



Vincentiana

Volume 41
Number 1 *Vol. 41, No. 1*


Article 6

1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Scallon, Kevin C.M. (1997) "The Intercession for Priests: Ministering to Priests in the Charism of St. Vincent," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 41 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol41/iss1/6>

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The Intercession fro Priests: Ministering to Priests in the Charism of St. Vincent

Kevin Scallon, C.M.

I began the *Intercession fro Priests* out of a great concern I experienced while working as spiritual director at All Hallows College during the early 1970s. Reports kept coming back about alumni who were leaving the priesthood, sometimes after only a few years in the ministry. The question was, what could be done and, while much was said about it, it seemed there was little anyone could do. In 1974 I had heard of a movement in the US called *Intercession fro Priests*. I was struck by this idea and said to myself: "Yes, at least we could pray for the spiritual renewal of the priesthood". It was about that time that I had a sudden and very significant conversion experience of the reality of Christ in my own life which greatly affected my interior life and my priestly ministry.

So it was that in 1976 with Fr Myles Rearden CM I planned to hold the first *Intercession fro Priests* hardly knowing what I was doing. The initial response from priests was most disappointing. People would register to come and withdraw at the last moment, so that I was left in great doubt whether I should continue with it or not. I put my dilemma to Bishop Dermot O'Mahoney, auxiliary bishop of Dublin, who was in All Hallows making his annual retreat. I said: "Bishop, I have planned this *Intercession fro Priests* and nobody is coming". I shall never forget the reply he gave me. He said: "Even if there are only two of you, begin". It seemed to me the Lord had spoken to me through him that day. We started with twelve priests on the feast of our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 16, 1976.

At that time the charismatic renewal was in full bloom and many of the priests who came had experienced great spiritual reawakening through it. That year 1976, over the four weeks of its duration, about 150 priests participated in the first *Intercession fro Priests*. Now in the 1990s hundreds of priests from all over Ireland and from many countries outside of Ireland come to take part. Over the last number of years about 1,000 priests have participated in the *Intercession fro Priests* during the month of August.

Development

It became quickly apparent that for the *Intercession fro Priests* to appeal to the many different strands of priestly experience it would have to be firmly rooted in what priests had in common, rather than in what sometimes divides them. From the beginning until now we allowed great freedom to those who came. For example, they were not required to pre-register or to notify us of their coming. In the seminary we always had plenty of rooms. Nor did they have to tell us how long they were going to stay or when they would be leaving. This arrangement seemed to suit very well. We did however ask that they would participate in what went on while they were there.

Why the Intercession fro Priests?

Intercession is the response we make to our belief in the Holy Spirit who is present and praying within the Church, the whole body of Christ (Rm 8:26). For the ordained minister of the gospel it is a mysterious participation in that prayer which the Holy Spirit prays within us; the prayer of Christ himself who "...in the days of his flesh... offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears (Hb 5:7), and is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hb 7:25. Cf CCC 2634).

Intercession, an essential element of the eternal priesthood of Jesus, is also essential to the priestly ministry. *Intercession for Priests* means praying for the intercessors as Jesus himself did. "Simon, Simon, behold Satan desired to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22:31-32).

There is only one priesthood, the priesthood of Christ; there is only one saving sacrifice, that which Jesus offered on the cross. Through baptism all of God's people share in this priesthood in a spiritual and mystical way, representing the Church -- the Body of Christ. Ordained priests share in it uniquely because they represent Christ, the Head of the Church. It is the ordained priestly ministry that makes it possible for the whole Church to exercise its spiritual priesthood because only the priest acting *in persona Christi* can make the offering of Christ really present among the people of God who unite with him in offering themselves.

Acting *in the person of Christ* involves more than ordination to the priesthood. *Lumen gentium* reminds us that the first requirement for the priest is holiness of life (Par. 41). This is why we have *Intercession for Priests* -- to pray for holiness for ourselves as priests and for bishops and priests everywhere:

- * We pray that priests will be filled with the love of Christ, that they will be secure in their identity and vocation and alive with the power of the Holy Spirit.
- * We also pray in thanksgiving for the vast army of faithful priests that they may grow in the love of Christ and that the title "Father" may have meaning because of all those who are brought to new life and holiness.
- * We pray for priests who are persecuted and imprisoned, who are rejected and poor.
- * We pray for a deep interior life that will liberate priests from materialism and sensuality, and for an end to discouragement, indifference and cynicism.
- * We pray that they will be protected from the deception of the evil one and safeguarded from confusion of doctrine and rebellion against authority in the Church.

