



# Humanum

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## A Young Priest Growing As a Father

FR. JACOB A. STRAND

The question caught me off guard. Nothing about it was out of place. I just hadn't been asked it before. "Why do you want to be a diocesan priest and not a religious?" Still young and wanting to make a good impression, I searched for some theologically impressive reply, but came up empty. This was a blessing because it forced an honest response. "Well, growing up I always admired my pastor. He was a father to the whole parish. I guess that's what I want to be too."

During the next decade of my life, I finished seminary formation, became comfortable doing priestly things as a parochial vicar, and completing extra theological studies. During this time, I interacted often with priests who were doctoral candidates, curial staffers, seminary formators, and professors. Being a parish pastor was not at the forefront of my mind. Then, just two years ago, I received an assignment as pastor to two parishes, four churches, and a school in Wisconsin farm country. I have discovered that, although my desire to become a pastor was dormant, it never disappeared. My current assignment has revived it: I have been introduced to the joy of being a spiritual father.

My parochial territory consists of many rolling hills. It would be easier to grow crops in flat fields, but much less aesthetically pleasing. Given a choice, most farmers would probably opt for this terrain over level fields, even though unpredictable topographic contours invite an unequal distribution of water flow that impacts part of the crop every year. Not all the land is farmable however, mostly because of the glaciers moving through the area 20,000 years ago, leaving erratic groupings of unexpected depressions and sudden peaks, which are now covered with hardwood forest.

This land was first settled by mostly German immigrants about two centuries ago. These pioneers were poor in everything but faith. They arranged themselves in small communities, worked hard and suffered much as they began cultivating the virgin soil. At the same time, the newly formed diocese was attempting to serve the Catholics in its massive territory. Priests would ride on horseback to find the Catholic communities and minister the sacraments to them. One can only imagine the happy relief the priest's visit occasioned, even if his stay was brief. There were babies needing the cleansing waters of baptism and couples desiring

marriage. Much of the community undoubtedly desired to confess and receive the Eucharist. As the settlement expanded, it would become a greater diocesan priority and the people would receive priests more frequently. If it grew large enough and boasted of a beautiful Church, it would become a parish and the people would earn a resident priest. The settlers now had their own spiritual father. They were no longer orphans.

But that was a long time ago. Nowadays most of these churches are used as photography studios or secular wedding chapels. Others have been demolished. Still others are retained by large parishes for occasional use. When I speak to old-timers about their parishes, they fondly rehearse all the pastors they knew, recounting to me the unique quirks of each one. When they arrive at the end of the list, their hearts sink as they tell me: “That’s when we lost our priest.” When I first began hearing this, I thought they meant the priest died. But he didn’t. It was just that they lost their own pastor. And this meant something in them died: they were orphans again.

Shortly after I began my current assignment, a few long-time parishioners from the smaller of my two parishes asked me, “Father, is it alright with you if we put your name on the sign outside of church?” I balked and requested a couple days to think about it. I had no desire to emphasize the man over the office, yet I was moved by their request. I sensed that they wanted to be reminded, every time they passed the church, that they still had a priest, whom they knew as a father and who was entrusted to them by the Archbishop. This particular man, this father, would show up to anoint their spouse in the hospital after being rushed to the emergency room, would challenge them with the Gospel by weaving it into their daily lives which he understood and appreciated, and would pray for their wayward children. In the end, I said: “Sure, that’s fine.” And they breathed a sigh of relief.

There may be droves of fallen away Catholics who are disgruntled by the bad decisions of clerics, scandalized by their sinful behavior, and put off by their selfish lifestyles. But there are still many who have experienced the worst of clerical decadence and still show up. Inevitably, a pastor will spend most of his time caring for these people. What they need more than anything else is a priest willing to be their father. Spiritual fatherhood exists at the convergence of the vertical and the horizontal. On the one hand, Christ, who is the image of God the Father, offers the paradigm of priestly fatherhood. On the other hand, the needs of the people draw out the spiritual fatherhood from within a priest’s soul, just as the needs of a child elicit the fatherhood from within the masculinity of a man. A priest brings Christ to the people in a way with which they are familiar, as a father. This paternity of the priest is highlighted within a parish, which is an extension of the parishioners’ families. My pastoring experience over the past couple years has reminded me time and again that spiritual fathers, influenced from above and below, are both with people and with God.

Christ walked with his disciples for miles and miles, he fished with them for hours and hours, and he ate and drank with them day after day. He who knew them had to become known by them. Likewise, a father spends his life with his children. He teaches them not primarily in a classroom, but through daily experiences. He shows them how to work, he plays games with them, and he converses with them. He doesn’t count the hours: his fatherhood is not a job but a mission that demands only one thing—because it demands everything.

My parishioners want a priest who is present. When I began my assignment, there was talk of tearing down the rectory that stands five steps from the church, and purchasing an off-property residence for the priest. But a majority of the parishioners were quick to share with me their resistance to this idea. Put simply, the parish was part of their family, and they didn’t want an absent father. They wanted to be able to water his flower beds and knock on his door

when they needed to talk. They wanted the comfort of knowing that Christ not only lived in the tabernacle of the church, but also in the man who lived next to church. More than being a talented preacher or a competent administrator, they wanted a father who found them worthy enough to be with them. They didn't want to be sheep without a shepherd.

