



## Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Giving

SPIRITUALITY OF PRIESTS IS OF GREAT CONCERN

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

With the current crises of a great shortage of vocations, and the sexual abuse of minors, the spirituality of priests is of great concern to the Catholic faithful. To help remedy the situation, the Rev. Eugene Hemrick, a priest of the Joliet Diocese, has established the National Institute for the Renewal of Priesthood at the Washington (D.C.) Theological Union.

"Its mission," he explained, "is to spritually and intell-  
ectually energize priests and their co-workers through pertinent  
information, and establish a forum through which they can dialogue  
on issues that are timely to the Church."

The uniqueness of the new National Institute is that it is  
built on the utilization of the modern communications technique  
of the Internet. This technological tool allows it to be in  
dialogue on a daily basis with bishops, priests, deacons and  
laypersons throughout the U.S. and other countries.

The very first dialogue question posted on its Internet  
website (<http://www.jknirp.com>) asked: How do you sustain your  
spiritual life amid a daily, busy schedule?"

Explained Fr. Hemrick, "What follows in this monograph are  
the results of that first dialogue. It is a testimony to ex-  
tremely busy people who are not only able to find time, but also  
creative ways of sustaining their spirituality."

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Readers cannot but be inspired by the efforts of people like themselves trying to stay close to God while living hectic lives."

The director also pointed out the example of the fictional priest Joe Hackett who is the focus of writer J.F. Powers' novel "Morte D'Urban" which won the 1963 National Book Award. Through a series of humanly humorous events, Joe Hackett comes to realize that the seminary wasn't the place for all-out mysticism, nor would any parish or place that he would ever be. The young, fictional priest also comes to the understanding that "it had been foolish to hope that he could go all the way, could get in touch with God directly, to think that he could bypass humanity." He finally comes to understand that he couldn't be a mystic, but that ~~being~~ being a priest would mean a life in pursuit of holiness.

#### Real-Life Incidents

Fr. Hemrick then offers two real-life incidents to support this outlook.

While teaching at Harvard University years ago, the renowned Fr. Henri Nouwen was asked how he was doing at the divinity school there. He replied quite candidly that his "soul hurt." "There is much talk about and study of God here, but little experience of God."

Within months of the conversation, Fr. Nouwen, first and always a priest, followed his heart and became pastor at L'Arch Daybreak Community near Toronto, Canada, where he remained until his death working among handicapped people.

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The other incident involved a newly-elected superior of a religious community. When complimented on the positive response to his call to prayer by members of his community, he responded, "Doesn't a good coach start with the basics?"

To Fr. Hemrick and so many others, the basics of the priestly life are holiness and prayer.

"But amidst the chaos, clamor, and attachments of contemporary life, how do priests maintain their prayer life?" asked Fr. Hemrick. "Well, most priests are notoriously reluctant to talk freely and openly about it. Take, for example, the story of the priest seminary professor who told his students that 'we're fine talking about sports or the weather, but have one of us bring up prayer and spirituality and we look at each other like 'what planet is he from?' However, when you finally do get priests to open up, you'll find that they are not reluctant in the practice of their prayer life."

#### The First Dialogue

The first dialogue on the website posed a compound question: "What helps us best to cultivate/improve/develop/maintain our spirituality amidst busy schedules? What spiritual exercises in our lives have most drawn us closer to God and God's people?"

The responses, over a four-month period and overwhelmingly from priests, came quickly and honestly. They contain real-life experiences and much wisdom from all concerned about priesthood in the present time.

It must first be said that the lives of priests today are busier than ever, reflecting the accelerated pace of our present-day world, the great increase in the Catholic population, and the sharp decrease in the number of priests. To this must be added that Catholics live more complicated lives, both morally and spiritually.

In this situation, a pastor shares these thoughts:

"I have been an inner-city pastor for fifteen years. All of us in the area are struggling with high costs, dwindling lay leadership and parishioners, the possible consolidation of schools, and sharing of personnel. In many ways, I find that our ministry is similar to hospice care. We are all waiting to find out which parish will have to share a pastor or be closed. While this situation exists in many parts of the country, it is still very difficult. As a pastor, it is hard not to be personally affected by parishioners' fears and sadness, and one's own sense of 'Did I do enough?' to prevent this from happening at this time.

