

“HERE AM I, LORD. SEND ME!”

I am seventy-two years old. I have been a ministerial priest for over forty-five years. My priestly service to Our Lord and his Church is done by placing myself in a position to serve you as you seek to follow Christ. This service has involved parish and education ministries. In that time I have taught many students—elementary school children, high school students, Seminarians, Theology students. I love to teach people about who Jesus is and help them to encounter Him as He becomes real for them. For almost forty of those years the Lord has prompted me to host a bi-weekly Bible study class mostly for adults. God has blessed me to be able to officiate at more than five hundred weddings—one just yesterday. I still enjoy such significant moments. They are blessings to me. I have been honored to celebrate and preach the funeral Mass for over a thousand people who have died. I love to preach God’s word and I love to preach as we lay to rest our loved ones.

The waters of baptism I have been blessed to pour over a thousand children and adults. I have no possible way of knowing how many people have experienced Christ’s forgiveness from my praying his words of absolution or the healing touch of my hands. Nor do I have any way of knowing how many thousands of believers have received Holy Communion from my hands. Distributing Communion is always such a moving experience to me to see the faith and devotion of young and old as they draw near to their loving Lord.

In my forty-five years I have presided at Eucharist between eighteen-thousand and twenty-thousand times. The Mass is never old. It is always new. And full of life. And intimate. An encounter with the living Christ. In the sacristy is a plaque that says: *Priest of God, celebrate this Mass as if it were your first Mass; as if it were your last Mass; as if it were your only Mass.* Through God’s grace and the Holy Spirit, those words have taken root in my heart. That same Jesus Christ has touched the hearts and souls of thousands of people whom I have anointed in the sacrament of the sick over those years. There is such a privilege to be with families when their loved ones are sick or dying and be the word and touch and anointing of Jesus Christ to them in those moments. Many times I have been the last human being to be with a person before they died, laying on hands, praying, comforting, reassuring, speaking to them of the depth of love that Jesus has for them. Telling them that He is coming soon and that he will say their name and all they have to do is say “Yes Lord.” And then go with Him. And that they don’t have to be afraid because his love has hold of them and he wants them to be with Him in his kingdom.

There are some who come to me for Spiritual Direction or just to share their life and faith journey with me or to seek guidance in their marriage or wisdom with their kids or parents. In the fifty-six years since I entered the Seminary I have learned how to pray and then how to pray more and then how to pray better and then how to help others to pray more and pray better. Slowly the realization has dawned that I like to pray and that I am good at praying by God’s grace and that Christ wants me to pray—especially for you. It is a privilege to pray for you. It is a privilege to be on the receiving end of your prayers and I know that I truly am—daily and often.

Just like people in marriage or the single life have no way of knowing what lies before them I had no idea what kinds of things I would face and struggle with on my journey as a priest. There have been a few very dark and troubling moments in my life. Most of them were of my own making. But God was always there to see me through. The Lord has never given up on me or turned his back on me and He surely could have but did not. I have been blessed with a great family and a number of great friendships

with men and women that have sustained and nurtured me over those years. I think some people think that the priestly life is a lonely life because you don't have a spouse and children. But I do not believe I have experienced more loneliness than any of you or of those in my own family or among my friends. You know, the Lord really does provide for you if you open yourself to Him. I have great joy and genuine satisfaction in my life and yet the Lord is not finished with me yet. The Lord is still stretching me to be more than I could ever be on my own. The Lord still invites me to surrender to Him as Our Lady did when she said to the Archangel Gabriel, "Let it be done to me as you say."

Today is Priestly Vocation Sunday. All over the world priests are encouraged to speak of their lives as a priest. I have just done so. I want you to know how very important all of you are to me and how much love Our Lord has placed in my heart for you. When I was a young priest one of the parishioners where I was assigned said to me one day that he thought I was a good priest—but that I would never be a great priest. I was hurt. I asked why he said that. He replied by saying that I truly gave myself to all the tasks and ministries of the priesthood and was a truly loving man but that I did not let the love of the people into my heart and soul. And that so long as it was just a one way street, me loving them, I would be a good priest but I would never be a great priest., not until I learned how to let you love me. Many years later I preached his funeral Mass and told that story. I said that it changed my life and made me want to be a great priest, to learn how to let your love into my life. Please know that it is still a work in progress but that I am committed to it. I love being your priest. Please encourage your sons to follow after me. There is a joy here that you cannot imagine.