

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
“THE CLOSENESS OF CHRIST IN THE PRIEST”
TO THE PRIESTS OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON
NATIONAL SHRINE OF POPE ST JOHN PAUL II
WASHINGTON, DC
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

I am very happy to be with you today. I thank His Eminence Cardinal Wilton Gregory for his invitation to address you. I greet Bishop Dorsonville and Bishop Campbell. Today, I wish to address the subject of “The Closeness of Christ in the Priest,” but before I do, I want to thank each of you for your priestly ministry. Very often, priesthood is viewed with skepticism. That has certainly been the case over the past twenty years, but you have shouldered on or responded to the Lord’s call to serve as a priest, even amid the shadows.

I thank you for your priestly service during the time of the pandemic. It certainly took a collective toll on our people and even on us, but still you labored for the salvation of souls, committing yourselves to your people and your own vocations. For that, I am grateful, and I express the gratitude and spiritual closeness of the Holy Father.

Today, I would like to address the subject of the closeness of Christ in the priest by examining two recent speeches of the Holy Father, and then contemplating the Heart of Christ, to which priests are conformed, through an address the Pope gave last year to a group of physicians. The first speech is his homily at this year’s Chrism Mass, and the second is an address he delivered in February to an International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood, held in Rome.

In 2016, on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, the World Day for the Sanctification of Priests, the Holy Father said:

He (the priest of Christ) is anointed for his people, not to choose his own projects but to be close to the real men and women whom God has entrusted to him. No one is excluded from his heart, his prayers or his smile. With a father’s loving gaze and heart, he welcomes and includes everyone, and if at times he has to correct, it is to draw people closer. He stands apart from no one, but is always ready to dirty his hands.” (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART, JUBILEE FOR PRIESTS, 3 JUNE 2016)

Part I: Threats to the Closeness of Christ in the Priest – Spiritual Worldliness, Numbers, and Functionalism

In his Chrism Mass homily this year, the Holy Father identified three threats to the closeness of the priest to his people: spiritual worldliness; numbers or statistics; and functionalism. After encouraging priests to fix their eyes on Jesus who reveals to us our own weakness and who cultivates within us a desire for mercy and grace, the Pope suggested that, at times, the devil tempts us to turn our glance away from God and toward ourselves – to engage in very subtle forms of idolatry, which replace the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Spiritual worldliness. We, as priests, stand *in persona Christi capitis*. Daily, through the life of prayer, we must nourish our friendship with Jesus, but living in a society that places high value on material goods and human respect, on status and influence, we can become distracted from our first love, namely Jesus Christ, and be drawn to the things of this world in a largely superficial or ephemeral way.

The Holy Father writes:

“One space of hidden idolatry opens up wherever there is spiritual worldliness, which is “a proposal of life, a culture, a culture of the ephemeral, of appearances, of the cosmetic”. Its criterion is triumphalism, a triumphalism without the cross. Jesus prayed that the Father would defend us against this culture of worldliness. This temptation of glory without the cross runs contrary to the very person of the Lord, it runs contrary to Jesus, who humbled himself in the incarnation and, as a sign of contradiction, is our sole remedy against every idol.” (POPE FRANCIS, HOMILY FOR THE CHRISM MASS, 14 APRIL 2022)

Sometimes, the desire to want to be “in the know,” or to associate with people of influence and culture in order to ascend the ecclesiastical ladder can lead to self-absorption, seeking our glory rather than that of God. The Holy Father contends that this worldly attitude, which can manifest itself in the accumulation of worldly goods, robs us of the “presence of Jesus, humble and humiliated who draws near to everyone, the Christ who suffers with all who suffer...”

Pope Francis is particularly blunt when he says, “A worldly priest is nothing more than a clericalized pagan.” (IBID.)

Numbers. A second type of idolatry, which His Holiness suggests, replaces the Spirit of God is a type of pragmatism “*where numbers become the most important thing.*” It is not that numbers are not important. You only have to ask your parish business manager, your finance council, your vocation director or seminary rector about numbers, and they will tell you about the importance of numbers.

My experience, however, of visiting parishes in this country is that immediately people tell you how many people attend Mass, how many children are in the school, how many baptisms there were, etc. These days, with declining numbers of clergy, and a super-abundance of parishes in some parts of the country, demographic studies and pastoral planning strategies are becoming critical tools for understanding how best to evangelize. They can provide a “snapshot” of the reality of a diocese or a parish, but, I must say, “numbers aren’t everything.”