Even those who live in monasteries or are engaged in teaching and similar apostolates are effected.

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"My monastery is very active," responds a monk, "operating a seminary, numerous parishes, and a college apostolate. Many of us work five days a week in the school(s) and then are assigned to help out at parishes on weekends, sometimes leading to seven-day workweeks for stretches at a time.

"On top of that, we still have to go out with a tin cup asking for help for scholarships for our students and assistance for our retired brethren. It's just the reality. We don't have monarchs anymore to subsidize our work."

Focus on Eucharist

To counteract these and other difficult situations, priests turn to the Eucharist and the other Sacraments. Write another respondent: "Most important is the celebration of the Eucharist — the source and summit of Church life. I challenge myself to be intentional, prayerful, and reverent as a way of communicating that the Eucharist is important to me and should be important to the assembly."

Still another priest echoed this notion well when he said: "As a priest, I find the greatest source of spiritual boost to be the celebration of the Eucharist. We do not read the Mass — we pray with and for the gathered community. I draw great spiritual strength from it, and I hear that the community draws it from me. We open ourselves to the continuing presence of God."

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Focus on Prayer

Setting aside a period of time regularly for prayer every day is a favored spiritual regimen for many priests, with morning being ranked first as an excellent time for communicating with God.

"I can think of no better way to start the day," said one priest."

Added another that "if I wait until later, later never comes."

Still another priest described his morning routine in these words: "I've been getting up early so I can read the Psalms and the Mass readings for the day. It really makes a difference. I find I get a lot more out of the Mass at noon if I've read the readings and the Psalms and have had time to reflect on them before I arrive at church."

A Matter of Discipline

Many priest respondents acknowledged the importance of discipline to make time for prayer in an overly-busy life. At times, one priest explained, "I have to grab myself by the seat of the pants to get back on track. My spiritual development is important to me, but sometimes I succumb to the demands of ministry, exhaustion, or sheer laziness in taking time to pray before the Blessed Sacrament or praying the Liturgy of the Hours."

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Others mention the need for orderliness and try to achieve it in such ways as the habit of a running conversation with God and the saints, or even during driving time (safeguarding the need for being alert to traffic). A bishop noted the importance of praying the breviary, especially with his chancery staff. Another priest suggested the discipline of awakening 30 minutes early and spending that time in the rectory chapel.

Still others suggested the practice of the "lectio divina" for reflection on Scripture, prayer of silence, or even doing something out of the ordinary such as phoning a person who is experiencing some difficulty.

The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises are also a favored discipline for priests, along with having a spiritual director, and the use of physical exercise with prayer. One pastor also urges the use of a labyrinth as a form of prayer.

#### Breaking Away

Those priests who responded to the original questions seemed to understand the difficulty of nurturing a spiritual life in the midst of a consumer society in overdrive. They also understood the necessity of going on a retreat and also spending time with fellow priests. Said one who sees great strength in numbers: "I get my greatest strength from priest gatherings in the diocese wherever they are and no matter how far I have to drive, be they diocesan retreats, convocations, days of recollections, gatherings of seminarians, senate meetings, support groups, clusters, or even the funerals of priests or members of their families."

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Other priests referred to seeking spiritual help from other traditions, and the ongoing need to seek God in all aspects of life.

Concluded Fr. Eugene Hemrick of his Internet outreach to priests and their spirituality: "Like all great authors, J.F. Powers knew and loved his subject — the priesthood. And he knew that what he wrote was not life imitating art. Quite the opposite. After all, his Hackett, Urban and their confreres were amalgamations of the priests who populated his life.

"They are still out there, pursuing holiness and finding it in the trenches of their ministries."

For copies of "The Many Faces of Priestly Spirituality" please write, e-mail, fax, or phone:

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