

Understanding the Vocation of Spiritual Motherhood of Priests

By Mary Gannon Kaufmann, MA, MS

I sat listening to the chairman of pastoral planning for the archdiocese describing upcoming changes that we could expect in our parishes due to the advancing age of our priests and the still inadequate number of new vocations to the priesthood. The question confronting us and most dioceses is: How will we do it with fewer priests, raise up more active lay participation within the parish? While empowering the laity in their call to transform the secular sphere and to support priests by their active participation in parishes in areas not requiring ordination remain important elements in invigorating the Church, another rather unheard of and specific initiative has been proposed by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy. On December 8, 2007, in a little known document entitled *Adoration, Reparation, Spiritual Motherhood for Priests*, Claudio Cardinal Hummes, the Prefect for the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, proposed fighting this spiritual crisis with a “spiritual endeavor.” He suggests forming and facilitating the vocation of spiritual motherhood for priests—spiritually mature women willing to offer their lives and pray at the Cross for priests and the priesthood.

Cardinal Hummes called *certain* “feminine souls, following the typology of the Blessed Virgin Mary to *spiritually* support priests in order to help them with their self-offering, prayer, and penance.” He cites the Gospel account of Jesus on the Cross as instigating “spiritual motherhood” or a *spiritual* connection between Mary and the Apostle John in the words to them, “Woman, this is your son; son, this is your mother” (John 19:26-27). Likewise, as an aid to this movement of prayer, Hummes also suggested organizing centers of 24 hour Eucharistic adoration “so that prayer of adoration, thanksgiving, praise, petition and reparation will be raised to God incessantly and from every corner of the earth, with the primary intention of awakening a sufficient number of holy vocations to the priestly state” and of invigorating the apostolic efficacy of priests already ministering within the Church. This plea from the Congregation for the Clergy is for the Church to elicit, discern and confirm certain women in a call to generous self offering in order to spiritually

empower priests and vocations. Through prayer, including regular Eucharistic adoration, and by uniting their sacrifices from ordinary life to Jesus on the Cross, the women become a pleasing fragrance to Christ and a spiritual power house for the Church and priesthood.

But, what does it mean to become a spiritual mother of priests and spiritually support a priest? The Congregation for the Clergy, the congregation of the Roman Curia that’s responsible for overseeing all matters concerning diocesan priests and deacons, tells us that indeed: “the vocation to be a spiritual mother for priests is largely unknown scarcely understood and, rarely lived notwithstanding its fundamental importance (ARSM 10).” They define it as a “vocation that is frequently hidden, invisible to the naked eye, but meant to transmit spiritual life (ARSM 10).” This is not a call to “maternalism” towards priests, to show up at the rectory with food, offer advice or to hover around priests. It’s not necessarily a call to close friendship with the priest, but more a connection experienced on the supernatural level, for their mutual growth in holiness. Spiritual motherhood demands and develops the spiritual and interpersonal maturity of the woman involved by presenting her with a regular opportunity to offer her spiritual resources for the benefit of

priests with detachment or without meeting her own personal needs in doing so. Spiritual mothers are virtuous women, women centered in God, women tempered by suffering, sometimes even suffering from interaction with priests, but women able to offer “a widow’s mite” in a way that makes a powerful spiritual difference for the Church.

Women of any state in life, lay, single, young, old, married, widowed or consecrated religious in both active and enclosed forms of religious life can discern this “vocation within a vocation” and become a spiritual mother for priests. In addition, women already committed to a third order like the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Carmelites can join and embrace this initiative. The vocation of spiritual motherhood of priests is more than just private devotion in praying for the priesthood. According to Cardinal Hummes, spiritual mothers are women recognized by the Church and set apart, albeit in diverse states of life, to pray and suffer for the Church and priesthood.

Some spiritual mothers offer their joys and sorrows for all priests and the priesthood in general; while others feel called to pray and sacrifice for one specific priest or seminarian. Some spiritual moms know not even the name of the priest that they pray for, while

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others live a holy, spiritual friendship with the priest. While the interpersonal dynamic of spiritual motherhood may vary, certain fundamental characteristics remain: to spiritually accompany the priest by offering their lives as living sacrifice for them.

But, is this something totally new coming on or is it something already present in our tradition? And isn't it outdated or regressive to consider opening yourself and living such a call for priests? John Coakley, in *Women, Men and Spiritual Power; Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators*, explores the relationship of nine pairs of male clerics and their female counterparts or intercessors from the Middle Ages. He describes the powerful relationships between priests and spiritually adept women, consecrated religious, married women or single women who interceded for the priests. While some had a collaborative ministry together—for example St. Catherine of Siena and her male counterpart Father Raymond of Capua who worked together to help return the Pope to Rome from Avignon, France, most lived a rather inconspicuous strictly spiritual unity as an aid to their mutual holiness. Coakley's work illustrates the cooperation between clerics and spiritually mature women and shows how institutional power or power coming from ordination can be upheld by the informal spiritual powers of the laity through their prayer, penance and self offering.

