

First, thank you to all who express their best wishes on my 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Priestly Ordination. I suppose it's something of an accomplishment. To me, I just haven't quit or died yet. Perhaps the last year and a half have been the greatest test to those. I've always been a forward-looking person, so I am more interesting in what lies ahead than what's in the rearview. However, "big number" anniversaries do provide the opportunity for reflection. How do you manage to remain in ministry 30 years or even 30 months in today's world without losing your love for the Lord, for people, for the world or just losing your mind?

Well, go ahead and lose your mind. Sanity is overrated. And we are called to be fools for Christ. Everything we do, at least in terms of worldly wisdom, is just plain nuts. As long as the Lord is at the center, go ahead and be a little crazy.

And that brings me to what I believe is most important for authentic ministry and ministry that endures for the long haul, the Lord; not the Bible, not the Church, but the Lord. (What is he getting at?) The point is this, there is God, the real deal, He in himself; and there are things that tell us about God. As important as they are, the Bible and the Church (the institution and Church teaching,) are things that tell us about God. They are, year in and year out, age after age, the two things that tell us the most about God and that most regularly lead people to God. However, God is also more than either of these or both of them combined. A Christian speaker on YouTube said quite accurately, if you set up in your thinking the Bible as God or even equal to God, you have committed idolatry. The same is true of the Church. To remain solid in ministry, love of God has to remain at the minister's center—God in himself, the real deal. Two great saints of our age, St. John Paul and St. Teresa of Calcutta both had Christ at their center and their ministries survived enormous changes, trials and disruptions, and lasted for decades.

Out of Love for God comes the second most important aspect of ministry. Jesus asked "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Simon Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love for the Lord has to translate into love for God's people. The call to ministry is the call to fulfill the command to love as Jesus has loved us. It's an ever-expanding circle of love that forgoes exclusivity in order to be available to the next person in need. That's how relationships in ministry most often begin, just as they did in Jesus' own ministry, because someone had some kind of need. When the minister does as Jesus did and loves with Jesus' own love, the minister finds his or her greatest joy.

"O, but Father, any Christian can do that." Yes, they can. However, who among us makes it their life's work to sift through the 2000 years of Christian writings to help all of us to become the best disciples we can be? "Father" takes on the tasks of interpreting the often cryptic Sunday readings, appropriately applying Church teaching, to somehow make this Christian project more than a "weekends only" thing. The parish priest's life is about constantly

searching for spiritual practices that will resonate with his people by using all the tools God has given him. Often times, his best measure of what will work is his own life and experience. If he is brave enough to do this, he becomes as St. Paul wrote, weak and vulnerable for the sake of his people. But therein lies his strength.

The priest, the Religious Sister and Brother each make an other-centered commitment of love that the world says is insane. “What? You have no spouse, no children? No significant other, at all?” No. No significant other, but I have a boatload of children; hundreds and hundreds of family that I love dearly. That’s the vocation summed up. All the other tasks and projects are variations on that theme. The bills need to be paid and the plant needs to be maintained in order to keep the community together. Even in this, it’s really God’s project and I am the caretaker. When the minister accepts the job as given, to walk by faith and not by sight, the fun really starts. We get to witness and sometimes be an active part of God fulfilling his promises. The tender shoot does take root and grow into a strong and mighty tree. The tiny seed becomes the largest of shrubs and things happen that we could not have predicted nor can we explain.

“Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and it has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him.” As good as the last 30 years have been, and they just keep getting better, I expect the years ahead to be absolutely astounding.