

Pope Benedict has designated this the year of the priest, and many groups have set aside today as Priesthood Sunday. It seems to me that priests get plenty of attention every Sunday, but it's good for all of us, myself included to remember what positive influence some priests have had on our lives. It was easy for me to consider priesthood as a vocation because the priests I knew as a little kid were such good men, but also because I come from a family where a lot of my relatives were priests and nuns. One was my grandmother's brother, Father Joe, a parish priest from Minnesota with a great sense of humor, who lived into his 90s. Father Joe used to say that if he had known he was going to live that long, he'd have taken better care of his health. He moved into a nursing home for a while but moved out again because he said there were too many old people there. During an ordination ceremony, a priest puts on his vestments for the first time, and he usually designates another priest to assist. When I was ordained, I asked Father Joe. On my bedroom wall I have a picture of him conversing with me at some other event, and for today's mass I'm using the chalice that he used throughout his priesthood. I always thought if I could grow old the way Joe did, it wouldn't be so bad after all.

Today's 2nd reading tells of the Old Testament priest. He was taken from within the community and made its representative before God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. The Letter to the Hebrews says of the Old Testament priest, "[He] is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people." It's easy to see the parallels in what priests do today: We pray for others, but we are not perfect, and repeatedly during the mass, the priest offers prayers for his own forgiveness. For example, when washing his hands, he prays this verse from Psalm 51: "Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sins."

The gospel also shows what priesthood is about. We priests are a lot like Bartimaeus. We are aware of things we cannot see. So we beg. We ask for financial support from whoever walks by, but we also pray directly to God for the miracles of health and salvation. Sometimes people tell us to be silent. But we can hear Jesus calling us to take courage. We also believe that God wants good things for everyone, so it's not unusual for us to approach our prayer as if God has said, "What do you want me to do for you?" It seems like a stupid question. God should know what we want. Well, God does know what we want. But God likes to hear us ask - to know that we know what is best. So we bring to God the most obvious prayers of the community - "Heal the sick, bring us peace, increase our faith, and change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, so that we may share in your life."

A lot of people think priests are mysterious, but there isn't that much to it. Our main role is to pray for obvious things. We know we are sinners; we know we don't see it all. But it doesn't stop us, nor should it stop anyone from doing what Bartimaeus did: Tell Jesus what you want. Receive what he gives. And follow him on the way.