Sometimes in our obsession with numbers and statistics, we can depersonalize persons and parishes. The Holy Father admonishes:

“This cannot be the sole method or criterion for the Church of Christ. Persons cannot be “numbered”, and God does not “measure out” his gift of the Spirit (cf. *Jn 3:34*). In this fascination with and love of numbers, we are really seeking ourselves, pleased with the control offered us by this way of thinking, unconcerned with individual faces and far from love.” (IBID.)

The criterion for judgment risks becoming what the numbers say or what the majority wants rather than the good of persons, the good of the Church, or even God’s will. Our desire to “push ahead” because of what the numbers say rather than to carefully discern the will of God or what the Spirit has to

say can be disastrous, not only for the faith of our people, but even for our own faith, because we can replace the promptings of the Spirit with a statistical analysis of the problem.

Pope Francis points out that the saints knew how to take a step back “to leave room completely for God,” which he says is “the mark of the Spirit,” who loves to keep hidden. A statistically-driven model of ministry is neither spiritual, nor incarnational. We must always keep before us the *persons* whom are ministry will impact, both negatively and positively.

Functionalism. Perhaps the greatest threat to the closeness of Christ in and through the priest is functionalism, which aims at efficiency and which replaces the Eternal Father who is “creative” and who creates through tender love rather than by simply doing things. The Holy Father describes this functionalism:

“Functionaries’ take no delight in the graces that the Spirit pours out on his people, from which they too can “be nourished” like the worker who earns his wage. The priest with a functionalist mindset has his own nourishment, which is his ego. In functionalism, we set aside the worship of the Father in the small and great matters of our life and take pleasure in the efficiency of our own programs. As David did when, tempted by Satan, he insisted on carrying out the census (cf. *1 Chron* 21:1). These are the lovers of the route plan and the itinerary, and not of the journey itself.” (IBID.)

While we as priests must learn from the world of business how to do things efficiently and well, the Church is not principally a business; rather, it is the Mystical Body of Christ whose head was not merely efficient, but who cared for each person He met and who revealed the creative and tender face of His Father.

In his February discourse to those gathered for the International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood, Pope Francis gave some examples of how this functionalism can develop within the priesthood. First, he noted, it comes from forgetting that our first vocation is to holiness, a call which begins at baptism. He writes:

“It is always a great temptation to live a priesthood without baptism – and there are some priests “without baptism” – in other words, forgetting that our primary vocation is to holiness. To be holy means to conform ourselves to Jesus, letting our hearts thrill with his same sentiments (cf. *Phil* 2:15). Only when we strive to love others as Jesus does, do we make God visible and fulfil our vocation to holiness. Quite rightly, Saint John Paul II reminded us that, “the priest, like every other member of the Church, ought to grow in the awareness that he himself is continually in need of being evangelized” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, [25 March 1992], 26). (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM ON PRIESTHOOD, 17 FEBRUARY 2022)

Our response to the call to holiness must first and foremost be a response to the One who first loved us and called us to be His Son by adoption in baptism, and then, configured us, through our ordination, more deeply to His Beloved Son, so that we truly are sons in the Son. The Holy Father invites us to look on our own humanity and to ask whether our vocation brings to light within us the potential for Love that we received on the day of our baptism.

Another type of functionalism lamented by the Pope is that which reduces the spiritual life to mere religious practice – a priesthood lived without Divine Intimacy. The Holy Father writes:

“The intimacy born of prayer, the spiritual life, concrete closeness to God through listening to his word, the celebration of the Eucharist, the silence of adoration, entrustment to Mary, the wise accompaniment of a guide and the sacrament of Reconciliation... Without these concrete “forms of closeness”, a priest is merely a weary hireling who has none of the benefits of the Lord’s friends. ... All too often, for example, in the life of priests, prayer is practiced only as a duty; we forget that friendship and love do not come from following rules, but are a fundamental choice of the heart. ... A priest who prays is a son who constantly remembers that he is such, and that he has a Father who loves him deeply. A priest who prays is a son who keeps close to the Lord.” (IBID.)

Part II: The Priesthood: A Fourfold Closeness

While there are threats and risks to living our priestly ministry in a fulfilling way, we can rediscover our own priestly identity by meditating on a fourfold closeness that Pope Francis proposed to priests during his address this past February: a closeness to God, a closeness to the Bishop, a closeness to other priests, and finally, a closeness to the people.

All of us understand some of the challenges to our priestly ministry as we experience epochal change. The Holy Father has said, “We live not so much in an epoch of change, but in a change of epoch.” As we experience epochal change, we can live our priestly ministry in different ways, but the fundamental question is whether we live our priestly vocation in a way that has the flavor of the Gospel.

