



## FULL OF GOD, FULL OF JOY

---

I have been asked by a couple of dioceses to write an article on priesthood in this Year for Priests, which I am honored to do. One diocese in particular suggested that I write ten steps toward *priestly holiness*. This sounded like an excellent idea, especially since the Holy Father stressed that the year's goal is to "deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness to the Gospel" (Letter Proclaiming a Year for Priests). The new patron saint of all priests, the Curé of Ars, said, "If you want the whole diocese to be converted to God, then all of the Cures must become holy" (*Sacerdotii Nostrae Primordia* 102).

But one of the problems with the word "holiness" today, I believe, is its frequent misinterpretation. In the modern mind, holiness sometimes conjures up images of a dour, joyless existence. And thus it would be easy, in a misguided effort, to attempt to present a negative, dour countenance, often with judgmental overtones. In response to this distorted image, one might quote St. Teresa of Avila, "God save us from these sour-faced saints."

So then, if we priests intend to strive more diligently this year to respond to the Holy Father's initiative, and indeed God's call to be holy, what images might we use for our time? To answer this question, I suggest we go back to a basic understanding of what holiness is. It can be thought of in many ways, but at root one could characterize holiness

as becoming more what God intended us to be: images of God. We are to become more like God. In effect, we are to be “full of God.”

And who is God? Dour, negative, judgmental, angry, sad, miserable? Hardly. To be full of God is to be full of love, joy, and peace. What are the fruits of the Spirit, indicators of who God is? We find the answer in St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (5:22–23).

So, then, this is what we are striving for. We priests want to be full of God’s Spirit, and we know this when we radiate these nine fruits of the Spirit. All of these spiritual fruits exist together as different manifestations of the one Divine life. Nevertheless, in this Year for Priests, I propose that we strive to become more like God, focusing particularly on the Spirit’s fruit of Divine joy.

Thus, if we think of holiness as becoming increasingly full of God and therefore his joy, I suggest the following ten steps. These steps build upon each other and progressively deepen our journey into God. . . .



## 1. CEASE ANY SERIOUS SIN.

---

This might sound a bit obvious, with no need of mention, but my last seventeen years of working with priests suggests that it needs to be said clearly and directly. I suggest

---

that our Church leaders, bishops, vicars for clergy, rectors of seminaries, and the like, ought to make it clear: priests must eschew such sins. All of us priests must reject them in ourselves and courageously challenge them in our brothers. In such matters, silence is not fraternal charity.

Happily, the great majority of priests live exemplary lives. Pope Benedict recognized this in his proclamation of the Year for Priests: “I think of all those priests who quietly present Christ’s words and actions each day to the faithful and to the whole world, striving to be one with the Lord in their thoughts and their will, their sentiments and their style of life. How can I not pay tribute to their apostolic labours, their tireless and hidden service, their universal charity?” (Letter Proclaiming). So the Holy Father himself opened his letter with words of praise and thanks to our faithful priests of today. I echo these wonderful sentiments.

But he also felt it necessary to mention, “There are also, sad to say, situations which can never be sufficiently deplored where the Church herself suffers as a consequence of infidelity on the part of some of her ministers” (Letter Proclaiming). The Holy Father did not shy away from such difficult truths. It has been a significant part of my work these past years to attend to such challenges. While these are the exception, the consequent devastation and heart-break make them particularly important to mention.

How has it come to this, that such a thing need be mentioned? There is, in our day and in many places, a declining sense of the spiritual. Focused on the many valid needs of the present but accepting only what our senses tell us, our society has little room for spiritual realities and spiritual truths. In our day, God is not so much disbelieved by many as ignored. And thus spiritual realities fade into obscurity.

For example, there are many, even some believers, who do not acknowledge the existence of a “hell.” However, when we lose this truth, we also lose an awareness of the devastation of sin and what its real consequences are. If we had but an inkling of this devastation, we would flee it with horror. Hell is real and it shows us what life becomes when we cut ourselves off from God. If we lose an awareness of the possibility of hell, we lose an awareness of the power of human freedom and choice.

When priests fall into double lives, inured in serious sin, they increasingly cut themselves off from God. They become miserable, and they begin to descend into “hell.” I have seen this firsthand in my work, and I urge all of us to review our lives and see if there are parts of our lives which are damaging our relationship to God. Sexual affairs, abusing young people, addiction to drugs or alcohol, Internet pornography, stealing Church monies, and the like become deadly to the human spirit. Sin destroys our journey into God and thus our journey into joy. Contrary to the demonic message of our time, it is sin that makes us miserable and joyless.

For the very few who find themselves in such circumstances, I urge you to contact your own bishop for assistance. It has been my experience that our bishops are wonderfully solicitous of their priests, particularly when they voluntarily come seeking help. It is never too late, and there is no sin that cannot be overcome by God’s grace with human cooperation. And if the sanctity of a single priest like the Curé of Ars can be a wonderful leaven to an entire diocese, the malfeasance of a single priest can be a serious detriment to an entire diocese as well.

When we have rid ourselves of serious sin, we are ready to begin the journey into God.



## 2. RENEW THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE IN OURSELVES AND IN THOSE WE SERVE.

---

It is no secret to us priests that the confessional has become underutilized in many areas of our Church. This is obviously connected to the previously mentioned dismissal of the full truth of sin and its consequent separation from God, that is, hell. It appears that some of us priests are not immune to this deprivation.

I am currently in the midst of conducting a large study of the spiritual and psychological wellness of our priests. To date, we have recorded the responses of 2,441 priests (from twenty-two dioceses), who have completed an extensive survey. One of the questions asked how often the priest himself receives the Sacrament of Penance. The results are important: 28.8% of the priest respondents said they receive this sacrament at least monthly; 57.4% go at least every three months; and 88.6% go at least yearly. Sadly, 11.4% of the priests admitted to receiving the sacrament “less than yearly.” For a priest whose life is intimately connected to the sacraments, this suggests that the Holy Father’s proclamation of a year of priestly renewal comes none