

TU ES SACERDOS IN AETERNUM: THE GIFT OF THE PRIESTHOOD

The title alone caught my eye – “Abolish the Priesthood.” Published in the latest issue of *The Atlantic*, its author’s name was familiar to me. Chicago native **James Carroll** was a popular Paulist priest and writer before leaving active ministry in 1974. Though he has a radically different ecclesiology, nevertheless I read the article only to learn that he **ceased attending** Mass a year ago, acknowledging that he “carries an ocean of grief in his heart.” As **painful** as it was to read, I reacted differently than I would have twenty years ago. Rather than anger, my gut reaction was one of **overwhelming sadness** at his **full-frontal invective against** the essence of the Catholic priesthood, especially for one who should know better. The article began with a poignant and painful account of the Church in Ireland, his ancestral home. Having recently returned from the Emerald Isle, clearly the Church needs significant rebirth in the wake of the abuse crisis. Our Archdiocese has double the number of seminarians than in the **entire country** of Ireland. That is shocking!

But Carroll proposes replacing a clerical and celibate culture (what he terms the “trappings of Empire”) with “intentional communities” which would effectively ignore the clergy. The laity would live, preach and teach the Gospel **without reference** to the **church hierarchy**, which he believes has obscured the Gospel message. This is a classic case of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” He writes of the Eucharist: “As ever, the Church’s principal organizing event will be the communal experience of the Mass, the structure of which—reading the Word, breaking the bread—will remain universal; it will not need to be celebrated by a member of some sacerdotal caste.” Eucharist without a priest? We have suddenly entered the realm of heresy. A man of his erudition certainly knows that. Early in his pontificate (1980), St. John Paul II issued an Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Dominicae Cenaе* stating: “The Eucharist is the principal and central *raison d’être* of the sacrament of the priesthood, which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist, and together with it.”

James Carroll quoted Irish author **James Joyce** (*Finnegans Wake*) that “Catholic” means “**Here comes everybody.**” When the Church scandals exploded in Ireland, its pervasive Catholic **ethos withered** in ways that we struggle to appreciate, immersed in our more diverse American experience. Yet, as we celebrate Ordination weekend, I am acutely aware of the manifold challenges that priests face today. Whether reflecting in my own prayer or in discussions with friends (lay and ordained), I am left with an **overwhelming sense of gratitude** for the priestly ministry that has been entrusted to me. While growing up I considered many careers, going through several phases— mailman, medical doctor, meteorologist, and even briefly that of an attorney! But nothing could quell the gnawing sense in my heart that I ought to give the seminary a try.

But even as an 18-year-old, I was naively demanding metaphysical certitude about my calling—though no one else did initially. Time gracefully brought greater clarity. After finishing my eighth year of seminary studies, I walked down this Cathedral’s center aisle on **May 27, 1989**. The details of the ordination Mass are **seared into my memory** – it was a crisp, mostly sunny day, with a high of 69°. I recall the sacred music, the banners (yes, we had banners!) and the tremendous joy I experienced, mixed in with a healthy dose of trepidation that accompanies a new journey. No matter how well-prepared I felt, my world changed quite radically. After my very first weekend in a parish, many more people knew my name than I knew of theirs. The transition to being “public figure” was instantaneous. Game on!

More importantly, I entered into people’s lives in a much deeper way, sensing my own unworthiness with every passing day. If I have learned anything, it is that I need to keep a **steady prayer** life. While in the college seminary, I was a member of the College of St. Thomas Concert Band. If our director was frustrated at our lack of progress, he would quip: “If you skip practice for one day you will notice... if you skip practice two days in a row, **I will notice!**” How true that was, and how appropriate it is to apply that principle to the spiritual life as well. Unless we remain grounded in prayer, it is easy to “burn out” in church ministry. I could not possibly have imagined either the joys or the struggles that would come when I embarked upon my priestly journey. Much of the **joy in ministry** is found in the unknown. What remains stable is the person of Jesus Christ, and whatever curveballs come our way, when approached from the perspective of faith and

trust, the Lord will guide our hand.

Tu es sacerdos in aeternum– “You are a priest forever.” I simply **cannot imagine** doing anything else with my life. On that day I processed down the center aisle, I believed with all my heart that I was saying “Yes” for life. Nothing has changed in the three decades since. While I find a few aspects of Church life frustrating and exhausting, I could **never have predicted** the unexpected ways in which God’s grace has touched my soul. Please forgive me for those times that I have been impatient and short with others, unhelpful or unclear in my teaching or counsel, have let e-mails slip by or have not provided the spiritual nourishment the people deserve. I ask for your continued prayers and beg the intercession of St. John Vianney to remain a faithful servant of the Gospel.

- **Saint John Vianney** is a fitting patron saint for priests, so zealous was he in his ministry. It is never about one’s position of influence, the weekly collection, the vibrancy of one’s parish school, etc. The priesthood is about bringing Jesus to others– and he did this selflessly for 44 years, almost all of them in the tiny village of Ars, France. See the schedule on page 7 for this Friday’s visit of the **incorrupt heart** of St. John Vianney. Please join us to venerate this great saint and to pray for the sanctification of priests.
- Join us for Mass tomorrow (Monday May 27) at **9:00 a.m.** It is a fitting way to kick off **Memorial Day**, praying for the repose of the souls of those men and women who have served our country bravely, making the ultimate sacrifice.
- I am pondering starting a support group for people who for the past eight years and 73 episodes have been completely and totally oblivious to all things related to **Game of Thrones**. Those of us who are totally “out of it” need support too, don’t we? Any takers?
- The 120 cardinals currently eligible to vote in a papal conclave (under 80 years of age) come from **65 countries**, clearly the most international college of Cardinals in the Church’s history.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector