

THE CARDINAL'S FORUM
@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary
August 28, 2017
on "The Gift of the Priestly Vocation"



remarks by

The Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
Archbishop of Philadelphia

Later this week, I'll have the privilege of ordaining a new bishop for the Diocese of Allentown. One of the great joys of being a bishop is taking part in the ordination of other bishops. And being an archbishop often leads to being the principal celebrant in a new bishop's ordination. I've had that privilege six times in the past. The seventh will be ordaining Bishop-elect Schlert on Thursday in Allentown.

Preparing to ordain Bishop-elect Schlert led naturally to my thoughts for our discussion this evening

Our theme tonight is the priestly vocation. And to be honest, in all my thinking, I'm not sure I can add much to the topic beyond the three wonderful talks Glasgow's Archbishop Philip Tartaglia gave at our priests' convocation this past May. Part of his success in Hershey came from the content of what he said about the priesthood. It was really excellent. I encourage you to read and pray about those talks. You can find them on our diocesan website. The second and third talks go to the heart of the issues we face in priestly life – especially the importance of priestly fraternity and the distinctive, sacred, set-apart nature of the priestly vocation.

But frankly, even more important than what the archbishop said, were the warmth and humanity of his person. He's a very good man. His manner radiates a kind of patience, simplicity, understanding and good will – married to sense of humor and a deep fidelity to the Church and her teachings; and I mean *all* of her teachings, even the inconvenient ones – that embodies the *imago Christi* we should all strive for as priests. He's the sort of priest you want to spend time with. I don't know whether those qualities come naturally to the archbishop, or whether he cultivated them over time. But they're hugely attractive. And they're a good lesson to the rest of us in our own ministries.

What we say to our people is important. But the model of Christian life we offer in our own priestly behavior is even more important. A lay friend of mine who's the father of four likes

to remind me that children are ruthlessly skillful in reading the hearts of their parents. A man can say he loves his children a hundred times a day -- but if he really *doesn't* love them, they'll know it, no matter what he says, and they'll forgive him nothing. And likewise, a father can be distracted and a bumbler and make a hundred different gaffes and mistakes a day. But if he loves well, if his heart is true, if he genuinely puts his family above himself, then his children will know that too, and they'll forgive him almost anything.

Of course, the adults in our parishes are grownups, not children. Many have exceptional experience and talents. Whatever their backgrounds, we need to listen to them and engage them with sincere respect. But the same basic principle applies. The priestly vocation is a call to a particular kind of fatherhood. And fathering demands a particular blend of patience, humility, courage and endurance. The priest exists for the salvation of the people in his care -- no matter how distressing some of those people can sometimes be.

Without love, we priests are just another brand of institutional functionary. And in America 2017, we're well past a time when the Church can survive as a moralizing corporation or a necessary monument in the cultural landscape. No one can find life or hope in that kind of Church. The habit of faith dies in a nation without a living stream of vigorous Christian witness. And today that means a certain degree of ongoing conflict with the world around us. The Church has zero importance to many of the people now making our laws and shaping our culture. And if she's noticed at all by our leadership class, she tends to be seen as a problem that needs to be neutralized on issues like sexuality, the nature of the family and the sanctity of life.

The good news is that we've been in these circumstances before. Today is the feast of St. Augustine of Hippo, and Augustine -- more than Benedict or Dominic, Francis or Charles Borromeo or any other great saint -- speaks to the needs of our time. He lived at a time every bit as difficult as our own. But his realism about the world never diminished his confidence in God's love. As a priest first and then as a bishop, Augustine was embedded in the life of his people and radically committed to bringing them to God. In one of his most famous sermons -- and I'm sure you'll remember it -- he said to his people "*for you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian.*"

Those words apply just as truly to every priest in every diocese as they do to bishops. In fact, they're even more profoundly relevant to priests than bishops. It's our priests, not bishops, who most intimately touch the lives of our people at births, baptisms, weddings, in the sufferings and joys of daily life, and on the doorstep of death.

That human intimacy, that ability to be the conduit of God's presence to others when they need him most, is the privilege and the power of the priesthood. And there's no greater model for the priestly vocation in our age than Augustine.

St. Augustine, pray for us!