

Archdiocese of Louisville Priests' Convocation Keynote June 5, 2017

It is good to join you for a number of reasons. For starters, I am back on “The Hill” here at St. Meinrad where I spent my years of seminary formation and made so many friends—several priests of Louisville among them; I also have an opportunity to see my good friend, Archbishop Kurtz, who once upon a time was my bishop; and I get to share thoughts with you, my brothers, on a topic that is very important to all of us as we seek to be not only good priests and good shepherds to our people, but also to be happy and fulfilled priests.

Let me ask you—how often have you been in a meeting of priests and the topic has come up in the form of having to choose someone for a role of leadership for some committee or other responsibility; and the suggestion is made to elect the poor fellow who could not attend the meeting? I have found that this is done only half-jokingly, and have even been in a few meetings where the brothers actually followed through with the election. The poor priest learns of his new role when he reads the minutes of the meeting!

We all know the critical importance of good leadership, but many priests are reluctant to take it on, in part, because it is not always easy; in part, because leadership carries burdens and requires time and energy; in part, because we can be insecure and lack confidence in our abilities; in part, because we don't know how—for example, there's a growing concern emerging over a trend in young adults that has been aptly described by Nebraska Senator Ben Sasse in his recent book, *The Vanishing American Adult*. He argues that society has produced a generation of individuals that lack *agency*, and the ability to initiate and follow through . . . something essential for leadership. These are a few of the challenges. But, leadership also has rewards, and the main one is that we get to see our people thrive and flourish when they have good leadership.

Since becoming a bishop nine years ago, I have come to see how important it is that we pay closer attention to the demands and expectations we place on our priests to be good at what we often call “governance.” Along with *teaching* and *sanctifying*, these make up what we commonly refer to as “shepherding.” Priestly leadership is a big part of shepherding. It is also an expectation of the faithful; however, it is the area that gets the *least* amount of attention in formation, at least in a formal sense. And, it is (unsurprisingly) the area around which most of the problems arise in priestly ministry.

I came to realize in seminary that a lot of the activity outside the classroom could in some ways be related to formation for pastoral leadership and governance. And, the expectation of both bishops and seminaries has been to develop and form the

priest for this aspect of being a pastor *after* seminary and in particular, within the initial years of priesthood. To “learn the ropes” so to speak from an experienced pastor or two as a parochial vicar. I have even heard it said that the first four years following ordination are meant to be a mirror of the four years a man spends in seminary formation. The first period learning in the classroom and study, the latter, learning in the concrete reality of parish life.

Even if this is the intention, it is often not communicated well to either the pastor or the associate, nor is there very much in the way of guidance. If a pastor is talented and takes this aspect of mentoring his newly ordained associate to heart, it can be effective. But, this does not always happen as successfully as one would hope.

There is also the serious tendency in many dioceses to rush priests into leadership positions prematurely. I have seen many instances where a newly ordained priest was made a pastor within just a few months of ordination. Often these young priests are sent to parishes which have challenges, which only makes the strain on the priest’s leadership more difficult. They are often either small, rural parishes, or older parishes that are in decline. Paradoxically, these can be even more demanding than the large, vibrant, healthy parishes, but they are often the “starter parishes” for young priests.

Following the Synod on Priestly Formation in the early 90s, the Congregation for the Clergy published the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* (1994). They saw at that time the same challenges we see persisting today. One of the strong recommendations in the last chapter of that document, entitled “Ongoing Formation,” was that the Bishop see to it that “in the year following Ordination a so-called pastoral year be established, which will ease the passage from seminary life to the exercise of the sacred ministry, proceeding gradually and facilitating a progressive and harmonious human and specifically priestly maturation” (#82). It even recommended that this pastoral year be lived out in a special *House of Clerics* so that there could be some form of common life established and the newly ordained not be immersed in excessively burdensome or delicate situations. It was foreseen that this year would also lead to conversation in which the newly ordained would get to know their bishop and their brother priests, pray together, exchange experiences, mutual encouragement, and begin good friendships. The Directory adds: “Notwithstanding the often critical pastoral needs, the first assignment must respond, above all, to the need of setting the young priests on the right road. The sacrifice of a year may then bear fruit for a long time in the future.” To my knowledge, I am not aware of any diocese that does this. If there is a pastoral year, it is during the time in seminary, not after it. I suspect that most bishops hope to

somehow accomplish this by assigning a newly-ordained man with a good pastor who might approximate what the Directory recommends.

