

**Bishop George Leo Thomas**  
**Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena**  
**June 27, 2014 Ordinations Homily**

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Msgr. Stephen Rosetti is a priest of the Diocese of Syracuse. He is a prominent psychologist, researcher, national speaker, and a highly published expert on the subject of Catholic priesthood.

In 2011, Msgr. Rosetti released the findings of an exhaustive study on the subject of priesthood in America. His work was drawn from a massive sample of priests -- 2,482 priests to be exact, living and serving in 23 dioceses across the United States.

The Rosetti study is the most comprehensive study of its kind ever conducted.

Researchers have described the study's conclusions as being countercultural, counterintuitive, but not surprising. To be sure, the results fly in the face of wide-spread public opinion and negative perceptions which have permeated and preoccupied the press and media in recent years.

The thesis of Rosetti's study can be summed up in four words, which also serve as the title his book, a book entitled Why Priests Are Happy.

Rosetti systematically compared the priesthood to the general American male population on a number of common scales, including physical health, psychological well-being, spiritual commitment, and habits of self-care.

More importantly, he has identified those underlying factors that have contributed to the individual and collective happiness of priests.

In Rosetti's words, "Priesthood consistently measures as perhaps the most fulfilling and satisfying vocation of any. Priests reported levels of happiness that are remarkably high and consistent across many studies . . . ."

On this day of ordination to diaconate and priesthood, it is good to be reminded that our candidates are entering a vocation that offers the potential for deep and meaningful satisfaction and joy.

Let's be frank. Priesthood, like Christian marriage, requires commitment, renewal, and plain old hard work. Your brothers will surely tell you, it is not "Going My Way" or "The Bells of St. Mary." Those already ordained for years or decades will say that the vocation of priesthood is a path less chosen, and a road beset with obstacles, challenges, and hardships. It is also the pathway to immense joy, if certain elements are in place.

Why, then, do priests report such a consistently high level of happiness and satisfaction?

I will offer you a few insights drawn from the writings of Stephen Rossetti, along with the wisdom of the sage people, including Pope Francis, and others, who know the souls of priests well.

## **PRAYER**

Each of these persons begins with the same point of reference. Happiness in the priesthood is predicated upon a deep and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

The cultivation of a strong interior life is the *sine qua non* for priestly happiness. This is the wellspring of priestly joy and hope. There is no other way.

A short epigraph written by Pope Paul VI describes the "the unfathomable joy which dwells in Jesus."

Those who intentionally live in His companionship can share in that unfathomable joy.

Your brother priests will describe to you the special joy that accompanies priestly ministry – from celebrating the Eucharist; to hearing the confessions of our people; to preaching the gospel well; ministering to the sick and dying; teaching the faith, and celebrating marriages and baptisms. You will also be surprised by the unexpected blessings that come to the priest who allows the Spirit to work through inevitable interruptions and unexpected events in the life of his people, even when they inconvenience you or throw your pastoral planner into chaos.

In the end, your relationship with Christ must be founded upon and sustained through a life of prayer. Prayerful and daily companionship with Jesus is the single most important predictor of priestly happiness. Everything else falls short of the mark.

## **SERVICE**

The second predictor of priestly happiness is one spoken about frequently by Pope Francis. *"If a priest wants to overcome those inevitable moments of sadness, exhaustion and boredom, as well as discover his true identity, he must head for the exit sign, going outside himself to be with God and his people."*

Happy priests have discovered the connection between sacristy and service, liturgy and life, worship and compassion, or in gospel parlance, the inexorable bond between "love of God and love of neighbor."

Let your ministry be generous and expansive. I ask you, the newly ordained, to avoid the temptation of ministering to only those who agree with your particular theological orientation, or are pleasant and easy to be around – the attractive or stealthy, the affluent and articulate. Pay close and particular attention to those not yet gathering with the assembly, those who are sick or afflicted, those weighed down by troubles or mental illness, those in nursing homes, jails and prisons, the undocumented, and those who live in the shadows of culture and on the fringes of society.

Happy priests are willing to move beyond their personal comfort zones into the uncharted and sometimes turbulent waters of modern culture and society.

## **COMMUNITY**

Thirdly, priesthood must be lived out in community.

