

## CHRISM MASS 2017

A few years ago one of the Pontifical Universities in Rome, the Gregorian, offered a course on the priesthood which posed as its central question: "Is it possible for a priest to be happy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" Such a course and such a question would have been unthinkable 50 years ago when our society had an excessively idealistic notion of the priesthood, and priests themselves were held up on pedestals. "Of course priests are happy" I imagine people would have thought. Then again, maybe nobody thought any such thing because people were not accustomed to thinking about their priests in these normal human terms.

Well, every priest is indeed fully human, with human strengths and weaknesses, hopes and desires, challenges and foibles. Taking we priests off our pedestals has been a good thing; it has been liberating for priests, freeing us personally and freeing us for ministry. But sadly, just as we often see swings in our society from one extreme to the other, so too I think we've seen an about turn in our societies view of the priesthood. Sadly, in growing sections of the modern media Catholic priests seem to me to be one of, if not the most, reviled and ridiculed groups in Australia today.

I know our priests feel it because I feel it too. Walking down the street in my clerical collar or telling a stranger who and what I am always comes with a risk. I never know whether the person will give me a loving smile, a threatening glare, or a hateful insult. And I know many parishioners are aware of this too. I sense it in the way parishioners express their concern for their priest and tell me how they love and appreciate him.

With this in mind I think it is timely to recall what Pope Francis said to the Calabrian priests in Italy in 2014. He began by saying "I would like first of all to share with you the joy of being priests." As the priests of the Armidale Diocese come together with each other and with their bishop today for the Chrism Mass and for the renewal of their priestly promises I would like to follow Pope Francis' cue and call to your mind dear Fathers the joy of being priests.

Do you remember the joyful surprise all those years ago when you first realized that Jesus chose *you*? You were aware of your sins and weaknesses yet Jesus chose *you* to come follow him, to be his friend, to be with him and to be sent out by him to others, to carry in your very person his word, his love, his mercy, his forgiveness to everybody you meet. As the Lord chose David to be king rather than any of his seemingly better qualified brothers, so to the Lord chose *you*.

Is there anything more beautiful for a man than this? To be loved and chosen by Jesus. When we priests are before the tabernacle each morning in our silent prayer with the Lord it is good for us to again feel Jesus' gaze upon us as we did when we first sensed his call. It is good for us to again hear the words he spoke to Peter and to us: "I know you are a sinner. But do not be afraid. Come follow me and I will make you a fisher of men."

Recently one of the priests commented to me that "a good day in the parish is when there is only one crisis!" Yes, the daily life and rounds of a priest are certainly filled with many challenges, and in this we are no different to husbands and wives, mums and dads, grandmothers and grandfathers. It is so easy to be swamped by these challenges and end up behaving less like priests and more like functionaries or employees just trying to get through the day's tasks, or to focus so much upon ourselves that we find other people becoming a distraction or a nuisance.

So at the beginning of each day we need to come back to Jesus: to feel his gaze upon us; to hear him call us friends; to be reanimated by him and to recommit ourselves to him. This is the only way we can be happy as priests. This is the only way we will find joy as we go about preaching his Gospel, sanctifying his people through Word and Sacrament, reconciling the sinner, healing the dying, binding up the broken

hearts, comforting those who mourn, proclaiming that true liberty and freedom that is only found in God, bearing our burdens patiently, and even administering the parish's goods and trying to balance the parish budget. Few of these tasks of the priest are easy, but it is for such things as these that we have been anointed and sent. They are all a privilege and they can all be a joy.

When searching for joy amidst our daily rounds these days it is good for us to take to heart those words of Jesus which we have heard so many times, but perhaps have not yet fully made our own. "If the world hates you remember it hated me first" (John 15:18), and ""Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12).

Remember Fathers that you are not alone. As well as having the Lord who has chosen you as his friend, as well as having the love and appreciation of your parishioners, as well as sharing in the lot of our Saviour, you also have the beauty and the joy of the priestly fraternity. We have the joy of being priests together, of following the Lord not on our own but together. And we have the joy of a great variety of gifts and personalities amongst us, and these differences enrich us as a presbyterate.

Like everybody else we priests are also immersed in today's individualistic culture that exalts the self to the point of idolizing it. And we can be prone to what Pope Francis calls "a certain pastoral individualism" whereby each priest just does his own thing. We have to react against this with the deliberate choice of fraternity. Our fraternity cannot be something left to chance. No, it is a choice which corresponds to our reality as the chosen friends of Jesus Christ. When Jesus says: "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35), he says it, certainly, for all, but first of all for the Twelve, for those he has called to follow him more closely in the priesthood.

The joy of being priests, of being chosen by Jesus himself, and the beauty of fraternity. May all these joys be present to us now as you renew your priestly promises.

[Some points taken from Pope Francis' Address to Calabrian Priests 21 June 2014](#)