Priests are not oblivious to this reality. It is a hot topic; however, I find that many of the younger clergy are reluctant to talk about it out of concern for how it might personally impact them.

They likely can relate to the old Cajun story of Boudreaux. In this story Boudreaux was riding in his wagon down the side of the road one day when a big semi-truck plowed right into him, and Boudreaux went flying one way and his horse and wagon went flying another way. Well a year went by and Boudreaux decided to sue the trucking company and he went before the judge and the judge said, “Boudreaux, last year when this happened and you were asked by the police officer how you felt you said ‘fine, everything is fine, I’m ok.’ But, now, a year later, you show up and want to sue for all these damages and injuries. Why is that?”

Boudreaux explained to the judge, “Well, your honor, it’s like this; when that big truck hit me, I went flying one way and my horse and the pieces of that wagon went another. We was all lying there by the road and this state trooper drove up and got out and he looked around, and he walked over and looked at my poor horse lying there and then pulled his gun out and shot her. Then he walked over to me and said, ‘How are you feeling?’”

Younger priests often may not say anything out of fear of what might happen if they do—a bad situation might become worse. It can be difficult to personally admit the struggles and challenges he might be going through. A new pastor wants to succeed, and is afraid that if he fails he might be pegged long-term as not having the abilities needed to be a pastor. Several of my younger priests have admitted as much. They were struggling but were reluctant to be seen as inadequate to the task entrusted to them, fearing they might be demoted or end up in a worse assignment. The bishop sometimes finds out too late that there is a real crisis.

As a bishop, I’ve learned that this is one area where I can help my priests by communicating to them that I want to know if a guy is “treading water,” and that a priest won’t be penalized for such an admission.

When it comes to the challenges of leadership and governance, priests need support and understanding and assistance; they also need perspective.

So, this evening I would like to speak to two areas. First, how do we consider priestly leadership theologically, in the light of faith? And, second, how might we more effectively respond to helping priests be better leaders?

As I mentioned a moment ago, this is a hot topic in most presbyterates. However, one often hears the duties of governance and leadership that a priest must assume described in the pejorative—almost as a necessary evil. We commonly speak of this idyllic priestly life which could somehow eliminate the pastoral leadership and governance responsibilities, and end up with only pastoral duties like sacraments, teaching, counselling, and visiting the sick.

When priests retire they often express this too in their joy at not having the burdens that go with pastoring, i.e., leadership, and can simply tend again to other pastoral care.

This is not only unrealistic, but it is also contrary to our vocation to be shepherds and fathers. If one reads the Second Vatican Council documents on Bishops and Priests, one finds a clear emphasis on the importance of leadership: “*To the degree of their authority and in the name of their bishop, priests exercise the office of Christ the Head and the Shepherd. Thus they gather God’s family together as a brotherhood of living unity, and lead it through Christ and in the Spirit to God the Father. For the exercise of this ministry, as for other priestly duties, spiritual power is conferred upon them for the upbuilding of the Church*” (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, 6; emphasis added). It then goes on to say this should be done in imitation of the Lord and quotes Saint Paul’s words to Timothy, “Be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, entreat, rebuke with all patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).

This power we are given is to lead our people through Christ, in the Spirit, to the Father. Wow. That is likely why we became priests—to give our lives to that! But, here’s part of the rub: we are given spiritual power to do this, but we are often not prepared to “reprove, entreat, and rebuke with all patience and teaching” and those are just some of the things good priestly leadership requires.

It’s interesting that the quote from *Presbyterorum ordinis* above describes the goal and purpose of the priest’s leadership as to first “gather God’s family together as a brotherhood of living unity.” I am often amazed at the parallels between a pastor of a parish and the father of a family. Do not the burdens and duties of a pastor mirror those that any good father might face in a typical household these days: encouraging; correcting; paying bills, fixing broken things, doing maintenance on the house, mediating conflict; resolving tensions, hurt feelings and arguments; settling insurance claims; saving for the future needs; saying no; admonishing unruly children; cleaning up messes; nurturing; making tough decisions?