Some respond by trying to live their vocation in a “safe” way, protecting themselves from risks or sheltering themselves from the world, longing for a time in the past, when the Church was seemingly much more glorious, but which is a time that no longer exists. Others try to live their vocation with an exaggerated sense of optimism that everything will be alright, without any discernment and without having the courage or confidence to confront issues and make decisions. Both these responses seem to be inadequate to meet the challenges of our day.

It seems to me that what we need to do is be realistic. Rather than flee from reality, we need to embrace reality, to attempt to understand reality, and to engage it in light of the Gospel and the living Tradition of the Church. God’s grace comes to us in reality. At the dawn of the new millennium, Pope John Paul II invited us to “*Put out into the deep.*” We need to do just that, but without fear. We do not need to be imprudent but discerning. We need to discern God’s will and to carry out our mission, but without an apostolic boldness, not merely as managers of problems.

Closeness to God. The Apostles were able to be bold after the Pentecost event, because they were close to God – close to the Risen Lord, close to His Mother, close to the Spirit of God. This closeness to God is at the heart of the priesthood. I have already mentioned the intimacy born of prayer that is demanded of each priest.

This is necessary for us to grow in our priesthood, for the measure of our success is conformity to the life of Christ, growing in holiness, that is, in communion and friendship with God, and becoming more and more a son of whom the Father says, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

In his February address, Pope Francis described this closeness to God in this way:

“A priest is called above all to cultivate this closeness, this intimacy with God, and from this relationship, he will be able to draw all the strength needed for his ministry. Our relationship with God is, so to speak, what “grafts” us to him and makes us fruitful. Without a meaningful relationship with the Lord, our ministry will prove fruitless. Closeness to Jesus and daily contact with his word, enables us to measure our life against his, learning not to be scandalized by whatever befalls us and protecting ourselves from “stumbling blocks”.” (IBID.)

The Holy Father is not naïve; this closeness is more necessary when we, like Jesus, are faced with ingratitude and constant attacks. It is that friendship, that awareness that He is near, that sustains us, even in moments of struggle. No one of us could say that Christ does not desire to be close to us; rather, we must make a fundamental choice of our heart. On what is my heart set? During the Jubilee Year for Mercy, Pope Francis invited priests to contemplate the Heart of Christ and posed a fundamental question:

Contemplating the Heart of Christ, we are faced with the fundamental question of our priestly life: *Where is my heart directed?* It is a question we need to keep asking, daily, weekly... *Where is my heart directed?* Our ministry is often full of plans, projects and activities: from catechesis to liturgy, to works of charity, to pastoral and administrative commitments. Amid all these, we must still ask ourselves: What is my heart set on? (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART, JUBILEE FOR PRIESTS, 3 JUNE 2016)

While some priests seek to fill the void in their heart with food or drink or other behaviors which can become addictive, none of these ever satisfy the heart’s deepest desires. Others make no attempt to satisfy the desire of the heart for divine intimacy, rather they replace it with activism, social activism, liturgical activism, excessive busyness, to avoid the silence necessary for prayer, self-reflection, and conversion. Yet, without this closeness to God, what do we have to offer our people that an efficient business man doesn’t offer? Pope Francis notes:

“Closeness with God enables the priest to touch the hurt in our hearts, which, if embraced, disarms us even to the point of making possible an encounter. ... A priest needs to have a heart sufficiently “enlarged” to expand and embrace the pain of the people entrusted to his care while, at the same time, like a sentinel, being able to proclaim the dawning of God’s grace revealed in that very pain. Embracing, accepting and showing his own impoverishment in closeness to the Lord is the best means to learn gradually how to embrace the neediness and pain that he encounters daily in his ministry, and thus to be conformed ever more closely to the heart of Christ.” (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM ON PRIESTHOOD, 17 FEBRUARY 2022)

Closeness to the Bishop. In addition to remaining close to God, the Holy Father invites priests to remain close to their Bishop. I am sure the Cardinal will smile widely, knowing that one can never ask deacons or priests to promise respect and obedience enough, and yet Pope Francis reminds us that “obedience is not a disciplinary attribute but the deepest sign of the bonds uniting us in communion.”

At the Last Supper, Jesus says, “You are my friends if you do what I command you: love one another.” The context of true obedience is love. In the story of the Prodigal Son, the older son does what

his father asks of him, but he does it without love, and, in the end, he becomes bitter. The younger son, on the other hand, although his heart wanders, his heart also returns, and his genuine love for his father is revived through his experience of mercy.

