

“How deep can priestly spirituality go? Msgr. Michael Becker’s work demonstrates it has no bottom. It is easy to see the priesthood as a series of daily ritual functions. Becker identifies the sacred uniqueness within these functions by drawing us into the mystical side of priests, a side that is often overlooked in our busy, distracted culture. As meditation draws us into the depths, so too does Becker uncover the spiritual depths of being a priest. The renowned theologian Karl Rahner once said that Christianity must be mystical or it won’t exist. Becker identifies the mystical in the priesthood upon which its very existence exists.”

—Rev. Eugene F. Hemrick
Director of the National Institute for the Renewal of the
Priesthood

“When parish priests are trying to find time for meditation, reflection and discernment, this resource is an excellent opportunity to be engaged with scripture, theologians and prayer.”

—Very Reverend James A. Wehner
Rector of Notre Dame Seminary, New Orleans

A Life of Daring Simplicity

*Daily Meditations on
the Priesthood*

Edited by Michael A. Becker



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*To my parents,
Clarence and Eileen*

Contents

Preface 9

Daily Reflections

January 11

February 42

March 71

April 102

May 132

June 163

July 193

August 224

September 255

October 285

November 316

December 346

References 377

Permissions 383

Preface

The “daily reading” genre has become a staple for countless men and women whose lives are already full but nevertheless desire a “still point” for personal reflection. There are books, websites, apps, newsletters that offer a wide array of daily, thematic readings taken from saints and popes, poets and seekers—all with the intention of offering the reader some inspiring food for reflection. Such collections grace the breakfast table or the night stand, offering a daily page of wisdom.

I am one of the countless. I readily confess to a full life. And to maintain that “still point” I have often kept at my bedside such collections of daily readings. In my four decades as a priest, however, I have been unable to discover any collection that offered everyday verse for those living the vocation to priestly life and ministry. If I felt this need to live more consciously this call of Christ to serve God as a priest, perhaps others may have felt a similar need. Hence, *A Life of Daring Simplicity*.

This book of daily readings has been prepared for priests, for those aspiring to the priesthood, and for every Christian who seeks to understand the priestly life. While there are a great many volumes that offer a single, cohesive spirituality of the priesthood, this one seeks to provide a wide variety of daily insights, each limited to a single page. It is designed to provide for each day of the year a prayerful daily meditation on some facet of priestly life. Each day begins with a verse or two from Sacred Scripture, followed by a few paragraphs from the writer for the day. At the bottom of each page I have included a brief prayer or question meant to prompt further reflection on the text.

The reader will notice that the writings of Saint John Paul II are the single greatest source of meditations. Few have written more extensively

and regularly on this topic than he, whose annual Holy Thursday letters have been for so many of us an inexhaustible fountain of wisdom. From the first year of his papacy to his last, these personal reflections flowed from his own lived experience of over half a century of priestly life. Saint John XXIII's personal diary, *Journal of a Soul*, has also offered very personal and pastoral insights. Dozens of other writers, those living priesthood and those observing it, our contemporaries and our Church Fathers, popes, and parish priests also provide glimpses of this unique and blessed way of discipleship.

The greater part of this collection was done—using Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini's phrase—"in the thick of ministry." I am most grateful to my family and brother priests who continued to encourage this work over the past many years. I especially appreciate the counsel of my friend Fr. William Cawley, who has been invaluable in editing, my students at St. Vincent Seminary who offered ready comments and suggestions, and the staff at Liturgical Press, whose attention to innumerable details has made this work a reality.

It is Saint John XXIII who uses the expression "daring simplicity" in his *Journal of a Soul*. Pope Francis gives vibrant witness to these words and calls us in our time to embody such priestly virtue. Day by day, may it become our reality!

August 4, 2014

Memorial of Saint John Vianney, Priest

Mary, Our Model on Pilgrimage

January 1

And Mary said: / “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; / my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” (Luke 1:46)

The Second Vatican Council presents the life of the Church as a pilgrimage of faith. Each one of us, dear brothers, by reason of our priestly vocation and ordination, has a special part in this pilgrimage. As ministers of the Good Shepherd we are called to go forward guiding others, helping them along their way. As stewards of the mysteries of God we must therefore possess a maturity of faith corresponding to our vocation and our tasks. Indeed, “it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy,” since the Lord commits his inheritance to them.

It is appropriate, then, that on this pilgrimage of faith each one of us should fix his soul’s gaze on the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. For as the Council teaches, following the Fathers of the Church she “precedes” us in this pilgrimage . . . and she offers us a sublime example. . . .

In Mary, who is the Immaculate Virgin, we also discover the mystery of that supernatural fruitfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit, which makes her the “figure” of the Church. For the Church “becomes herself a mother . . . because by her preaching and by Baptism she brings forth to a new and immortal life children who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God,” as witnessed to by the Apostle Paul: “My children, I must go through the pain of giving birth to you all over again.” This the Church does, suffering as a mother who “has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of her child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world.”