When I assumed my current posting, I initially perceived it as somewhat of a project, having been brought up with a focus on hard work, good time management and productivity. I observed the parish, recognized areas in need of improvement, and listed things I wanted to do to bring the parish to a better place. But my parishioners soon taught me that there was a much more urgent need that wasn't on my list: namely, themselves. They did not want me to be in my office pushing papers and brainstorming plans for solving problems. They wanted me to be with them; so they could tell me who they are related to in town, what their children's favorite sports are, and where they have seen signs of big whitetail bucks. Noticing and appreciating this desire shifted my personal priorities. If I were to father these people who were assigned to me, I had to spend time with them. Only after showing them that I loved them enough to visit their homes, shake all their hands after every Mass, and show up at their 5th grade daughters' basketball games, would they trust me enough to lead them. Nearly every page of the Gospels recounts Christ leading his disciples. He turns his face toward Jerusalem, and they follow. He tops strict justice with mercy, and they listen. So too a father guides his children. He not only is with his family: he gives it direction.

A few weeks after beginning my assignment, the finance council told me a cell phone company would like to erect a tower on our property and significantly compensate the parish. "What should we tell them?" they asked. Still new, I didn't even know the parish property lines. I couldn't even begin to weigh the monetary reimbursement against the aesthetic damage to the landscape. Nonetheless, these committed parishioners wanted to follow my lead. I've noted that most of my parishioners want to follow their priest: not just in trivial dealings with cell phone companies, but also in matters of ultimate importance such as the moral life, liturgical worship, prayer, and education. In these areas, a spiritual father orientates his family to God, or it will be lost.

I have always had an instinct for consulting with others before making decisions. Though a commendable trait, it also masks a hidden desire to please people, to not only make the best decision but also the most agreeable one. As pastor, I have experienced how this adolescent insecurity can preserve the status quo and restrict a parish from interior growth. A spiritual father leads by acting upon deep interior convictions formed by prayer, study, and discussions with trusted friends. He needs fortitude to protect these decisions from the complaints of the displeased. He also needs humility to admit when the complaints are justified, for he leads most powerfully through his weakness.

The greatest way of directing a parish is neither through decisions nor words. In fact, it isn't active at all. A spiritual father's strongest act is actually a passive one: suffering. He must let his people's pain act upon him. Christ's passion is the paradigm for this. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb 4:15). A true father would rather suffer himself than see his children suffer. Their pain pierces more deeply than his own. Nonetheless, when they suffer, as they inevitably will, he is there.

Whenever I receive the call, the world stops spinning, whatever was causing me stress disappears, and I brace myself. A parishioner committed suicide. A parishioner died in a car accident. A parishioner lost her child in the womb. Those grieving don't want words; they want to know they are not alone. So I get in my car and drive to them, wanting in some ways never to arrive; yet inevitably, I do arrive. As I enter the door, I am conscious of crossing the

threshold that separates an anesthetized world from a raw world of pain. Those grieving only want one thing: Jesus. I will never get accustomed to feeling people's bodies shaking against my own. If you got used to it, then it wouldn't hurt. When I was coming of age, notions of safety were drilled into me. Always wear a bike helmet, buckle your seatbelt, and never smoke cigarettes. Such messages instilled within me a desire to run from pain and suffering. Yet the more I grow as a spiritual father, the more I find God calling me to run toward such brokenness. My parishioners, too, invite me into it. They seem to intuit that my presence brings the presence of Christ, who gives their pain some purpose, some meaning.

A spiritual father may be with his people, he may lead boldly and even suffer lovingly: but if he is not with God, he will bring no life to a parish. The Gospels recount Christ escaping in prayer to be with the Father, which undoubtedly left a deep impression on his disciples. So too, when children see their father praying, they learn lessons incapable of being communicated with words. To some extent, the holiness of a parish depends upon the depth of its pastor's union with the Lord. As a spiritual father, this truth has moved from theory to reality. I see it daily. When my heart is open, the Lord uses my weakness as his privileged instrument of grace to change the hearts of those I love. This has brought about a new incentive to know and love God. It's not only for me, it's for them too.

The Church requires every pastor to offer Mass on Sundays and Holy Days, without exception, for the intention of the people entrusted to his care. Mediating between the people and God at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the climax of my life. By serving as a spiritual father, the peoples' prayers, pain, and sins, penetrate my body and soul. As I daily go to the altar and pray the Roman Canon, I beg the Father to "accept this oblation of our service." My priestly service at the altar, which draws upon my priestly service in the world, is nothing short of offering my existence, made one with Christ, to the Father in heaven.

Christ's Passion lays bare his spiritual fatherhood. At the Last Supper, he was with his Apostles whom he led. Afterwards, his suffering with them and for them began to intensify until he offered his life to the Father on the dead wood of the Cross that he brought to life through his resurrection. My experience as a parish pastor has invited me to closely follow the interior movements of this paschal mystery, uniting me to Christ, priest and victim, in ways I could have never have imagined.

Perhaps, without giving it much thought, this is what I noticed in my parish pastor as I was growing up. Like Christ, he was a true father to his family, which included my family, my relatives, and my friends. He was with us and with God, not for himself, but for our eternal benefit. He may have had no children on earth, but he had many whose names are written in heaven.

*Father Jacob Strand is the pastor of Holy Trinity and St. Michael Parishes in Kewaskum, Wisconsin. He is also the chaplain of Seton Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.*