Obedience involves attentive listening to God's will, a will that is not discerned in isolation, but in a relationship - with the bishop and the community. The Bishop, in discerning what is best for his priests, must also listen to God and discern with his collaborators, but he is discerning not as a school superintendent or a police chief, but as a loving father.

The Holy Father keeps telling us that he wants a synodal church – a Church that walks together, but a synodal church is also a Church that listens. The Holy Father writes:

“Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart that makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives.” (IBID.)

The Evil One wants to destroy the fruitfulness of our priestly ministry by sowing seeds of division, undermining the bonds that establish and preserve the Church in unity. In our speech and in our behavior, we must ask, not only whether we are obeying our bishop, but whether we are keeping our promise of *respect and obedience*. Are we deepening the bonds of communion with him, and through him, with our brother priests, or weakening them?

The Holy Father reminds: “Obedience is the fundamental decision to accept what is asked of us, and to do so as a concrete sign of that universal sacrament of salvation which is the Church. Obedience can also be discussion, attentive listening, and in some cases tension, but not a rupture.” (IBID.)

Closeness to other Priests. Through the bonds with our bishop, we also begin to understand that we are part of a larger family, with many brothers – our brother priests. Now more than ever priestly fraternity is necessary. Of course, there have always been priestly support groups, *Jesus Caritas* groups, and the like, but the pandemic has caused priests to live in isolation. Sometimes priests choose to live in isolation – to be “lone rangers” and do other things. Occasionally, this is a function of having to manage multiple parishes even in remote regions, but rather than withdraw, fraternity can help renew us for ministry.

Fraternity, of course, cannot be imposed. We all experienced this “forced fraternity” in the seminary, and sometimes it worked, and many times it did not. The Holy Father describes priestly fraternity as “choosing deliberately to pursue holiness together with others, and not by oneself.”

What are the signs of this fraternity? The Holy Father uses the characteristics of love found in First Corinthians, Chapter 13, to describe fraternity, which involves patience, which is the opposite of indifference.

Furthermore, he speaks of the danger of *envy* in the priesthood and within presbyterates. It was the envy of Cain which the devil used to turn him against Abel. We are sometimes envious of others' positions or parishes, envious of the relationships they have, and envious of their successes. As priests,

we need to carefully examine our consciences and our attitudes toward our brothers. Can we rejoice in the successes of our brothers?

Similarly, we need to not be boastful or inflated. There is no need to talk about all the good things we are doing or to receive accolades from others, attempting to make ourselves more attractive. Rather, we should listen to the words of St. Francis de Sales, “Be who you are and be that well in honor of the Master Craftsman whose handiwork you are.”

A true brother accepts another as he is and calls him to greatness. We do not need to fake excellence. As brothers, we strive to bring out the best in one another. Authentic compliments and words of encouragement are becoming of priests. We can be like Barnabas, a “son of encouragement.” In contrast, some priests harbor grudges and engage in gossip, ruining the reputations of their brothers. Here we must ask whether by our speech or even by our interior attitudes whether we are a bridge or barrier to deeper communion within our presbyterate, for each of you has been called to exercise his ministry alongside your brothers here in this Archdiocese.

Closeness to the People. The fourth type of closeness identified by the Holy Father is closeness to the People of God, which is a “not a duty but a grace.” In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis stated:

“To be evangelizers of souls, we need to develop a spiritual taste for being close to people’s lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy. Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. ... Jesus wants to make use of priests to draw closer to the holy faithful People of God. He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people; without the sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 268).

Priestly identity cannot be understood without this belonging to the holy, faithful People of God. This closeness to the people cannot be interpreted to mean that a cleric lives like a layman or that the laity should be clericalized. Rather, by being close to his people, a priest can understand the joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams of his people, and present these to the Lord. This is where closeness to the people cannot be disconnected from closeness to the Lord.

The People of God wants priests who are close to them, who are willing to leave their offices to be near to them, who comfort them in times of illness or loss, and who model the “style of Jesus,” which is one of “compassion and tenderness”. We should also acknowledge that they want priests to be close to them who, like Jesus, are men of courage, willing to challenge without crushing, and who are willing, like Christ the Good Shepherd, to lay down their lives for them. The closeness of the priests gives the faithful a sense of belonging to the flock, to the Family of God.

