

FROM THE INSIDE

By Peter Berger, Seminarian

Greetings as we continue to celebrate Christ's resurrection. It is in that spirit of hope and joy which flows from the Paschal Mystery that I write this latest "From the Inside" column.

It can be easy, as we think about vocations and priesthood, to focus in on what the priest gives up. It seems that our society wants to focus in on those sacrifices that a vocation to the priesthood entails. Yes, there are sacrifices that must be made, but I would contend that they are no more or less than the average married person with a family makes.

A couple of years ago, a man was walking by the seminary with his newborn daughter. He stopped and we started to chat. He asked if I was a student here and if I was studying to be a priest. When I said yes, he told me "that must be a huge commitment to make."

I looked at his daughter and said, "Actually, I think you've made just as large a commitment by being a father." You could see in his face that something resonated with him, that he understood better, that what each of us was doing was not so far from what the other was doing. In light of that, I think it would be nice to reflect for a bit on the joys of priesthood! I am not a priest yet, but I was able to spend nine months on a parish internship and experienced some of the things that a priest does and they are very deep joys.

As a diocesan priest you:

- *Experience the mundane and the deeply spiritual:* One of things that excites me about priesthood is the diversity of experiences that a diocesan priest has. I can remember preparing for the Easter Vigil at my intern parish. We had a large baptismal pool that was set up for the Easter season, and about an hour and a half before the vigil was scheduled to begin, we discovered that the heating pump had a hole and had pumped a fourth of the pool onto the floor. Needless to say, it was not what we needed! So, I spent time mopping up the floor as fast as I could before we needed to begin. Only a few hours later we baptized two people in that same refilled pool. One was a 22-year-old college senior and the other a 61-year-old grandmother. To go from cleaning up a mess to experiencing the entry of two people into the Church was a huge swing and brought with it a deep sense of joy.
- *Live your life in community:* That may seem something odd to say about a diocesan priest, since they don't generally live in community with other priests. What I learned on internship was that you live in a community just the same: the parish community. You are truly a part of the life of a community of various people, all united around a central faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to His

Church. I was not alone like I feared I would be. The People of God sustained me in my vocation, and I hope and pray that I helped to sustain them in theirs. That type of community excites me in a way that religious life community does not. I love the diversity of the parish community, where you get to live your life and share yourself with people who work hard, have fun, and long to experience God in their lives. By the same token, they share themselves with you and accept you as part of the “family.”

- *Serve everyone:* Religious orders have particular ministries. For instance, Jesuits tend to serve in educational institutions and missions. Franciscans tend to serve the poor and the cause of justice. What excites me about the diocesan priesthood is that we serve *everyone*. We don't have a “special assignment” to a certain group of people; we serve anyone and everyone who walks through the parish door, or who lives in the parish neighborhood. They are all entrusted to our care, young and old, rich and poor, black and white, the weak in faith and the strong in faith, families and single persons, the newly born and the dying, the healthy and the sick. We are called to serve ALL of them. No one is left outside the care of the parish priest. That breadth of people whom I can serve is something that very few if any other ways of life offer.
- *Are allowed into the depths of a person's soul:* When I had been on internship about three weeks or so, I went to the first meeting of the RCIA for the year. I had never met these people before in my life, but as I was walking back to the rectory that night, one of the sponsors, a younger man, stopped me because he needed to talk. He had lost his job and was struggling to support his family. He himself had just come back to the Church about a year before and was wondering where God was and whether God cared for him. I had never met him before in my life! He knew I was a seminarian though, and felt comfortable sharing his faith struggle with me. It was an honor to be allowed into the depths of his soul like that. We talked and it seemed to bring him some relief. A week later, after Sunday Mass, he stopped me. He had found a job after months of searching! God had answered his prayers. I experienced the depths of his concern and also the joy of a new opportunity. The priesthood allows one to quickly enter another's life and share in the pains and joys of that life.
- *Preach regularly:* One of the central missions of the priest is to preach, to share the Good News with the community. The ability to take the fruits of your own prayer and God's actions in your life, to share where you see God acting in the community and the world, and to share that with hundreds of people every week is an incredible joy and gift. It is a sacred trust and a central aspect of the care of souls. It makes God's actions and words new and relevant in the lives of average people.
- *Celebrate the Sacred Mysteries of our redemption:* A priest is one who celebrates the sacraments. I was, of course, not allowed to do that on internship! The longing to celebrate them, though, was deep. The sacraments are Christ's gift to

His Church, the very pledge of His love and His presence with the Church for all time. When someone asks where God is in their lives, one of the easiest places to point is the Eucharist. As a priest, one is given the grace of celebrating these mysteries of new life, of marital commitment, of forgiveness, of anointing the sick, of the very Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. That Christ would call me, or you, to continue to celebrate these mysteries for the People of God, day after day, weekend after weekend, is a joy beyond words.

There are many other joys to the priesthood: spending time in the grade school, listening to teenagers, walking to the gravesite with a family, welcoming the stranger, speaking for the voiceless, caring for those who have no one else to care for them, and daring to represent Christ to His holy people. Yes, there are sacrifices that a priest makes, but so many joys that far make up for them.