This parallel seems to be confirmed in the requirements that Saint Paul lists as requirements for Holy Orders. This is found in several texts that are similar. The first is 1 *Timothy*, chapter 3 in which he first describes the requisite characteristics

for a bishop, and then those required for a deacon. Among the requirements, the bishop must be: beyond reproach, married only once, sober, prudent, respected, gracious, learned, meek, and not contentious or passionate. He must have a well-ordered home and well-disciplined children because if he cannot govern his own house, he cannot govern well the Church of God (*cf.* 1 Tim 3:1-7). Similar requirements are listed by Saint Paul in his letter to Titus, in which he describes the necessary qualities for presbyters (*cf.* Titus 1:6).

Notice that an indication of pastoral leadership is whether a man can lead and manage the smaller community of his own family. If he can be a good husband and father, he can probably lead a larger family too. This measurable quality is still valid for those who are applicants for the permanent diaconate.

Obviously, things have changed in that this is usually not an observable quality since most candidates who enter formation for the priesthood are celibate. But, the point remains: a man should not be advanced to Orders unless he possesses the ability to lead, manage and govern like a good father in a typical household. This was Saint Paul's rule of thumb—if he can run the domestic Church well, he will likely run well the portion of the household of God entrusted to him too.

Since now we usually cannot see how he manages his family, we must seek other ways to evaluate a candidate for priesthood for this necessary quality. Here it is imperative that we entrust leadership opportunities to men while they are in formation to consider whether they will be able to lead others. I also think it is important for us to think of newer ways to develop this sense in the future. For instance, our Vocations Office began this year to make some small changes that we hope will help. We are providing a week of sessions for our theologians and newly-ordained on a particular topic pre-emptive of what a pastor may or may not provide with a new associate. We are asking our college seminarians to find employment over the summer, for several reasons. First, we find that many of them have never had a real job (in fact, I am surprised at how many young men applying for seminary still don't have a driver's license!). This goes back to Senator Sasse's point that we live in a nation of delayed grown-ups in which many do not have much experience or interest in seeing tasks through to completion. Second, working and contributing to their own college expenses helps to mitigate the culture of entitlement, something Pope Francis has spoken about to clergy, both bishops and priests. Third, holding a job often requires collaboration with a diverse set of people. A young man gets a mini-education in basic humanity and the challenges people face in the world. Finally, it is a way for a college seminarian to get his feet wet in discovering where both his strengths and weaknesses lie when it comes to leadership.

As I mentioned earlier, the responsibilities of leadership come with rewards but also burdens. These are inescapable and they too must be seen in the light of faith. I recently told a friend that when you have over 130,000 Catholics in your care someone is always getting into (or causing) some kind of trouble! This is an important part of shepherding and yet it is also a reason we are reluctant to take it on.

We are all probably familiar by now with that reading we come across every year in the Breviary from St. Gregory the Great, on the burdens of being a pastor. It is in the Office of Readings for his Feast on September 3rd, in which he reflects on the passage, “*Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel*” (Ezek 3:17). Saint Gregory pours his heart out in reflecting on the challenges of being called to be a “watchman” and how hard it is to do well.

If you will indulge me, I want to quote extensively from Saint Gregory and this text. See if you can identify with him on any of this:

“Since I assumed the burden of pastoral care, my mind can no longer be collected; it is concerned with so many matters.

I am forced to consider the affairs of the Church and of the monasteries. I must weigh the lives and acts of individuals. I am responsible for the concerns of our citizens. I must worry about the invasions of roving bands of barbarians, and beware of the wolves who lie in wait for my flock. I must become an administrator lest the religious go in want. I must put up with certain robbers without losing patience and at times I must deal with them in all charity.

With my mind divided and torn to pieces by so many problems, how can I meditate or preach wholeheartedly without neglecting the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel? Moreover, in my position I must often communicate with worldly men. At times I let my tongue run, for if I am always severe in my judgments, the worldly will avoid me, and I can never attack them as I would. As a result I often listen patiently to chatter. And because I too am weak, I find myself drawn little by little into idle conversation, and I begin to talk freely about matters which I would have avoided. What once I found tedious I now enjoy.

So, who am I to be a watchman, for I do not stand on the mountain of action but lie down in the valley of weakness? Truly the all-powerful Creator and Redeemer of mankind can give me in spite of my weakness a higher life and effective speech; because I love him, I do not spare myself in speaking of him.”

I take great solace in this reading from Saint Gregory. He speaks in an unvarnished way about the burdens of pastoral care. We face just about all the

same challenges, except the barbarians. But, instead of barbarians, we live in a highly secularized society where moral values, and truth itself, have been called into question in ways my parents and grandparents could not have imagined. Like Saint Gregory, we all have our weaknesses exposed in this role of watchman, but we also realize it is a vital part of what Christ calls us to as priests.