- a) The priest cannot survive long as a Lone Ranger. Isolation, unlike solitude, is a hazard to the priesthood, and a breeding ground for trouble. Stephen Rosetti's advice is clear and compelling – invest in friendships with your brother priests, and do not neglect the diocesan presbyterate. These are your brothers. They are here for you. They are talented and generous, opinionated and, occasionally, irascible. There is immense talent and experience in this body of priests. In your relationship with your brothers, I ask you to value their years in the noon day sun, and respect their experience. Listen to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, who echoed the ever-sage St. Augustine – *"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty, and in all things, charity."* The priests are prepared to receive you as a brother, to support you, care for you, mentor you, and occasionally knock you off of your pedestal. Rosetti advises that priestly happiness is highest among those who consciously cultivate deep and meaningful friendships with their brother priests. His advice is well researched. But there is more.
- b) Rosetti further admonishes priests to cultivate healthy relationships with lay men and women. Our people love and support the priests and the priesthood. They enjoy our company, welcome us into their homes and lives, and we are the beneficiaries of their loving friendship and care. Pope Francis offers a powerful and unique perspective and another dimension of lay friendship: *"When the shepherd is in the midst of his flock, it is a 'guarded joy', watched over by the flock itself. Even in those gloomy moments when everything looks dark and a feeling of isolation takes hold of us . . . even in those moments, God's people are able to guard that joy, they are able to protect you, to embrace you, and to help you open your heart to find renewed joy."* In a word, priesthood and laity are there for each other. The charism of priestly celibacy, well lived, allows you to live in freedom and to have a cherished place in your heart for all.
- c) On the topic of community, I have this strong admonishment for you. In the years ahead, as you receive greater leadership responsibilities, do not allow your community to become self-enclosed or self-referential. Through your preaching and teaching, establish strong and meaningful ties with the Universal Church, with neighboring parishes, deanery, and Diocese; and with the ecumenical, interfaith, and civic community. Cultivate meaningful relationships with your Bishop, deep reverence for our Holy Father, and strong ties with the mission territories of the Church, especially our own mission in Guatemala. This helps to establish a more expansive vision of the Church, which is always missionary in orientation, and evangelical by the Lord's own *mandatum*.

## **CO-RESPONSIBILITY**

Since the close of the Vatican Council, some 50 years ago, the role of the laity has been raised up and celebrated as a work of the Holy Spirit. Words like "collaboration," "consultation," and "collegiality" have entered the Church's vocabulary, and have given new shape and contour to the ecclesial landscape.

These are not just fancy words or ethereal concepts. In recent years, both Pope Emeritus Benedict and Pope Francis have raised the ante on the role and mission of the laity, stating that they are not just collaborators with the clergy, but co-responsible for the very being and activity of the Church.

My advice to you is, "Know what you don't know." Surround yourself with wise people, experts in the field, consultants, volunteers and staff members.

Every parish in this Diocese should have fully functioning pastoral and financial councils, and a full cadre of well-formed liturgical ministers.

In the years ahead, let lay ministry flourish and blossom in your community. Let it be marked by a spirit of mutuality and trust, and the net result will be ministerial, pastoral care, and administrative excellence.

## **BALANCE**

Priesthood is demanding, and requires an intentional commitment to live a balanced life. Get over your Messiah complex early on.

Rossetti has underscored the need for spiritual direction and a regular confessor in the life of the priest. The late Bishop Bernard Topel of Spokane once said, "*The priest who serves as his own spiritual director is the disciple of a fool.*"

Keep your mind well informed through a systematic and sustained program of spiritual and theological reading.

Get reasonable rest and relaxation, exercise and good nourishment. Don't eat everything that is put on your plate. Discover the medicinal value of laughter and camaraderie. If you find yourself foundering, stumbling, overwhelmed, or simply over your head, seek help. It is there for the asking. We are here for you.

The well- disciplined life is an investment in our people, and an investment in longevity. Prepare for the marathon and not just the 100-yard dash.

I know that I speak on behalf of a full Cathedral when I say, "*We warmly welcome you into the presbyterate and transitional diaconate, and wish you a lifetime of happiness and joy.*" The ordination gospel is clear and compelling. Jesus has come to you and to me that we might have joy, and have it to the fullest.

We pray that your hearts overflow with that special happiness which comes from knowing, loving, and serving our Lord Jesus, who, in just a few moments, will call you to Holy Orders through the power of His Spirit, and through the laying on of hands.

Give your heart to Him, fully and unreservedly, for He is here, in our midst, "as one who serves."