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THE SECRET IS SILENT PRAYER

A Meditation for Priests on Holy Thursday

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> And the fire on the altar shall always burn, and the priest shall feed it, putting wood on it every day in the morning …. This is the perpetual fire which shall never go out on the altar. (Lev. 6:12–13)
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> When He was at the table with them, He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him …. They asked each other "Were not our hearts burning within us …?" (Luke 24:30–32)

Every now and then, a younger brother priest would come up to me with these words, "How can we keep the fire of our priesthood alive? After only a few months after ordination, I already feel bored. I feel dry. I am not excited anymore. I might not last." "A priest who is not at peace with himself will not be able to inspire peace in another soul. O priests, you bright candles enlightening human souls, let your brightness never be dimmed" ("Divine Mercy in my Soul," Diary of St. Faustina, 75).

Lost Fire

Every priest knows that feeling of the well drying up and the fire dying. The ordination honeymoon seems to end so quickly and

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monotony soon sets in. Burning out, running on empty—the feeling is all too familiar.

The onslaught of all these feelings boils down to prayer, or more specifically, the lack or neglect of it. Indeed, pastoral action is attractive and emotionally rewarding, and priests tend to be consumed by it. But when we sacrifice personal prayer for the sake of pastoral action, burn out, boredom and monotony will set in fast.

Unfortunately, the first victim in this boredom and burn out phenomenon is the Mass. We offer the Mass haphazardly without noticing it because we no longer examine our consciences anymore. We rush the prayers and omit the songs, forgetting that the face of God is more important than the face of our wristwatch. We rehash old homilies *ad nauseam*. We put on the Mass vestments like we put on our ordinary shirts and pants and after we unvest, we just throw them on the table of the sacristy, in a rush to go to another appointment. The source and summit of our Christian life has become just a duty to do and a source of revenue. Sad! Why? How can we reverse the path?

In our desire to invigorate our seemingly humdrum life we begin to indulge in "other pursuits." We explore hobbies and sports—photography, golf, tennis …. We pursue further studies. We join more socials. Buy more gadgets. Take longer and farther vacations.

But the happiness continues to evade us. "In our age, as in every age, people are longing for happiness, not realizing that what they are looking for is holiness" (Jerry Walls). The fire could not be reignited. We become mediocre and lukewarm and get accustomed to bland, tasteless water. We just submit to the reality that the wine of the Lord is no more.

Find Him Where You Lost Him

It need not be so. You will find God where you lost Him. You lost Him at Mass? You will find Him there again. "… The whole Church draws life from the Eucharist, all the more then must the life of a priest be 'shaped' by the Eucharist. So for us, the words of institution must

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be more than a formula of consecration; they must be a 'formula of life'" (Letter of John Paul II to priests on Holy Thursday 2005, n. 1).

Where in the Mass can we recover the Lord? As a brother to a brother, I encourage you to look at the silent prayers at Mass that we tend to gloss over or even totally ignore or forget because of haste or lack of concentration. "Even before the celebration itself, it is commendable that silence be observed in the church, in the sacristy, in the vesting room, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred action in a devout and fitting manner" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 45).

The priest's silent prayers in various parts of the Mass are personal prayers that will help us to see ourselves not just as ministers for the validity of the sacraments but as fellow worshipers of the priestly people. The silent prayers prescribed for the priests during the Mass are not for the people but for us. These silent prayers remind us that we are not only there to bless; we also need to be blessed. We are not just at the ambo to teach; we are there to be taught also. We are not just there by the altar to minister; we also need to be ministered to. We are not just functionaries. We are not just tools. The Lord calls us His friends.

The silent prayers of the priest at Mass, if properly prayed, will awaken in us that sense of awe and amazement as we perform our holy duty. "This amazement should always fill the Church assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist. But in a special way it should fill the minister of the Eucharist" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 5).

Saint Charles Borromeo said in one of his last homilies, "Another priest complains that as soon as he comes into the church to celebrate Mass, a thousand thoughts fill his mind and distract him from God. But what was he doing in the sacristy before he came out for the Mass? How did he prepare?"

How do we prepare for Mass? There is no substitute to silent prayers before putting on the vestments. Put on your vestments silently praying. Resist chatting in the sacristy. Recollect. When you vest for Mass, you put on Christ. Your alb is white, so must your soul be. As you put on

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your beautiful and expensive Mass vestments, look into your soul and make sure that your soul is more beautiful than your vestments.

Liturgical discipline requires us to cover our secular clothes with liturgical vestments like the white alb or the white cassock. Putting on these white vestments is like putting on a spirit of love and almsgiving. Almsgiving covers a multitude of sins, the Lord says. Love does not hide; love makes us new. The vestments do not conceal; the vestments say you are a new man. Christ is in you, with you. Remember your dignity with humility.

