

THE GIFT OF GOD

Mgr Dónal O Cuilleánáin

On February 14, 1943, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá founded the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross whose membership is comprised of the priests incardinated in the Prelature of Opus Dei and many diocesan priests from the different local Churches whose desire is to live the spirituality of Blessed Josemaría and strive for personal holiness in and through their priestly ministry.

To mark the 50th anniversary of this Society the Regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Ireland preached the following homily during Adoration and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. While his words were specifically directed to the priests present at that ceremony whom he urged to love their priesthood with an abiding and passionate love, they have a relevance for all Christians who, through Baptism, share in the priesthood of Christ. 'Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet 2: 5).

Priesthood in the Catholic Church, whether it be of the ordained minister or of the faithful in general is truly a 'gift of God' and should be appreciated as such. One of its consequences should be the centrality of the Mass. 'Keep struggling, so that the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar really becomes the center and root of your interior life, and so your whole day will turn into an act of worship—an extension of the Mass you have attended and a preparation for the next' (Forge no. 69).

On one of his journeys from Judea to Galilee Jesus passed through Samaria. He arrived at Sichar. He was weary and thirsty. His disciples went into the village to get provisions, and he sat down beside Jacob's well. The scene is familiar to us. We have

all meditated on it frequently, and preached on it so often. I feel I am bringing coals to Newcastle!

Jesus eased himself down onto the ground to rest. Eventually the lady of easy virtue arrived on the scene. She obviously saw him, but ignored him. What else would you expect? It was obvious he was a Jew and she could expect nothing, not even the courtesy of a grunt of greeting, from a Jew.

He was thirsty, probably quite dehydrated. He had no way of drawing water. He positively wanted to be dependent on her. 'Give me a drink,' he said. She was stunned: 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' He replied: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him and he would have given you living water' (Jn 4:7-10).

Thanks for all God's gifts

'If you knew the gift of God.' These words have a haunting quality. They are a challenge to our complacency, to our casualness, perhaps to our lack of faith. So much we have received and continue to receive from God, and so often we fail to acknowledge, fail to appreciate it. Conscious of this human failing, Blessed Josemaría, made an addendum to his act of thanksgiving: for all your benefits, *'pro universis beneficiis tuis, etiam ignotis'*: including the ones I haven't even noticed—the unknown ones.

Let each one of us thank him, the hidden God on the altar, for all his gifts: thank you for becoming man, for being weary and thirsty—that way we recognise your solidarity with us, and we with you. Thank you for redeeming us. Thank you for the happiness contained in our joys and in our sorrows. Thanks for the eternal happiness you have prepared for us.

Thanks for our priesthood

And let the words 'if you knew the gift of God' echo in our hearts. We can be the last to realise the gift of God which is uniquely ours. The gift of being configured with Christ. The gift of being his ministers in dispensing the living waters which the Samaritan women had (understandably) not thought of requesting.

Life goes on, there is a job to be done and we do that job dutifully every day. But if only we realised the gift of God, we would be truly excited, bubbling over with gratitude. In this regard, we can be slow to realise that this gift of God, our vocation, our priest-

hood, is truly a gift. If you have attended an ordination recently (not your own), you may have noticed how the lay faithful have a wise and wonderful appreciation of the mystery of priesthood. They are happy for the newly ordained. They are happy for themselves, for the Church. The sacred mysteries will continue to be celebrated in this as in every generation since Pentecost. The gift of God is once again guaranteed. The living waters will continue to flow and well up to eternal life, in a rising tide that will raise us all up. That's why they rejoice: they may not express it clearly in words, they may feel that priests would do it better, in more technical terms. But they intuit the gift of God. They know the gift of God which is our priesthood. If we only knew the gift of God as well as they.

Slaking God's thirst

In the new catechism, at the beginning of the section on prayer, these same words of our Saviour are commented on: "If you knew the gift of God" (Jn 4:10). The marvel of prayer is revealed just there, beside the well where we have come in search of our water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. He is the first to search us out and it is he who asks us for water. Jesus thirsts. His request springs from the depths of God who desires us. Prayer, whether we realise it or not, is the meeting of God's thirst and ours. God thirsts for our thirst for him' (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2560, my translation).