Part III: Imitation of the Heart of Christ – the “Style” of Jesus

Mediating the closeness of Christ to His People is at the heart of the priesthood. To that end, we need to contemplate the Heart of Christ. Living our priestly vocation with the dedication with which Christ lived His priestly ministry on earth can be demanding. Last November, the Holy Father addressed Catholic physicians and the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery at the Catholic University of Sacred Heart, who, during the heart of the pandemic, were beginning to feel a bit worn down. He invited them to contemplate once

more the Heart of Christ, using three words, which can also be useful for the renewal of our own vocation: memory, passion, and consolation.

Memory: To remember means to return *to* the heart or to return *with* the heart. But to what? Pope Francis answers this way:

“To what He did for us: the Heart of Christ shows us Jesus who offers Himself; it is the compendium of His mercy... It comes naturally to us to remember his goodness, which is freely given, which can neither be bought nor sold; and, unconditional, it does not depend on our actions.” (HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INAUGURATION OF THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY AT THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF THE SACRED HEART, NOVEMBER 5, 2021)

Frequently, for a renewal of our own personal zeal for our vocation and for our people, we need to return to Christ Himself to understand that He gives Himself to us freely and unconditionally. Without this constant remembrance of His Presence, amid the “haste of a thousand errands and continuous worries”, we will run dry, or as the Holy Father puts it, “Without memory, one loses one’s roots, and without roots, one does not grow.”

I think it is always good to contemplate the love Christ had for us and our families on our ordination day. I think it is also useful to remember those people – our parents, our parish priests or professors, or parishioners – who touched our hearts and who brought Christ to us.

The Holy Father speaks of a need to “cultivate among ourselves *the art of remembering*, of treasuring the faces we meet. It is easy to remember the criticisms we receive, but do we remember, with gratitude, those who have touched our lives? Do we also have an appreciation for the gratitude of those whose lives we have touched through our priestly ministry? Do we give thanks to God for those privileged moments?

Passion. The second word proposed by the Holy Father is passion. To have passion is not merely a warm, affective feeling; rather in contemplating the Heart of Christ, Pope Francis reminds us that it is a “heart wounded with love, torn open for us on the cross... Pierced, He gives; in death, He gives us life... it shows us how much suffering our salvation cost” (Ibid.)

The Pierced Heart of Christ reveals what God the Father is passionate about: us. We began by speaking about the closeness, tenderness and compassion needed in the priest, and it is needed precisely because this is the style of God. As priests, we are called to love God, and, in fact, our promise of celibacy is to made not only to make us radically available to love but also to witness to the coming of the Kingdom and that God is to be loved above all else.

The compassionate style of God, according to the Holy Father, suggests that:

“If we really want to love God, we must be passionate about humanity, about all humanity, especially those who live in the condition in which the Heart of Jesus was manifested, that is, pain, abandonment and rejection, especially in this throwaway culture that we live in today.” (IBID.)

Comfort. The third word is comfort. By comfort, the Holy Father really means consolation. Consolation, he says, “indicates a strength that does not come from us, but from those who are with us: that is where strength comes from.”

Do you draw your strength from Jesus, who is God-with-us? Jesus, before He sent His disciples forth to proclaim repentance and to cast out demons and to heal the sick, first summoned His disciples to be with Him. The Beloved Disciple was privileged to lean on Jesus’ breast, close to His Sacred Heart, at the Last Supper. Amid the pandemic, amid the anxieties of life, amid personal doubts, even about our vocation, do we lean on Him?

While it is true that we are called to console our people and even to console the Heart of Jesus for offenses against Him, do we allow ourselves, not in a selfish way but in a healthy way, to be still and to be consoled by Him? To say, as a man, that I need to be consoled is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a sign of humility.

Without consolation, we could easily be discouraged whether it is by frustration in our projects, the sheer amount of work placed upon us, the burdens of age or health, or even the negative news about priests. The Holy Father writes:

“We could become discouraged. That is why we need *consolation*. The Heart of Jesus beats for us, always repeating those words: ‘Courage. Courage. Do not be afraid! I am here! ... do not lose heart. The Lord your God is greater than your ills. He takes you by the hand and caresses you. He is close to you. He is compassionate. He is tender. He is your comfort.’ (Ibid.)

Without this experience in our own lives, how could we expect to offer these words to our own people?

I conclude by simply inviting you to contemplate the love of the Heart of Christ for you, a love which surpasses human understanding. The Heart of Christ offers us a model as to how to live our vocations as priests and brothers to one another – with the style of God – with closeness, tenderness, generosity, and true passion. The Heart of Christ is a burning furnace of charity; may ours be as well.