The *Intercession fro Priests* has always been characterized by great sincerity. Gossip and cynicism are noticeably absent. Everyone humbly acknowledged the need for repentance, healing and spiritual renewal. The joy of the Lord is very evident. Every year we make the claim that priests

who come to pray for others go away greatly blessed themselves. It has certainly been true in the past. The *Intercession for priests* is a work of faith, but more than anything else it is a gesture of great love for the gift of priesthood and for all the "vessels of clay" in which it is carried.

Themes for each day

Each day has a particular emphasis, based on the theme for that day.

e.g.: Monday: *Repentance and Reconciliation.*

The secular world's widespread denial of sin has affected the thinking of many in the priesthood. The emphasis on social sin, very necessary in its own context, has prevented many priests from addressing sin in their own personal lives. In the context of a penitential rite we deal with the need for repentance very directly and in considerable detail. We urge the priests to the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Tuesday: *Healing and Growth*

The healing ministry has been one of the great fruits of renewal within the Church. As with Jesus in the gospels, healing and evangelization go hand in hand. The sciences of psychiatry and psychology are useful as diagnostic tools; but it is only the Lord who heals. It is only the grace of Christ which can bring wholeness to a broken life. That is why we offer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick at mass on this day, with a healing prayer service later on in the evening. The fruits of this ministry over the years could hardly be exaggerated.

Wednesday: *Mary, Mother of the Church*

More and more we see the importance for the priests to have an enlightened devotion to the Mother of God. On this day we speak of this, finishing off with an Act of Consecration to our Lady.

Thursday: *Priesthood and Eucharist*

On this day the emphasis is on the renewal of our priestly ordination and on conversion to the priesthood (2 Tm 1:6-7). For this we celebrate a para-liturgy, involving the renewal of our baptismal promises and pledges made to the bishop during the Holy Thursday Chrism Mass, culminating with prayer ministry around the Most Blessed Sacrament. Priests find this little ceremony to be a very powerful and moving experience.

Friday: *Discipleship*

"Bishops, with priests as co-workers, have as their first task 'to preach the gospel to all men', in keeping with the Lord's command. They are 'heralds of faith, who draw new

disciples to Christ; they are authentic teachers' of the apostolic faith 'endowed with the authority of Christ'" (CCC 888).

"The Bishop and priests sanctify the Church by their prayer and their work, by their ministry of the word and of the sacraments. They sanctify her by their example, 'not as domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock'. Thus, 'together with the flock entrusted to them, they may attain to eternal life'" (CCC 893).

"Our vocation is to embrace the hearts of all men, to do what the Son of God did, he who came into the world to set it on fire. It is true therefore that I am sent not only to love God but to make him loved. It is not enough to love God if my neighbour does not love him" - *St. Vincent de Paul (XII 262)*.

"Now if it is true that we are called to preach the love of God far and near, if we must inflame the nations with this love, if we are called to cast the divine fire on this earth, if all this is so, my brothers, what a great fire of divine love should be burning in my soul" -- *St. Vincent de Paul (XII 263)*.

Daily Horarium

This is rooted in the kind of prayer experience familiar to all priests.

8.30 Breakfast

9.30 Morning Prayer (Divine Office), Intercession

10.15 Quiet Time (for private prayer, intercession and reflection in silence)

11.15 Coffee

11.45 Eucharist (On Tuesday and Thursday the Liturgy of the Anointing of the Sick will be included for anyone who requests it)

1.00 Lunch (afterwards free for rest, recreation, etc.)

3.30 Tea

4.00 Monday - Penitential Service
Tuesday - Healing Service
Wednesday - Faith sharing
Thursday - Renewal of the Priesthood

5.15 Evening Prayer (Divine Office) and Intercession with Eucharistic Adoration

6.00 Supper

7.15 Rosary - followed by a talk and short discussion

Over the years we have learned how important it is that priests who come to the *Intercession for Priests* have a fresh experience of the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharistic Liturgy. For that reason we have tried to maintain as high a standard of liturgical celebration as possible. Many priests have told us how helpful they have found this.

(For a complete explanation of the daily running of the Intercession for Priests may I refer you to the little booklet entitled *Guidelines for the Intercession for Priests*).

On-going development

From Ireland the *Intercession for Priests* has spread to England, Scotland, France, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, the Philippines, and back again to the United States.