We see a similar expression with Saint Paul, when in Second Corinthians, recounting his “credentials” as an apostle, he adds: “*And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches*” (2 Cor 11:28). In this letter, you may recall, Saint Paul is confronting the crisis of the Corinthian Church and he is seeking to quell the chaos introduced by outsiders, super-apostles. It is this letter, as much as any, that shows the anguish that Paul experienced on their behalf as their shepherd.

Let’s face it, with both Saint Paul and Saint Gregory, this is the language of *suffering*, and here, I suggest, is the heart of the matter. The *suffering* of the watchman, of the apostle, of the pastor, is born of *love*. Good leadership always requires *love*, otherwise it evolves into dictatorship or abdication and surrender.

True love always entails a measure of suffering, and this includes the love of a pastor for his people. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has said that, “Anyone who really wanted to get rid of suffering would have to get rid of love before anything else, because there can be no love without suffering, because it always demands an element of self-sacrifice, because, given temperamental differences and the drama of situations, it will always bring with it renunciation and pain. . .” Isn’t that a remarkable insight? Pope Benedict sees that in our human interactions together, with all the differences in temperament and the dramas that erupt, there will always be a need, especially on the part of the shepherd, for an element of self-sacrifice, which is true love and entails suffering. And, isn’t this what the action of Christ washing his disciples’ feet is all about?

Benedict continues, “Anyone who has inwardly accepted suffering becomes more mature and more understanding of others, becomes more human. Anyone who has consistently avoided suffering does not understand other people; he becomes hard and selfish . . . If we say that suffering is the inner side of love we then also understand why it is so important to *learn how to suffer*—and why, conversely, the avoidance of suffering renders someone unfit to cope with life” (from *God and the World*, pp 322-323).

Brothers, this is important, because what we have been speaking of to this point is part and parcel to our vocation. We have to be careful to make distinctions here. There are parts of our ministry that are difficult, and yet, this is precisely where we

learn to love; it is where we become the most Christ-like in our priesthood; it is where God saves *us*. If we seek to take things off our plate that we don't like, or don't care for, or that are a nuisance; or, if we simply have a desire to do the "good stuff" that we enjoy, and pass off the difficult, the monotonous, the troublesome, to avoid the suffering, then we may be (I repeat, *may* be) refusing to love.

A father who avoids the hard stuff of raising children, being a steward, sacrificing, taking up the hard decisions, neglects his family and does not really love them as he should.

If we are tempted to say, "This is not the cruise I signed up for" then let's be realistic, our vocation, like any Christian vocation, is not a really a cruise. The demands of love can startle us, and even scare us. Much as a man who gets married gets scared at times over the demands his wife and children place on him. We can be tempted to take our hands off the plow and look back (*cf.* Luke 9:62).

Here's my point: seeking to totally avoid or eliminate our real duties as pastors is not an option if we wish to be good shepherds and servant leaders as priests. Part of what we can fail to recognize, and maybe have false expectations about, is that this is *an essential part* of the priesthood. To speak of priesthood as a purely sacramental function, or as *pastoral* in a truncated way, is unrealistic and foreign to parish priesthood.

But, what is also foreign and unrealistic to our tradition, and common sense, is that the priest/pastor do it all by himself; which segues to our second consideration: how do we prudently respond to the situations faced by priests today so that they can be happy and fulfilled in their ministry with all its added complexities and expectations?

Here, I would like to suggest two ways we can be better. The first, getting the help of others; the second, helping the individual priest.

Every year the Liturgy places before us Scripture readings about what now we often refer to as "collaborative ministry." The first instance is what we could call the "Jethro Rule." I am of an age that whenever I hear the name, Jethro, I think of the *Beverly Hillbillies*, but in this case, I am referring to Moses' father-in-law. Moses found himself with all the overwhelming demands of decision making in leading and governing the community of the Israelites, and Jethro gave him an inspired solution:

“. . . Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from morning till evening. When Moses' father-in-law [Jethro] saw all that he was doing for the people he said, 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why

do you sit alone, and all the people stand about you from morning till evening?’ [Paraphrasing here: “Are you nuts, Moses?”] *And Moses said to his father-in-law, ‘Because the people come to me to inquire of God; when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between a man and his neighbor, and I make them know the statutes of God and his decisions.’ Moses’ father-in-law said to him, ‘What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will wear yourself out, for the thing is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it alone. Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God, and bring their cases to God, and you shall teach them the statutes and the decisions, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. Moreover choose able men from all the people, such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe; and place such men over the people as rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people . . . every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves; so it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and this people also will go to their place in peace.’*

So, the “Jethro rule” is: a. seek help for the burdens of leadership from good, prudent, intelligent and talented people; and b. don’t give up your essential responsibilities, because you are the leader.

