not over. We are still being purged. We are becoming more the priesthood we were meant to be. We are becoming holier. In the beginning, sanctity can taste bitter to the mouth, but the bitterness soon turns to sweetness in the soul.

It was not our intention to become holy men. We only heard the Lord’s call and willingly chose to serve. But each year the bar has been raised a little higher. Each trial has caused us to dig a little deeper. Each ordeal has purified the priesthood a bit more. In the surrounding darkness, we begin to shine more brightly.

Where it began, prostrate on the floor, we would never have dreamt of such graces or prayed for them. We endure them now with faith. We welcome what is presented to us. We trust in the One who is worthy of trust. The best of presents comes from our God of divine gifts.

Today, I thank God for the divine gifts he has sent us. Today, I thank God for you.

Thank You, Father



My Brothers,

I begin these letters where I should begin, by thanking you. I am so grateful for you and your priesthood. From the very beginning until now, you have nurtured me in the faith, supported me as a brother, and shared with me the riches of God's beauty and truth. What a wonderful grace you have been for me. And so, I begin as I must by thanking you.

When I was just born, you welcomed me into God's family, pouring water over my head in the name of our triune God and casting out the powers of darkness. You anointed me with the oil of salvation. It was then that I became a member of God's redeemed family, thanks to you. For you, it was probably just another routine Sunday baptism, but not for me. For me, it was the beginning of everything.

I remember you teaching our catechism class. You taught us the faith. You shared with us your own faith. How could I believe if there was no one to share the

Word? You did that. I know you were very busy, but I could see that you enjoyed being with us. Your eyes twinkled a bit, I thought, and you had a big smile for us. I remember. I could tell the faith was precious to you, and so it became precious to me. I thank you.

You gave me my First Communion. By that time, I knew that there could be no Eucharist without a priest. You were there. There are parts of the world today without priests. They have no one to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Today, even in this rich land, it is becoming poorer in the things of the Lord, including numbers of priests. You have remained faithful. You have remained steadfast in your priesthood, and so I have been blessed to receive the Lord's body and blood. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Whew! What would I have done without you?

You might not remember when I became an altar boy. Classes were on Sunday mornings in the parish hall. You were teaching the new servers the prayers at the foot of the altar in Latin, as they were in those days. I simply walked in unannounced and uninvited, and sat down. You didn't ask me why or what. You knew when to keep silent and to let things be. You simply and kindly accepted my presence and so I became one of them.

I liked being on the altar, although I don't think I understood too much, at least intellectually. I learned most from your gestures and your face. Your eyes were focused so intently during the consecration. Throughout, I heard the reverent tone of your voice and saw your actions. You taught me about the Eucharist.

I am not sure I was much of a help to you, really. You welcomed us. I felt welcomed by God. I felt at home there. You and I were surrounded by sacred things, things set apart for God's service. The symbols of cross and saint were part, and are part, of our beings. They and we are one community. It is where we belong. Thank you for sharing these with me.

In adulthood, each place I went, you were there—a faithful priest. Each Sunday you did your best when you preached. Some of you were better preachers than others. But each one spoke the truth. For ten or fifteen minutes each Sunday, we heard the truth preached to us. It was not a small thing. Today, many never hear the truth. All they hear is a cacophony of noise, superficial facts, and half-truths. Each Sunday, at Mass, we hear the truth and we receive the truth into our hearts.

At one point, you asked me if I ever considered becoming a priest. Was Jesus asking me through you? Through his Mother? Perhaps. But it was not yet a crystalized thought.

Clearly, I could see you and your example. You liked being a priest. I could see that people needed their priest and his presence was important to them. Indeed, what could be more important?

When a child was born or a parent died, when someone was to be married or someone was ill, they needed a priest and you were there. At times, it must have seemed mundane to you. But it was never so with us. When we were sick, it was not a small thing to have you enter our room.

