

7 Steps to Support the Newly Ordained Fraternity is key in fostering a love for the priesthood

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Having a mentor priest can be a key part of the happiness and success of a young priest early in his ministry. Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic

It is always a source of sadness when a young priest leaves the priesthood. After years of discernment and formation, the exit of a young priest can be a surprising and distressing event.

Some of those who leave come to realize that, despite having been ordained, they should not have become priests in the first place. It turns out that they lacked some of the basic human essentials to function as priests in a demanding, interpersonal ministry.

Others, because of gross misconduct, are dismissed. Church leadership appears to be more willing today to recognize some behavior as

necessarily resulting in a priest's dismissal.

But there are other cases where a priest, after a few years of ministry, voluntarily resigns. Perhaps the priest might have stayed and ministered well if some support structures had been put into place. In this article, I will set out seven important steps in nurturing the vocations of the newly ordained. In addition, these steps surely will help all those in priestly ministry to live happier and holier lives.

1. Mentoring Program

The new *Ratio Fundamentalis* emphasizes the importance of ongoing formation in the life of a priest (Nos. 80-88). Recently I heard it said, "Training for priesthood occurs in the seminary, but formation begins at ordination."

Human formation, especially for celibacy, begins in earnest when a new priest arrives in his first parish. Here, with the help of mentors (and his parishioners!), he learns how to make friends and to live a fully chaste life in the context of a busy, celibate ministry.

It is easy to underestimate the difficulty in transitioning from seminary life to full-time priestly ministry. In my research study ["Why Priests Are Happy"](#) (Ave Maria Press, \$18.95), the cohort

of priests that showed the highest levels of stress and burnout were those in the first years of priesthood.

The newly ordained need a structured program of support and supervision to aid in their transition. Some dioceses already have begun these programs where newly ordained meet together monthly to share a day of mutual support and prayer. These meetings often are attended by the vicar for clergy and occasionally the bishop.

In addition, each newly ordained priest should have a senior priest as a mentor. This older priest, perhaps his pastor but not always, will meet regularly with the young priest and help him in his personal life and new priestly ministry. Some dioceses have a list of senior priest mentors from which the newly ordained can choose.

2. Private Prayer

Once, a young priest came into the Saint Luke Institute for psychological treatment to deal with personal struggles. I asked him, "How much do you pray privately each day?" He responded sharply, "I am too busy to pray!" To which I responded, "Then you are too busy to be a priest." Not only is personal time for prayer an essential foundation of our priestly ministry, it is critical for our own well-being and happiness as a priest.

At Saint Luke's, the priests who come for treatment begin the program with 20 minutes of private prayer a day and increase it from that level. In my study of healthy priests, the average amount of daily private prayer was 30-45 minutes a day with 20 percent praying at least an hour a day.

Sadly, only 58 percent of priests said they prayed all or most of the Liturgy of the Hours daily. I would encourage seminarians to begin to develop a taste for the psalms and the daily recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours not only for the good of the people whom they serve and pray for, but also for their own integrity and spiritual welfare as a priest.

3. Attend Gatherings

Priests who leave ministry often are isolated. The newly ordained ought to be formed in the reality that priesthood is not a solo practice. Rather, they are ordained into a presbyterate, gathered around their bishop. Regular gatherings of priests are important for them to attend, not only for the strength of the presbyterate, but for their own spiritual health as well.

In my research, about 80 percent of priests said they regularly attended priest gatherings. When speaking to seminarians, I encourage them to attend priest gatherings such as ordinations, priest funerals, the annual Chrism Mass, priest retreats and convocations, and others.

I worry about young priests whom we never see at priestly gatherings.

4. Belong to a Support Group

One of the best helps for a priest is to belong to a priest support group. These groups usually pray together, share what's new with their lives and eat a meal.

There are some associations already in place, such as the international fraternity called Jesu Caritas. Or priests can start their own informal groups.

As someone who has been a part of a priest support group for almost 20 years, I personally can attest to its efficacy. It is a wonderful grace to have a small group of brother priests with whom you can share your personal and priestly life. We pray together; we talk about our lives and struggles; and we share a meal at a local restaurant. About one-third of American priests belong to such a group. I think all should!

5. Develop Relationships Skills

Much of what we do at the Saint Luke Institute is to assist priests in building healthy relationships. One common factor among priests with psychological problems is their inability to build life-giving relationships. This means learning how to make good relationships with God and with others. Throughout the vicissitudes of priestly life, the priest needs to have his "house" built on the solid foundation of the love of God and love of his neighbor.

If a priest is isolated, I do not have much hope for the quality of his priesthood. At the Saint Luke Institute, priests learn how to relate to one another in honest and mutually supportive ways. For some, it is the first time in their lives that they have real friends. Not surprisingly, as a result, many reported that they also learned how to relate to God honestly and intimately as a real presence in their lives.

I believe that seminaries should conduct short courses for its seminarians on how to build relationships. Many men come into the priesthood without the knowledge and experience of building relationships. Such a course will be one of their most important learnings!

6. Establish a Separate Living Space

In his 2002 book ["The First Five Years of Priesthood"](#) (Liturgical Press, \$24.95), Dean Hoge found that resigned priests reported a "difficulty of establishing private living space."

Priests are very public people and thus need a modest private living space to rest and to find a bit of privacy. Resigned priests had difficulty establishing this regenerative personal space. I know of a couple of dioceses, one in China, where the bishop built a residence just for the priests to have a place to go on their days off to rest and recuperate. And the priests' personal quarters should be off limits to anyone but their closest invited friends.

7. Outpatient Psychotherapy

In my research, when I asked American priests if they had sought out help from a counselor during their priesthood, 46 percent said they had. Clearly having such a resource available to priests is helpful in their navigating difficult times. Some priests bring with them into priesthood

significant baggage from their childhood. Being able to tap into some healing resources, both psychological and spiritual, can be vocation-saving for such people. More than 70 percent of those priests and religious who came to the Saint Luke Institute for treatment returned to an active and productive ministry.

I know several dioceses that offer outpatient psychotherapy services to their priests free of charge. They make provisions for it to be provided anonymously, thus concealing their identity. The priest only needs to make an appointment at the counselor's office if he feels the need.

Conclusion

As noted previously, there was a strong correlation between those priests who were experiencing the symptoms of burnout and thoughts of leaving the priesthood. Thus it is imperative to intervene quickly, applying healing resources and any other ministerial adjustments needed. By the time a priest shows up in the bishop's office and declares that he wants to leave, it is usually too late to change his mind. But if we can intervene at the first signs of isolation, loneliness and burnout, we have a better chance of saving his vocation.

These seven steps are important for any priest. Developing a healthy relationship with God and others, spending time in prayer, being with other priests and finding space to rest and rejuvenate are all part of what makes a happy and successful priesthood. In the early years after ordination, young priests should have mentors to help them adjust to their new, often intense lives as priests.

My research suggests that priests, as a group, are generally psychologically healthy and happy people. They have good friends and love their ministries. They find much support in their personal spiritual lives and in their relationships to the Lord. Nevertheless, sometimes extra help and support in living the priesthood is needed. The kinds of steps that we take to help and support those in need are typically a help and support to all our priests.

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