It is in prayer that we discover and rediscover the mystery and power of the Giver and the gift received. Perhaps we go to prayer out of habit. Perhaps we're even a bit casual. We don't realise he has been beside the well waiting for us. In the Blessed Eucharist he has been waiting for us, for you, for twenty centuries (cf. Blessed Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 537). At times our prayer is dry, maybe even non-existent. And it is he who asks us for water, to slake his thirst for us. Why does he seek our company, when it is we who should be seeking his? He is God, we sinners, Samaritans, outcasts. We carry our treasure 'in vasis fictilibus,' in fragile vessels. 'Si scires donum Dei,' he says reproachfully, and then guarantees us those living waters, sparkling waters which delight and refresh. It is in prayer we seek the most important refreshments. The refreshment we need in order to administer the living waters which well up within us to eternal life for ourselves and for the

faithful. At our peril we neglect prayer. We should regard a half-hour a day, every day, as essential, and particularly on the busy days.

Loving our priesthood

In prayer we learn to love and appreciate the beauty of our vocation more each day. It is always beautiful to witness the human love of a young couple being sanctified in matrimony. It is the love, the sacred love, that gave us life. The sparkle in the eye, the way they embark on life together—the plans, the hopes, even the naivety. It is beautiful to see that same love mature in sacrifice, faithfulness and fruitfulness. It is even beautiful to see the sadness of bereavement in ripe old age.

We know that some marriages don't work out, but most do. We have often heard the sobs of a widow or widower, months after bereavement, in the shadows of the confessional as they pour out their bereaved and loving heart to a patient ear: not yours, they know very well it is the Lord's.

The faithful appreciate the 'gift of God'

Let us learn to love our priesthood like that. We should be passionately in love from the beginning, with a twinkle in our eye and the freshness of youth. And as the years go by, our love should become deeper, maybe less demonstrative, but mature, sensitive, tender and grateful and marvelling at its spiritual fruitfulness, the spiritual paternity of priestly celibacy.

When the time comes for us there is no bereavement. It is the faithful who are bereaved when a holy priest dies, a priest who, independently of his human qualities or abilities, has realised the gift of God.

I think of Fr Michael Shortle who drowned a few years ago, the second member of the Priestly Society to die in this country. At his funeral Mass Bishop Comiskey remarked that never before had he witnessed anything like what he had seen the night before in the church. It was full of young people, in tears. Michael wasn't a particularly charismatic figure, but he was a hardworking, mild-mannered, conscientious priest. He loved his vocation. His people loved him. He and they knew the gift of God.

Mass at the centre of the priest's life

In knowing and loving the gift of God, we strive to love all that

goes with it. Do we, above all, love our Lord in Holy Mass, in the Blessed Eucharist? If we knew the gift of God, we would celebrate our daily Mass as we celebrated our first. Is it obvious to those who attend our Mass that we passionately love the God we worship, the sacrifice we offer, the flesh and blood of Christ we receive and distribute in Holy Communion? Do our actions reveal our passion as in the case of a young couple.

Some years ago I went with a group of students on an over-night hike in the mountains. We arranged to have Mass, in the morning, in a chapel at the foot of one of the highest mountains. It is only used on Sundays. We got the key from the nearby hotel. I have never seen anything so filthy. The altar cloth was black, the corporal was so dirty you would not even dream of using it as a handkerchief or a duster. The sacristy was unbelievable. Somewhere in a corner lying on a heap of rubble were the vestments. Luckily we had all we needed with us for Mass bar the altar, and so we spent a few hours washing and scrubbing the altar and the sanctuary before we had Mass. The boys were scandalised, they lost their innocence, but probably in the long term, they learned that Jesus should never be treated like that, neither by themselves nor by priests.

Christianity: the miracle of forgiveness

The faithful intuit the level of our faith and love from the way we look after the things of God. Do we appreciate and love the sacrifice of giving time to administering the living waters of God's forgiveness in the sacrament of penance? When a General Practitioner sets up practice, he first of all puts up his plate, he lists the surgery hours, and he waits. If he is a good doctor, if he is there, if he is available, if he has a good bedside manner, even if he goes through a lean period at the beginning, he soon builds up his practice. You and I want to heal, we want to cure, we want to administer *all* the living waters that flow from the side of Christ. Let us be patient and wait, and tend those who come. They will bring more. In the meantime let us pray and give the best service to those who do come.