To give some idea of the extent of this ministry and of how it is accepted it might be helpful to refer to our experience in the Philippines. In November 1993 we conducted two retreats in the Philippines, one in Manila and one in Cebu. The Manila retreat was attended by 380 priests and 13 bishops. The one in Cebu by 210 priests and 9 bishops, among them Cardinal Vidal. In November 1994 we again conducted two retreats. The first one, in Tagaytay, Luzon, was attended by 620 priests and 10 bishops. The second, in Mindinao, was attended by 230 priests and 80 seminarians. An American confrere who had spent most of his life in China and Vietnam, and who attended the first retreat, said of it. "That is the best retreat I have ever made in my life". So, in the last two years in the Philippines we have ministered to priests of 42 dioceses. Next year we are planning to have two more retreats for the remaining dioceses. In 1996 we have been asked to conduct the *Intercession for Priests* retreat for the entire hierarchy of the Philippines.

When we were finished in the Philippines in November 1994 we went to minister to priests in Hong Kong and Macao. There we met three bishops from the underground Church in China who begged us to come into China and give retreats to the priests there. Already there are plans being prepared to do this.

In all of this work the power of the charism of St. Vincent is evident and palpable, but like all such things it has to be experienced to be really understood. However, this approach to working for the spiritual renewal of the priesthood has not been without its critics. It is perceived by some as not being relevant to a Church which has come to stress the role of the laity. Others think of it as too priestly, too clerical, as placing too much emphasis on the priesthood. No one knew better than St. Vincent the relative importance of the role of the laity and the ordained ministry. Any emphasis on the role of lay people and the exercise of their baptismal priesthood should never be allowed to diminish the importance and the unique role of the ministerial-hierarchical priesthood:

While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace -- a life of faith, hope and charity, a life according to the Spirit -- the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all

Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, High Priest of the Redemptive Sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts *in persona Christi Capitis* (CCC 1547-1548).

Others criticize the *Intercession for Priests* for harking back to a kind of old church devotionalism with an over-emphasis on Eucharistic Adoration, personal confession, the rosary, etc. Perhaps; but in over twenty years of working with priests I have learned that it is not possible to come to any kind of spiritual renewal either as a person or as an ordained minister without the grace of on-going repentance from sin and without encountering the healing Christ through prayer and in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The struggles I have experienced with sin in my own life in addition to the many long hours I have spent hearing the confessions of priests in every corner of the world, convinces me of the perennial necessity for this kind of ministry. In these years amidst much talk about renewing the priesthood I know that the Lord has blessed the *Intercession for Priests* and that it has been a source of grace, renewal and salvation for countless priests.

Sister Briege Mckenna OSC

Sr. Briege in a Poor Clare, an Irish member of a congregation called the Sisters of St. Clare. She is the author of the book *Miracles Do Happen*, which has become a kind of spiritual classic in its own right and which has been translated into fourteen languages, including Chinese, Korean and Japanese. In 1970 she was instantly healed of acute rheumatoid arthritis during the celebration of the eucharist in Florida, where she had lived since 1967. She came to visit me because she was interested in the work of the *Intercession for priests*. It was immediately obvious to me that the Lord had blessed her with many gifts. She was already well known for her gift of healing, but what struck me about her was her extraordinary charism of helping priests in the renewal of their spiritual lives and in their priestly ministry. Since that time Sr. Briege has ministered at the *Intercession for Priests*. Since 1985, with the blessing and full-hearted support of our respective superiors, Sr. Briege and I have travelled to many places in the world to work for the spiritual renewal of priests. I am keenly aware that the fruit of our ministry is due in no small measure to the unique gift that the Lord has given to her for the priesthood in these times.

Core group

In addition to the ministry of Sr. Briege I have also been blessed by the assistance of several other priests: two Vincentian confreres, a Franciscan, two diocesan priests, a Pallotine, a Salesian, a Dominican. All of these men volunteer their time each year to come and work during the four weeks of the *Intercession for Priests*. Their dedication in helping with this ministry and their faithfulness to it has been a source of very great blessing to the priests who attend.

Lay involvement

From the beginning of the *Intercession for Priests* the laity have been involved in many different ways. For the first eight or nine years all the catering and housekeeping was done by the Daughters of Charity. Every Friday evening people gather in the chapel in All Hallows to pray before the Blessed Sacrament for the priests of the world. The rosary leaflet was prepared especially for them and at their request. This leaflet has been translated into several different languages, and already tens of thousands copies of it have been distributed in different parts of the world. Lay people feel a great urgency, as well as a great willingness, to pray for the priests of the Church.

