

## **Experiencing Priesthood**

### **For 50 years**

“You are lacking in one thing, go sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, then come follow me . . .” Mark 10:20

This invitation of Jesus opens the road to freedom. Pope Francis is probably the best current exemplar of such freedom. He has few personal possessions, lives in a very simple apartment, has one basic suit of clothing. Yet he is free to witness God’s love without distraction and to speak God’s Word without compromise to a world hungering for authentic truth and love.

As I reflect on the great blessing of serving as a priest for 50 years, I grow ever more grateful for the opportunity to attempt to live simply. Among the first benefits is the lack of distraction so that God’s penetrating outreach of love can be communicated directly to me. This love reaches deeply into the heart.

This firsthand experience stimulates an awareness of the goodness and value of others one comes in contact with. One feels drawn to look in the eyes of the other passing on that love of God. Such enables that brother or sister to realize inherent value and that they too are loved and cared for. They are worthy of genuine respect and have an eternal destiny.

For a priest this communication of love is uniquely celebrated in the sacraments which he is privileged to administer. I experience no greater joy and satisfaction than introducing salvation and God’s love than in baptism. This sentiment carries forward in the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation. God’s mercy knows no greater bounds than confession. Bringing relief and a new moment are the simple words, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Marriage and Holy Orders set individuals on a path to life-long relationships which position God in the center insuring happiness and a sense of self-fulfillment. Finally, as priest. I have felt privileged to be an intimate companion in the moment of suffering and death as the passage to eternal life occurs.

A second freedom that has had an impact in my life is the opportunity to proclaim the Word of God and its applicability to our times.

The very first is to proclaim the reality that every person is made in the image and likeness of God and is entitled to life and respect. This, of course, as Pope Francis insists, is especially applicable to the poor, to the vulnerable, to the unborn and to the elderly, to the sick. Such a world-view insists on the equitable distribution of the world's goods which during our lifetimes we are the stewards of not the owners.

The exclusive discipleship of the priest in following Jesus provides the liberty to address moral issues which are oftentimes cloaked as political matters only. Among those prominent today are:

The morality of climate change which is leading the earth's inhabitants down a slippery slope to imminent suffering and destruction of God's creation. Morality enters in because we can change this pattern as scientific evidence attests.

The morality of responding to the crisis of refugees and immigrants. With comprehensive immigration reform and reaching out to face root causes in originating countries, compassion and the very face of Jesus can come forth to assuage unnecessary pain and suffering.

The morality of responding to the nuclear threat. We are called to be in dialogue and conversations with those who pose a threat to the very existence of the earth. There resides in the human psyche a desire for peace and basic justice.

The third area where I have found the freedom in following Jesus without baggage is in being a companion with those who are in difficult straits and of being a shepherd to them.

Categories are many. Those with the scourge of addiction, the incarcerated, victims of sexual abuse and harassment, those who endure natural disasters, the unchurched, the victims of war,

violence, accidental tragedies. The catalogue of compassion opportunities is bottomless. Our response depends on our freedom.

As I reflect on my good fortune of being able to some degree to follow Jesus in the way of simplicity, I render thanks to God, in a special way to my parents, brothers and family for sharing this outlook. They have no hesitation in supporting this vision of freedom where “less is more.”

Also essential are all the fellow pilgrims along the way who have chosen to join in the vision that fully embraces the establishment and flourishing of the Kingdom of God. Especially is this so of all my companions who have shared this journey in the 23 counties of southwest Iowa. I have been exceptionally fortunate to be with you.

As I embrace the coming days, I do so with the full recognition of Yogi Berra’s insight that most of my future is behind me. But I come to do so with irrepressible joy and hope.