

Year for Priests (1): A Conversation that Changed his Life

Fr Jose Antonio Abad never forgot what his friend told him in all frankness: “I have come to help you, if you agree to be helped. But, in any case, I will tell you honestly what I think of your attitude...”

09/15/2009

Father Jose Antonio Abad is a diocesan priest and professor of Theology. He is also a member of the

Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. He offers us a glimpse into his life as a priest. * * * * * “ **You and I have become priests to serve...**”

Although many years have passed, I remember even the most insignificant details of that conversation we had. At that time, we were both parish priests of some villages in the mountains. I had just graduated from university and had enough experience of life to know what it was like to live with snow for a good number of months a year. But that day, he did not come to discuss the weather or to offer basic ski tips so that the villagers would not be left without Mass when winter came.

The reason was quite different and had certainly not even crossed my mind. He knew that though I was residing among the seven houses and the 35 souls that made up that village, I had not really accepted my

situation. Knowing that it was a situation that could brew bitterness and rebellion, he had come like a surgeon, knife in hand, ready for an operation that was as painful as it was indispensable. I can never be thankful enough for his fortitude and charity, all the more remarkable especially since my treatment of him could not be distinguished by refinement.

After greeting me, he told me frankly, "I have come to help you, if you agree to be helped. But in any case I will tell you honestly what I think of your attitude." And without giving me a chance to respond, he added, "You and I have become priests to serve, to obey and to be holy; not to make a career out of it nor to follow our whims. As you know, I belong to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, and they have often repeated this to me and I can assure you that it has done me a world of good. Bring it to

your personal prayer before the Tabernacle and you will recover your peace and joy.”

You cannot imagine what those words did for my interior life, though I must say that a few months later, I asked to be admitted to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. Soon after, thanks to God, John Paul II would erect the Priestly Society as an intrinsic part of the personal prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei.

In gratefulness to God and to the Pope –and without forgetting St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, through whom Divine Providence manifested its inexhaustible spiritual wealth–, and because I am conscious of the enormous good that the Priestly Society means for the whole Church and for diocesan priests, I am looking over the memoirs I wrote years ago. Its contents are more

suited for a intimate chat with a friend than for a website, and I pray that sharing it here may serve as a sign of my filial love for the Blessed Virgin, who is so much a part of the life of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, and as a help to other secular priests to give thanks to God, our Father of Mercy! **An active member of the diocese**

One thing that really caught my attention, from the first moments I started receiving spiritual attention from Opus Dei, was their insistence on the concern that I should have for my brother priests –for everyone– and the human and spiritual help that I should render them.

The theological foundation for this did not surprise me since I well knew that among priests, unity and brotherhood exist as a result of our participation in the same Priesthood of Christ through the Sacrament of

Holy Orders. What impressed me were the concrete advices –simple, spontaneous and full of life– drawn from that theological reality. They were not to be reserved for some special or solemn occasions, but in ordinary and habitual moments. Much later I reached the conclusion that this was what it meant to feel that one belongs to the diocesan presbytery.

I was very young and thanks to their advice, I learned, for example, to esteem and love –not only to tolerate– the older priests. And in such a way that this esteem and affection could really be seen: visiting them, consulting them and admiring their fidelity.

That experience showed me that priestly fraternity, lived without affectation but with depth, easily unites the prudence of grey hairs with the enthusiasm and vigor of

youth. It melts, like wax, the walls of a lack of understanding, isolation or resentment that arise from arrogance, pride or distrust. The roads of what seemed like insurmountable mountain ranges then open up, and we would meet to exchange ideas, to have coffee together, have a friendly chat, hear one another's confessions and add a little supernatural spice to the routine of ordinary life.

For some years, I assisted an older priest in the parish. I have been able to constantly verify that priestly fraternity can create bonds that are stronger than family ties. It is not that our limitations and miseries disappear, but they are soothed over by the balm of understanding, of realism and, sometimes, of mutual and sacramental forgiveness.

Another thing that vividly impressed me since I became part of the Priestly

Society of the Holy Cross was the love for priests who are sick. During my years as a seminarian, especially as the day of my ordination approached, I had meditated more than once on the words of St Matthew about the final Judgment, which mentioned visiting the sick and seeing Christ in them. But my meditations were more about the souls that would one day be entrusted to my care, though possibly they touched on priests who were sick. However they couldn't have been that profound, as I can still recall the delightful surprise of hearing detail after detail about caring for priests who are sick.

On the other hand, I began to discover horizons that I had not even dreamed of. From the teachings and the life of the founder of the Opus Dei –whose prescription was *to have the heart of a mother* – they taught me that I had to be aware if a brother

priest was not looking well, if he were too thin or overweight. And to accompany him to the doctor, to be by his bedside, especially if he were admitted to a clinic or hospital, exerting every effort so that he can be cured, while simultaneously leaving everything in the hands of God. And in the case of those with chronic illnesses, to help them to sanctify that situation.

With the passing of time, I have verified the importance of insisting on the spiritual attention of the priests who are ill, especially if it is known that unless God worked a miracle, the situation was irreversible. How marvelous it is to be able to bring Holy Communion to a priest who is ill, to hear his confession, to administer Extreme Unction to him frequently and to give him the Viaticum! All this could be overlooked or their value underestimated.

But it would falsify reality if the impression given is that care and concern for priests refers largely to those who are elderly and ill. In spiritual direction, as much as in other means of formation, it is the normal circumstances that are insisted upon. And the normal refers to the priest who works with you or who is a friend. It is to him that we ought to dedicate that treasure that is time; a treasure that should not be squandered. It is necessary to go beyond mere camaraderie or simple companionship in order to advance in authentic and true fraternal friendship.

This friendship allows one to speak of intimate things: pains, joys, difficulties, illusions, work, etc. And when the friendship reaches very sublime levels, it would be necessary to speak of God, of the frequency in receiving the sacrament of the Penance, of generosity in sacrifice, of

ardent zeal for souls, of total availability, of a real love for poverty, of spiritual direction, of knowing how to pardon and smile, of trying to spread the “disease of doing apostolate”, etc., etc. And all this, without preaching, without thinking oneself better than the others, yet without being intimidated by one’s own miseries, while trying to learn so many things from the others.

Nothing without the Bishop

For my theological studies and doctorate, I had to read the writings of the Fathers of the Church. Among them, one that is frequently quoted speaks about the priesthood. It is very brief but very incisive. Not surprisingly, it comes from the wise and holy Bishop of Antioch, St Ignatius. Referring to the unity that must exist between priests and their bishop, he plainly states: “ *Nihil sine*

episcopo , nothing without the bishop”.

Like everyone else, I learned the text. But I did not pause, as I should have, to unravel the implications it contained. And it certainly did not cross my mind to examine my relation with my bishop in the light of this principle.

When I became a member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, that text acquired a great importance, to the point that, at least once a week, I began to examine myself about its demands. Although at the outset I did not understand its full importance, it did not take long for me to understand that it could not be otherwise.

Indeed, according to the spiritual message of the founder of the Opus Dei, the admission to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross did not change my theological and legal

state, since I continued to be a none other than a secular priest incardinated to a diocese and dependent on one specific bishop. Rather, it was a special call to sanctify myself in that state.

Therefore, my ties to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross reinforced my condition as a secular, diocesan priest, where the figure of my bishop occupies a very important place in exercising my ministry in every aspect, in accord with his indications and in intimate communion with him. My long and wonderful experience is that I have never felt like I belonged to a group apart and neither has there ever been the problem of double obedience in my priestly ministry.

As such, if I wished to really sanctify myself, I had to be in tune with my own bishop, in thought and in action. This goes much further than a mere

“not being against”; it is to love and collaborate in a way that is intimate and sincere, like that of fathers and sons.

Evidently, to put these principles into practice is very demanding. I should love my bishop, gladly recognizing the place that he occupies in the diocese by the will of Jesus Christ as teacher, liturgist and shepherd.

I also collaborate in the task of sanctifying the faithful, in the place that the bishop deems most opportune. This means being attentive to all his indications in order to act on them with promptness, intelligence, fidelity and total availability, even if what is asked of me is not particularly appealing personally.

On the other hand, I ought to keep in mind that the responsibility that weighs on the shoulders of a bishop is very great, requiring much grace

from God and much sanctity. The intimate communion with my bishop pushes me to pray for his intentions every single day, especially since I am aware that he counts on my prayers.

In addition I try to be totally available to for the tasks entrusted to me, whether pleasant or difficult, seeing in them the hand of God. Only in this way could I obey without protests or reservations, and in a manner that is cheerful, free and unconditional.

My bishop, on the other hand, like all human beings, must have his limitations, including physical ones; all the more reason to show him affection and a good measure of understanding, putting into practice the Pauline recommendation of “carrying one another’s burdens”.

Without pretentiousness –for everything is due to God’s grace– I

can say that my association with the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross has helped me to really love my bishops, to pray for them every day in the Holy Mass and the Rosary, to cheerfully accept appointments that in other circumstances would perhaps not have gone down so well, to be totally identified with their pastoral indications –without this being an obstacle to loyally voice my opinions when needed–, to fight seriously against speaking behind their backs and to sincerely repent if I should fall into that temptation, and finally to be contented in the different tasks entrusted to me, whether humble or illustrious.

I can say that even humanly it has been worthwhile, because it has given me inner peace, serenity and joy, although, it has sometimes been accompanied by real tears or moral suffering.

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After what has been said, it is easy to understand that my allegiance to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross has not created the least difficulty with respect to my condition as a secular, diocesan priest. On the contrary, it has been enhanced and heightened, because it has lead me to love my brother priests with deeds, without distinction of age, education or character; to be in hierarchical communion with my bishops sincerely and loyally; and to be a pastor to the souls that have been entrusted to me.

For this, I am so thankful to God for that day when that priest came unexpectedly to the sparsely populated and snow-covered mountain village where I was – unhappily–, to open up horizons for me, transmitting to me the joy that God had granted him of serving.

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(01/25/2026)