> Sacred silence also, as part of the celebration, is to be observed at the designated times. Its purpose, however, depends on the time it occurs in each part of the celebration. Thus within the Act of Penitence and again after the invitation to pray, all recollect themselves; but at the conclusion of a reading or the homily, all meditate briefly on what they have heard; then after Communion, they praise and pray to God in their hearts. (*GIRM* 45)

Sense of Mystery, Sense of Awe

Do you still pause after saying "Let us pray" before proceeding to read the presidential prayers? This pause for silent prayer is a sign of respect for the people who need to join their prayers to the priest's. This pause is also for the priest to remember that he must carry in his words the unspoken words of prayer from the community. The priest is presiding. The pause after "Let us pray" is a reminder that he is not alone. The whole cosmos benefits from his act of worship. What an awesome act of a priest! You will never completely understand this mystery because if you would, you could die. It is too much to be contained by our limited hearts.

Do you still bow to the altar before proclaiming the Gospel and pray fervently and silently "Almighty God cleanse my heart and my lips that I may worthily proclaim your Gospel"? How important indeed is purity of heart! "Purity of heart is to God like a perfume, sweet and agreeable" (St. Nicolas of Flue). The Lord taught us so at the Mount of Beatitudes. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt.

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5:8). Purity is detachment from all and attachment to our All. Purity is self-emptying so that all that we are can be dedicated to God.

> The pastor should always be pure in thought, inasmuch as no impurity ought to pollute him who has undertaken the office of wiping away the stains of pollution in the hearts of others … for the hand that would cleanse from dirt must be clean, lest, being itself sordid with clinging mire, it soil whatever it touches all the more. (Gregory the Great)

Decades ago, Bruce Lee, a master of the martial arts, said: "You must free your ambitious mind and learn the art of dying. The cup realizes itself only by being empty. Be yourself." This is the purity of heart that is essential before proclaiming the Gospel. Christ speaks to His people through us.

Our lips need cleansing from all the murders they have done. "… the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do" (Jas. 3:5). When our lives deny what our lips proclaim, we bring death to the lives of many. As we stand before the ambo to proclaim the Gospel as written by the evangelists, the people look at us and ask, "Father, what is the Gospel according to you?" The world does not need teachers. The world needs witnesses. We are ordained by the Church to be sent. We are sent to teach but we must talk only when necessary because the most important component of preaching is living the message.

After proclaiming the Gospel, we kiss the book and pray "May the words of the Gospel wipe away our sins." Do we still humbly pray this? The first person who must be changed by the Gospel should be the priest. We kiss the Gospel to show our love and reverence. Not all kisses are born from love though. The Lord surely received many kisses from his sinless mother as a baby, as a child and surely when his bloodied lifeless body was placed on her lap. Remember, too, the kiss on his feet by the repentant woman. And surely you will not forget the famous kiss in the garden of agony from his betrayer. "… are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48). How do we kiss the Gospel? How do we kiss the Lord? We cannot imitate the kiss of his sinless mother because we have long lost our innocence. We can only choose between the kiss of a traitor and the kiss of a repentant servant. When finally you raise your head after kissing the Gospel and begin the

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homily, you teach the people of God as a fellow sinner. Let the Gospel touch us first. The best proof of a spirit-filled homily is not when people applaud us, but when they bow their heads, strike their breasts and say, too, "May the words of the Gospel wipe away our sins."

Humility, Humility, Humility

The life of the priest is a life offering. Therefore, it is not surprising that at the offertory of the Mass, the priest has three silent petitions. "By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." The second prayer is "Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts." Finally, the third silent prayer is "Lord, wash away my iniquities and cleanse me from my sin."

Water is life. Water is a great teacher. Bruce Lee said, "Be flexible. Be formless. Be fluid. Be shapeless like water. You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. Water can flow or it can crash or creep. Be water my friend." Water has the continuity of movement. The water of life is mixed with the wine of joy. "You will show me the path of life, fullness of joy is in your presence" (Psalm 16:11). Our life is Jesus. Our joy is Jesus. "… We have joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we are now at peace with God" (Romans 5:11).

St. Augustine was asked, "What are the ways to God? First is humility. Second is humility. Third is humility." Humility is seeing yourself as God sees you. "Until a man is nothing, God can make nothing out of him" (Martin Luther). God loves humility because God loves Truth. Humility is truth but not only truth; it is truth in love. "Humility, humility, and ever humility, as we can do nothing of ourselves; all is purely and simply God's grace" ("Divine Mercy in My Soul," Diary of St. Faustina, 55).

The humility that is asked of a priest is not about self-deprecation or suppression of our talents. Humility is rather the acknowledgment of the greatness that God has done through us. "What is mankind that

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you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4). And the fruit of true humility is a merciful and forgiving heart. Seeing something divine in others, the truly humble person becomes incredibly, endlessly and foolishly merciful. The proof of humility is compassion. "Humility is the solid foundation of all the virtues" (Confucius). A proud priest is a contradiction. "Let us take care so that our own failure may not cause injury to the Church" (St. Ambrose).

Broken Bread, Broken Priest

As he prepares to give the body and blood of the Lord to his people, the priest prays again, "May this mingling of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it." Do not be afraid. Take courage. As the priest breaks the bread, may he remember the repeated times he broke the heart of our merciful Lord. "O God, be merciful to me for I am a sinner" (Luke 18:13). I always find it heartbreaking to break that bread because the act confronts me with my own brokenness that comes from sin and guilt. But the brokenness of the Lord springs from his love. How far my life is from the life of my Lord!

I must relish the sacrament of penance. I need to return to the confessional right after this Mass, sit there with much patience and compassion because I am myself a sinner. Priests are not angels. If we start to think and act like angels, we will end up acting like beasts. The barometer to gauge the depth of our spiritual life is the frequency of our confession. We may be good administrators or fast builders or eloquent teachers or popular pastors, but if we are far from the sacrament of penance, we are only ourselves. We are not another Christ ….

> The priest's spiritual and pastoral life, like that of his brothers and sisters, lay and religious, depends, for its quality and fervor, on the frequent and conscientious personal practice of the sacrament of penance. The priest's celebration of the Eucharist and administration of the other sacraments, his pastoral zeal, his relationship with the faithful, his communion with his brother priests, his collaboration with his bishop, his life of prayer—in a word, the whole of his priestly existence, suffers an inexorable decline if by negligence or for some

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> other reason he fails to receive the sacrament of penance at regular intervals and in a spirit of genuine faith and devotion. If a priest were no longer to go to confession or properly confess his sins, his priestly being and his priestly action would feel its effects very soon, and this would also be noticed by the community of which he was the pastor. (*Pastores Dabo Vobis* 26; *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* VI).

A Crisis of Saints Among Priests

Right before receiving the Lord in the Eucharist, the priest bows humbly and whispers, "Lord Jesus Christ, with faith in your love and mercy, I eat your body and drink your blood. Let it not bring me condemnation but health in mind and body."

Every reform in the history of the Church started with the reform of priests. The crisis of the Church is really a crisis of saints among priests. We lack saints but we have too many celebrity priests. The luster of celebrities is temporary. The saints will shine like the stars for eternity. May all priests be saints and may I be a saint with them.

What a great mystery, what a great gift the priesthood is! The decreasing number of young men ready to answer the call can be a symptom of a deeper crisis in society—the loss of the sense of mystery and absence or lack of comprehension and appreciation of the meaning of gifts.

> There is spreading in every part of the world a sort of practical and existential atheism which coincides with a secularist outlook on life and human destiny …. The individual … finds himself ever more bereft of that "supplement of soul" which is all the more necessary to him in proportion—as a wide availability of material goods and resources deceives him about his self-sufficiency. There is no longer a need to fight against God; the individual feels he is simply able to do without him. (*Pastores Dabo Vobis* 7).

In a society that is only focused on the palpable and verifiable, on the logical and scientific, mystery is absurd and has no place. In a society where everything seems to be available in the classified ads and the media offers everything for sale, all gifts have price tags and

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no one needs to express thanks. If we regain the sense of mystery and awe, the capacity to dream and wonder, we will regain the meaning of living. If we can say "thank you" and "please" more often, we shall realize that so much in life is a gift and we have so many people to thank and so much to be thankful for. And we can be happy again!

Priests are mystery men. Priests are gifts of God to the world. Priests are gifts of the world to God. I am His priest and I am grateful, forever grateful. "Live the mystery that has been placed in your hands!" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis* 24).

Learn the Art of Dying

On eating the body of the Lord, the priest prays silently, "May the body of Christ bring me to life everlasting." And drinking from the cup he whispers, "May the blood of Christ bring me to life everlasting." As he purifies the sacred vessels, he prays, "Lord may I receive these gifts in purity of heart. May they bring me healing and strength now and forever."

Bruce Lee said: "Success flows from dedication and self-knowledge." What was success for Bruce Lee was holiness for Jesus. Bruce Lee only saw success and nothing beyond it. Jesus pointed beyond success and opened the door to perfection. Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect, Jesus taught. What is the way to success? What is the way to perfection? In this Bruce Lee and Jesus shared a common road map—sacrifice.

If the seed dies, it bears fruit. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). If you want to be my disciple, carry your cross daily and follow me. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Bruce Lee echoed this Christian tenet in these words: "You must free your ambitious mind and learn the art of dying. The cup realizes itself only by being empty."

There is no holiness without the cross. There is no love without sacrifice. How must the priest live out this call to die? Cardinal Sin

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taught me two very important lessons on dying. The Eucharist and the confession are sure ways to the art of dying. Free your ambitious mind through confession. Learn the art of dying through the Mass.

Our vocation is such a great blessing but it can also be a great temptation. The priesthood can lead us to heaven as we touch heavenly things here on earth or it can lead to our damnation if we take for granted the holy mysteries we hold. If the priest wants sincerely to take care of his vocation, three things are necessary: celebrate Mass daily, pray the complete Liturgy of the Hours faithfully everyday and go to confession monthly.

Finally, I have been asked "What is my most memorable day as a priest?" I readily said "Everyday!" Everything is grace. Grace is everywhere. Every moment is grace.

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