Conclusion

This ministry of the *Intercession for Priests* was begun in the spirit of St. Vincent whose zeal for the renewal of the priesthood is unique in the history of the Church. Let me finish with these words from our holy founder:

Oh Fathers, what a wonderful thing a good priest is. Is there anything a good priest can not do? What conversions would he not bring about? Take for example Monsieur Bourdoise, this excellent priest. What does he not do and what is there that he cannot do? The happiness of the Christian way of life depends on priests because the good parishioners look up to a good priest; they respect a charitable pastor and they follow his lead; in fact they try to imitate him. O, let us strive to make them all good since this is our work and because the priesthood is such a sublime calling. O my Saviour, how totally should the poor missionaries give themselves to you for the formation of good ecclesiastics since this is the most difficult and sublime work, and of course the most important for the salvation of men and the progress of Christianity (XI 7-8).

Places travelled:

Canberra/Goulburn, ACT, Australia
Brisbane, Australia
Canberra, Australia
Melbourne, Australia
Armidale, NSW, Australia
Bathurst, NSW, Australia
Dubbo, NSW, Australia
Oberon, NSW, Australia
Caims, Queensland, Australia
Perth, W. Australia
Gorka, Papua New Guinea
Medang, Papua New Guinea
Wewak, Papua New Guinea
Kiribati, Pacific Union
Agana, Guam
Cagayan, Mindinao, Philippines
Cebu, Philippines
Iloilo City, Phiulippines
Manila, Philippines
Tagaytay, Philippines
Singapore
Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia
Melaka-Johore, Malaysia
Miri, Sarawak, East Malaysia
Hong Kong/Macao
Taiwan, China
Fukuoka City, Japan
Ibaraki-Ken, Japan
Kumamoto City, Japan
Seoul, S Korea
Cheju, S Korea
Kumasi, Ghana
Nakuru, Kenya
Mzuzu, Malawi, Central Africa
Jos, Nigeria
Awka, Nigeria
Abakaliki, Nigeria
Onitsha, Nigeria
Benin City, Nigeria
Lagos, Nigeria
Split, Croatia
Ljubljana, Slovenia
Medjugorje, Yugoslavia (Hercegovina)
Magdalenka & Gostyn, Poland
Eindhoven, Netherlands
Brussels, Belgium
Glasgow, Scotland
Paisley, Scotland
Mid-Glam, Wales
Cheshire, England
Clifton, England
London, England
Middlesbrough, England
Plymouth, England
Preston, England
Sheffield, England
York/Leeds, England
Fatima, Portugal
Carlow, Ireland
Clare, Ireland,
Cloyne, Ireland
Cork, Ireland
Donegal, Ireland
Dublin, Ireland
Galway, Ireland
Kerry, Ireland
Kildare, Ireland
Knock, Ireland
Louth, Ireland
Meath, Ireland
Raphoe, Ireland
Wexford, Ireland
Armagh, N Ireland
Belfast, N Ireland
Derry, N Ireland
Down, N Ireland
Fermanagh, N Ireland
Tyrone, N Ireland
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
Grand Falls, Newfoundland, Canada
Nova Scotia, Canada
Irondale, Alabama
Douglas, Arizona
Tempe, Arizona
Tucson, Arizona
Manhattan Beach, California
San Bernardino, California
Vista, California
Denver, Colorado
Bloomfield, Connecticut
Moodus, Connecticut

North Haven, Connecticut
Norwich, Connecticut
Miami, Florida
New Port Richey, Florida
Orlando, Florida
Palm Beach, Florida
Palm Harbor, Florida
Pensacola, Florida
Safety Harbor, Florida
St. Augustine, Florida
St. Petersburg, Florida
Tampa, Florida
Peachtree, Georgia
Chicago, Illinois
Notre Dame, Indiana
Wichita, Kansas
New Orleans, Louisiana
St. Cloud, Minnesota
Biloxi, Mississippi
Jackson, Mississippi
Pass Christian, Mississippi
St. Louis, Missouri
Omaha, Nebraska
Larchmont, New York
Syracuse, New York
Yonkers, New York
Dunbar, Pennsylvania
San Antonio, Texas
Baebados, W Indies
Trinidad & Tobago, W Indies
Lima, Peru
Campinas, Brazil
Fortaleza, Brazil
Itaici, Brazil
Porto Alegre, Brazil
Recife, Brazil
Sao Paolo, Brazil