

# Litany

Lying face down on a cold marble floor is one of the most humbling experiences imaginable. During the ordination rite, prior to the Litany of Saints, the priesthood candidates, vested in alb and deacon's stole, lie prostrate while the rest of the congregation kneels. The names of saints and holy ones lingered over me; the echoing music and lives hovered over me as I remained face down in this vulnerable position. Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, Andrew, Mary Magdalene, Francis and Dominic, Teresa, Elizabeth Ann Seton, John Neumann, Frances Cabrini, Katharine Drexel—the list seemed never-ending. Throughout this litany I joined in the prayer, speechless while eternity unfolded in this powerful moment of faith.

My personal litany embraced mother, father, godmother, godfather, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, teachers, and kind neighbors. For me the list also included priests whom I have been privileged to know in my adult life. I know dozens of priests personally and have met or heard about countless others. The fact that only a handful of them served as models and mentors for me does not speak ill of the others; the example of a few has made a deep impression within my heart.

At the end of the deacon and priesthood rites and before the liturgy of the Eucharist, a priest helps the candidates put on the vestments of the sacrament they have just received: either the deacon's stole and dalmatic (outer vestment) or the priest's stole and chasuble. This assisting priest is usually a mentor or a friend who has been supportive in the candidate's journey to ordination.

The priest who vested me at my priesthood ordination had inspired me years earlier during his first assignment after ordination. He was the first priest I had ever gotten to know as a person. Although he was young and energetic, he had countless heart problems stemming from a childhood illness that led only a few years later to his early death following a heart transplant. He rode a motorcycle, drove fast cars, planted a garden at his first rectory, and touched the lives of others by a priestly life filled with sincerity and genuineness.

## Promises, Promises

At ordination a priest promises obedience to the ordaining bishop and his successors. Diocesan priests do not take a vow of poverty, as do members of religious communities in the consecrated life. This difference is one of the least-known facts among people who raise questions about the priesthood. Because priesthood candidates make a commitment to *celibacy* at diaconate ordination, they are already living a celibate life by the time priesthood ordination arrives.

Promises, vows, and commitments are similar in concept; the difference lies in *who* expresses this decision and *to whom* the statement is addressed. Whatever its form, the commitment must always be firmly rooted in love. Love is so misunderstood and so overused as a term that it has become meaningless to many people and confused with everything from lust to nice feelings to raw emotion. In truth, love is commitment, a fundamental orientation toward God, who makes us a new creation in Christ in communion with neighbor and stranger alike. Love goes beyond a satisfying feeling at liturgy or a sense of accomplishment in an act of service.

Paul's famous words about love from the First Letter to the Corinthians are often included in weddings and other religious and secular ceremonies. His purpose is to speak about the nature of a Christian community, a community that can include any group—as few in number as a married couple and as large



as a suburban parish led by a pastor and two assistants. Paul's description of love can serve as the agenda for any ordained minister. Words and actions without love cannot be truly effective.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (1 Corinthians 13:4–8)

Love is never soft, spineless, or devoid of courage. The challenge to the ordained priest is to remain true to love in all seasons, including times when tough love is necessary. Because priests enter ordained ministry motivated by a deep desire to help people, sometimes they get caught in the trap of pleasing people. For many of my brother priests, saying the word no becomes a problem; the priest either has a hard time saying no to any request or becomes so disenchanted that he says no to every appeal.

Yet, the promise the priest makes at ordination functions not as a prison but rather as an empowerment to serve the people of God. A priest can sustain only by love his promise and his commitment to neighbor and stranger when their interests are other than his own. This kind of love is more powerful than the particular love for another person or the sexual love that is expressed within marriage. This love is rooted in the priest's heartfelt understanding of the unconditional love he receives from God, which allows him to have a heart of flesh, not of stone. A heart inspired by God's unconditional love serves as the wellspring for the ordained priest's celibate love.

As a male, I cannot deny my gender. As a priest, I must deal daily with my gender and my sexual identity. A priest elder once confided to a group of young people, who had inquired about how he deals with sexual temptation, that he expects temptation to end "three days after I'm dead!" His wisdom, born from long and faithful service as a priest, rings true in my heart and brings a smile to my face.

My ordained priesthood is not emasculated, as if I could change myself into a gender-neutral person. I am a man, and who I am as a male is intimately connected with my priestly identity. People fool themselves if they imagine that somehow "Father" is above sexual temptation and feelings. As a celibate, the priest is not married and is not involved in sexual relations, but the priest is not a eunuch! My depth of feeling that moves me to love is rooted in all the feelings that make me male.

Feelings—sexual or otherwise—become an issue when a person acts on them in an unhealthy manner. Furthermore, the church's understanding of celibacy is that it is a freedom rather than a burden. By not being deeply invested in one relationship, the priest is free to be available to all God's people.

High school students are invariably curious about the priest's sexual experiences. "Can you be a priest if you ever had sex?" "Have you ever fallen in love?" "How do you handle all those feelings?" Yes, some priests are not virgins; some have fallen in love before and may do so again. Healthy priests acknowledge their feelings; instead of entertaining them, they allow them to pass. I must address, embrace, and transform these sexual feelings into the core of my loving actions; otherwise, my ministerial love becomes intellectualized and disconnected from my heart and ultimately from my vocation. "Three days after I'm dead," perhaps I will be beyond these feelings, but for today I am a man, a priest, a complex being with God-given feelings and emotions that enrich my ministerial priesthood.

(This article is excerpted from *Priests: An Inside Look*, by Rev. John P. Mack Jr. [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press]. © 2001 by Saint Mary's Press.)