The end-result is your own health, happiness, and effectiveness as a leader, and the peace, health and happiness of the community.

We see a New Testament version of the Jethro Rule in the Acts of the Apostles when the apostles entrust part of the work to the first deacons (*cf.* Acts 6:1-15).

There has been talk about “collaborative ministry” since I was in seminary, but I think we still have room to grow.

In seminary formation, the Church situates our topic of leadership and shepherding under *pastoral formation*. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, “On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day,” which is 25 years old this year, Pope Saint John Paul II wrote: “*And so pastoral formation certainly cannot be reduced to a mere apprenticeship, aiming to make the candidate familiar with some pastoral techniques. The seminary which educates must seek really and truly to initiate the candidate into the sensitivity of being a shepherd, in the conscious and mature assumption of his responsibilities, in the interior habit of evaluating problems and establishing priorities and looking for solutions on the basis of honest motivations of faith and according to the theological demands of pastoral work*” (#58). Priests need to be

self-aware and self-confident enough to be able to work with other people without feeling threatened. There needs to be formation in leading a team of colleagues, for even if a priest is open to seeking assistance, he must realize that he is still the leader. This is a role he may not abdicate. But this authority to lead is defined by *service* to the community, and its power is justified not by superiority but by *charity*.

Saint John Paul was clear that a priest cannot be a good shepherd by simply learning “techniques,” but he was not excluding the skills that good leaders need to be effective. Rather, they must be situated in faith and the theological demands that flow from representing Christ, the Good Shepherd. To represent Christ, the Good Shepherd, we must be in a living and constant communion with Christ, the Good Shepherd.

Fortunately, there are more tools and opportunities to assist priests in leadership for good governance and pastoral service. Some dioceses have benefitted from initiatives like *Catholic Leadership Institute* and their *Good Leaders, Good Shepherds* program or others like it.

In the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, we just completed the first year of an initiative we undertook with the help of Rockhurst University, a Jesuit University in our diocese, and their Helzberg School of Management.

I asked our newly ordained to attend these courses at Rockhurst, which were offered on an afternoon once a month, specifically for soon-to-be pastors and new pastors for leadership.

The topics included:

- Personal Leadership Style and Different Leadership Styles
- Situational Communication Essentials & Listening
- Conflict Management & Communication
- Meeting Management & Communication
- Crisis Communication & Complex Human Relationships
- Leadership vs. Management
- Language and Format of Financial Statements & Cash Flow
- Hiring and Termination & Liability
- Performance Evaluation & Setting of Expectations & Conducting Performance Reviews

In many of these areas there is not an absolute carry over from the business sphere into the life and culture of the Church, however, there are many parallels, and

much wisdom that can be applied to assist priests to become more comfortable and effective as leaders.

I recall once when I was with your Archbishop in Knoxville, and we were discussing a particularly contentious situation in the diocese, and he remarked to me about how grateful he was to have had training in “Family Systems” as part of his Masters Degree in Social Work, and how often it helped him to diagnose what was at the crux of a disagreement.

To that end, later this month, in our diocese we are having a seminar for pastors who have or who will have associate pastors living with them. The seminar will be led by some of our counsellors who are specialists in “Family Systems”. We want to give them a sense of what living in a household together ought to be like, and what to expect. Many of these same insights carry over into one’s leadership in the parish.

These are just some of the ways we might be more creative and proactive in helping each other be better leaders and better shepherds.

It is both a humbling and an honorable thing to be called “Father.” That title captures many aspects of what our priesthood is about. We are to love with compassion and mercy as the Father, and with the Spousal love of Christ the Bridegroom, recalling again the mission we have been entrusted with and expressed at the Council: *[to] gather God’s family together as a brotherhood of living unity, and lead it through Christ and in the Spirit to God the Father.*

Thank you for listening. May God bless each of you as you seek to lead with a Christ-like heart.