These are important moments to us, and we want a priest to stand among us. We want God to be among

us. I know that God is always here, but when the priest comes, it is a unique presence. You truly act *in persona Christi*. Many people love you, some people hate you; it is the same with Jesus. Thus, it will always be.

When I started to think about priesthood, it was you who came to mind. You showed me what priesthood was. This was important. I know you weren't perfect. I didn't expect you to be. But I expected you to be faithful, and you were.

When I entered the seminary, it was you who taught me and formed me. God knows I wasn't the easiest of seminarians. I was anxious to get going, I didn't want to spend so many years studying. You were patient. You taught me scripture, systematics, sacraments, moral theology, and preaching. You supervised my pastoral work, and I learned from you how to be a priest. I made some mistakes. But you were patient.

Do you remember when I was in the seminary and they were thinking of dismissing me? God knows I was a bit hardheaded and stubborn. But you went and literally pounded on their desks (so uncharacteristic for such a gentle man!). Reluctantly, they kept me on. Thank you, Father. I needed someone in my corner precisely at that moment. It was, of course, a priest who intervened. Did God send you?

And so I was ordained. On my ordination day, you were there. After the bishop, you laid your hands on my head. Those actions said it all. We partake of the one loaf, the one cup, the one Spirit. We are brothers united in the Lord.

Now, after many years, I am happily ensconced in priesthood. I continue to be blessed surrounded

by priests. You are my brothers. We pray together, go to the movies and out to dinner, and we travel on vacations together. I am grateful to be part of a priest-support group, Jesu Caritas. We have been meeting monthly for over a dozen years. You know me well, and we support each other.

You continue to hear my confession, and you hold me up when things get rough. There have been some difficult times these last years. We have not always been the Church that we have been called to be. But the public lashing, at times, has been incredible. The fury of hell has been unleashed against us.

Perhaps worse are the judgmental criticisms, snide comments, rageful bloggings, and general dismissal. Some see us as anachronisms or figures from a past, superstitious era. Others simply do not care. I feel sad that they do not receive joy or take in Love's bountiful self-gift. Their ragings and anger, if not checked, will lead to death.

During it all, you have been oh-so-steady. Mass after Mass. Baptism after Baptism. Sick call after sick call. Kindness after kindness. I marvel at you and wonder what it is that sustains you. The cup I drink of, you shall drink. Every era has its crucifixions and its exaltations. We have ours. I have heard it said that the angels only envy us in that they cannot suffer for God as we can. In these days, the angels must be very envious.

Whenever my faith is weak, I only need look at your face to be strengthened. Together we are strong. Together we are priests. It is our faith, not my faith. It is our priesthood, not my priesthood. I would not be

a priest were it not for you, and I would not be able to remain a priest were it not for you.

Together we have been supported by the people. They, too, are our friends and our family. Their love for us feels so much more than we have any right to deserve. It is really their love for Jesus. I hope they see a little of him in us. I trust that they do. That can be the only explanation for such a generous outpouring of love for such flawed souls as ours.

It has been many years since I was ordained. Slowly, I saw you, Father, get old and finally pass away. You ministered until the end. I don't think I have the strength or the great generosity to be the priest that you were. You were a generation of holy men. You formed us and you nurtured us. I would not be a priest today without you.

Now, finally, I belong to the older generation of priests. There are younger priests now. I rely on them, their enthusiasm and their energy. I love their zeal, although at times it needs a little softening. They could use a little more patience. But that will come. Perhaps I can help with that.

And they can help me. I need them. I move a little slower. I need their energy. I tire more easily. They kindly raise my drooping hands. I need their faith. We are priests together.

I thank you, Father, for what you have done for me. I thank you, my brothers, for our common priesthood and our common faith. It is because of you I am here today. It is because of you that priests will be here tomorrow.



A crowd seated around him told him, “Your mother and your brothers [and your sisters] are outside asking for you.” But he said to them in reply, “Who are my mother and [my] brothers?” And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. [For] whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

—Mark 3:32–35