Blessed Josemaría gave many retreats to priests and seminarians. During the early forties, more than a thousand priests a year attended the retreats he gave. He always endeavoured to speak personally with every one of the retreatants. On one such retreat, to-

wards the end, he realised that everyone bar one had come for a chat. He decided to look him up in his room. He was a somewhat gruff individual who kept to himself. Gently Blessed Josemaría made his way into that fraternal soul. The poor man had been the object of outrageous calumnies and attacks. Blessed Josemaría, aghast, asked him: did your brother priests not stand by you? He replied dolefully: I stood by myself. I got together on my own.

Priestly fraternity

Unfortunately this can easily happen and does. If I were the devil, I would certainly have it on top of my do-list to sow division among priests and between priests and their bishop. We all possess a vast treasure in the common currency of God's gift. Let us learn to recognise, foster and protect God's gift in our brother priests. Whatever divides comes from the devil. What unites comes from God. That does not mean we have to think the same way about everything. Diversity does not mean division. Unity doesn't imply uniformity, as we were reminded recently in the document from the Holy See on 'Communio'. Inevitably, we earthen vessels knock against one another, and there is jarring, and chips flying. Let us try to be a focus of understanding, of forgiving and of forgetting. And if the difference is on the level of personal preferences in unessentials, let us be quick to yield. Blessed Josemaría used the analogy of a thick carpet: we should strive to be a carpet on which others can tread softly. And if it touches on the essentials of doctrine, let us learn to have the fortitude to express our view calmly, clearly, without bitterness, wishing to convince rather than score points.

And if this should be so with our brother priests, much more so should it be so with our bishop.

Fostering vocations

A few days ago I was talking to a nun in the liturgical centre at White's Cross. We got to talking about the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament they have there, and about priestly vocations. In one diocese, where there is no shortage of vocations, most of the seminarians come from parishes where there is perpetual adoration. She remarked: the problem is that we are surprised; we shouldn't be. If people pray, if the gift of God is appreciated, the gift of vocations comes. It stands to reason.

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We are all painfully conscious that there is a drop in vocations. The numbers have never been so low. What can we do? If we only knew the gift of God! If we love our own priesthood, if we are diligent in seeking holiness in the exercise of our ministry, if we are clearly happy, then we are good advertisements for the priestly ministry.

Let us not baulk at the difficulties, the problems in the schools, the altar boys evaporating. Our own personal fidelity and a bit of ingenuity will go a long way in ferreting out those vocations we pray for.

Sanctifying the priestly ministry

What has all this to do with the 50th anniversary of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross? Blessed Josemaría was a priest of the diocese of Madrid. He knew and loved his fellow priests, many of whom died as martyrs. In the thirties and forties he gave a lot of time to preaching diocesan retreats and giving spiritual guidance. Fifty years later, priests and bishops who as seminarians attended his retreats still remember clearly the content of his meditations.

Opus Dei came into being as a way of holiness in the middle of the world for ordinary lay people. They sought and seek holiness in the way they work, in the fulfilment of their everyday duties. His spirituality was therefore also particularly suited for secular priests who can and should respond to the universal call to holiness in the exercise of their ministry, their everyday work.

He also realised that the priests who would be incardinated in Opus Dei should be secular, diocesan, in spirit and in law. It was a tricky problem and on 14 February, 1934, he found the solution: the solution whereby there are secular priests to tend to the pastoral needs of the laity of Opus Dei, and an association for other diocesan clergy who wish to make use of the spirit of Opus Dei in the daily exercise of their gift of God.

And what does that mean? Love your vocation, pray, celebrate the sacred mysteries lovingly, be a support at all times to your brother priests, be united with your bishop, foster vocations. Through the intercession of our Lady, we ask for an abundance of that living water for a world which unwittingly is thirsting as never before.

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