—Saint John Paul II, Letter to Priests for
Holy Thursday, 1987

Lord Jesus, may I continually look to your Mother Mary as a model of prayerful and priestly service to your people.

“For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (John 6:33)

As Our predecessor of immortal memory, Pius XII, has said—“The wonderful example of St. John Mary Vianney retains all of its force for our times.” For the lengthy prayer of a priest before the adorable Sacrament of the Altar has a dignity and an effectiveness that cannot be found elsewhere nor be replaced. And so when the priest adores Christ Our Lord and gives thanks to Him, or offers satisfaction for his own sins and those of others, or finally when he prays constantly that God keep special watch over the causes committed to his care, he is inflamed with a more ardent love for the Divine Redeemer to whom he has sworn allegiance and for those to whom he is devoting his pastoral care. And a devotion to the Eucharist that is ardent, constant and that carries over into works also has the effect of nourishing and fostering the inner perfection of his soul and assuring him, as he carries out his apostolic duties, of an abundance of the supernatural powers that the strongest workers for Christ must have.

We do not want to skip over the benefits that accrue to the faithful themselves in this way, as they see the piety of their priests and are drawn by their example. For, as our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, pointed out in a talk to the clergy of this dear city: “If you want the faithful who are entrusted to your care to pray willingly and well, you must give them an example and let them see you praying in church. A priest kneeling devoutly and reverently before the tabernacle, and pouring forth prayers to God with all his heart, is a wonderful example to the Christian people and serves as an inspiration.” The saintly Curé of Ars used all of these helps in carrying out his apostolic office, and without a doubt they are suitable to all times and places.

—Saint John XXIII,
Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia, 48–49

Lord Jesus, as you are truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, so may I be truly and fully present to you!

The Priest Belongs to All

January 3

“As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them . . .” (John 17:18-19)

To be a pastor the priest must be both a minister and an apostle. But to whom? The faithful themselves need this double ministry: the Gospel and the sacramental life. So priests, already overburdened because of their small numbers wonder whether they ought not to make a choice and confine themselves either only to believers or only to those outside the Church. The definition and experience of Catholic Action answers their doubts; not by a magic formula, in this realm of mystery and free gift, but by throwing a light on the way to a solution.

The priest, as a minister of God, and the father of a community which, through him, must render to the Lord the worship which is His due, has charge of the souls of the people entrusted to him, whether they are “inside” or “outside” the Church.

He belongs to all, equally and without distinction. So he would have a poor grasp of what the Church expects of him, if he thought that the sad circumstances of contemporary atheism entitled him to neglect the faithful. Progress will not be made with unbelievers by jeopardizing the faith, charity, and moral life of believers, or by allowing the source of their apostolic generosity and spiritual energy to dry up. The care of the baptized must not be considered as a ministry of secondary importance, still less as a necessary evil. On the contrary, it is the open road, the predestined passage of grace, to the masses who are separated from Christ.

. . . In everything and everywhere it should contribute to the creation and education of the faithful so that they will become the Christian Leaven . . . The faithful will bring about a profound transformation of their whole environment.

—Emmanuel-Célestin Cardinal Suhard,
The Church Today, 280–81

How do I understand my ministry to those “outside” the church? How inclusive or exclusive have I become?

“I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth.” (John 17:19)

This is what stands out clearly in the priestly prayer of Jesus in the Upper Room: “I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.”

Following Jesus’ example, the priest, “the steward of the mysteries of God,” is truly himself when he is “for others.” Prayer gives him a special sensitivity to these “others,” making him attentive to their needs, to their lives and destiny. Prayer also enables the priest to recognize those whom “the Father has given to him.” These are, in the first place, those whom the Good Shepherd has as it were placed on the path of his priestly ministry, of his pastoral care. They are children, adults and the aged. They are the youth, married couples, families, but also those who are alone. They are the sick, suffering, the dying; they are those who are spiritually close and willing to collaborate in the apostolate, but also those who are distant, those who are absent or indifferent, though many of them may be searching and reflecting. Those who for different reasons are negatively disposed, those who find themselves in difficulties of various sorts, those who are struggling against vices and sins, those who are fighting for faith and hope. Those who seek the priest’s help, and those who reject it.

How can one be “for” all of these people and “for” each one of them according to the model of Christ? How can we be “for” those whom “the Father has given to us,” committing them to us in trust? Ours will always be a test of love—a test that we must accept, first of all, in the realm of prayer.

—Saint John Paul II, Letter to Priests for
Holy Thursday, 1987

What evidence is there in my daily life that I have consecrated the whole of my life and my prayer “for others”?