But, what type of sacrifices do spiritual mothers offer for the Church? They offer the challenges that come to them in the duties of their primary state in life. In family life, religious and single life, holding back a sharp word, joyfully interacting when you would rather be alone, paying attention to the details that impact people, noticing a sense of the divine in them, and raising your heart and mind to God while you perform repetitive tasks become ways spiritual mothers can offer themselves for the spiritual good of others, including priests. Under the guidance of a spiritual director, some undertake additional penance for the benefit of priests. Cardinal Hummes' suggestions help us realize that many of us, especially many lay women, have underestimated the power we have in living our ordinary lives with intention for the sanctification of others.

How might a woman recognize that she is being called to this life? For most women, they notice a growing desire and holy drawing to pray for priests, for the priesthood and vocations. Often when they are focused on other things, the thought of a certain

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priest or the priesthood comes into their minds or hearts with an intensity to pray for them. Priests or seminarians may approach them and ask them to pray for them; and when the women do, they notice that God acts and that they are energized by it. They may find themselves meeting other women who also have a desire to pray and uphold the priesthood. Another common facet of this call is that many spiritual moms feel guided in how to pray for others through interior movements, images, deep peace or desire to pray. God seems to facilitate like-minded individuals to meet, support one another and know how to pray for others, most especially his priests and future priests.

In addition, most spiritual mothers notice a growing desire to regularly offer their lives and prayers to God in the sacraments. Many find themselves drawn to attend daily Mass, to frequent sacramental confession and to adore Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament as much as their state in life allows. Many report a growing intimacy with the Blessed Virgin and a desire to take her as their model of virtue and of intercession. By intentionally pursuing a more vigorous sacramental life, women living as spiritual mothers of priests grow in purity and correspondence to the grace of their vocation. They become more able to offer adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and supplication for priests, for those considering priesthood and for their own families. We see that any mature, Catholic woman that is intentional about her faith and pursuing a sacramental life in the Church can consider such a call.

The life of Blessed Alessandrina Da Costa (1904-1955) reveals the transforming and concrete effects of self-sacrifice made by an infirmed single woman who lived in the

simplest conditions. The statement of the Congregation of the Clergy (20) describes that Alessandrina sensed Jesus telling her *"My daughter, a priest living in Lisbon is close to being lost forever; he offends me terribly. Call your spiritual director and ask his permission that I may have you suffer in a special way for this soul."* The Lord even gave her the name of the priest, whom she had never met. Alessandrina fervently interceded for this priest. She offered her simplest everyday activities and her physical suffering for his conversion. Several months later, in a casual conversation, her spiritual director heard of an unusual event that his friend had experienced while leading a retreat in Fatima. One night, during the retreat, a man that had caught his friend's attention earlier as a quiet pious soul, had a heart attack. He asked to see a priest to confess his sins, receive communion and then died. In actuality, his friend leading the retreat reported to him that this quiet pious soul was a priest, the very priest that Alessandrina had been praying for.

The women of Lu, a small village in northern Italy, made an important decision to do something about stimulating vocations to the priesthood and religious life in their city. In 1881, under the direction of their parish priest, the women decided to gather every Tuesday for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and to ask the Lord for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. On the first Sunday of every month they gathered after Mass for a few minutes to pray a short, simple prayer that they had composed themselves. They prayed:

"Oh God, grant that one of my sons may become a priest! I myself want to live as a good Christian and want to guide my children always to do what is right so that I may receive the grace, O God, to be allowed to give you a holy priest! Amen."

As a consequence of these simple, yet fervent actions, over several decades, the small village of Lu produced 323 religious vocations (152 priests and 171 nuns). From some families, as many as three or four children followed a call to the priesthood or religious life, including the Rinaldi family from which seven children became a priest or a sister. The experience of Lu demonstrates the power of simply and faithfully offering adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and intercession for priests and religious vocations.

What might a priest do if he desires to receive the spiritual support of a spiritual

mother? He should simply ask the Lord for the gift of such a personal intercessor and receive the spiritual support when it comes to him. He could also familiarize his bishop with spiritual motherhood of priests by connecting him with the document, *Adoration, Reparation and Spiritual Motherhood of Priests* or by handing him this short article. To know that his success or pastoral effectiveness comes as much from the faithful, fervent prayers of others who are oftentimes engaged in the simplest of ordinary activities as much as from his own actions should stimulate a deep sense of humility within the priest. In response, he could grow in a sense of gratitude to God, and desire to extend himself in generosity to others.

A priest I know well that has experienced the “fruits” of having a spiritual mother, reported that he possesses a deep joy in knowing that he is being supported in prayer by a spiritual mother, a sister in the Lord. He feels closer to Jesus and is greatly encouraged in being a holy priest. In addition, from this, he has noticed a strong inner healing of his heart in his relationships towards women in general. He says, “Knowing that I have a “sister in Christ” praying for me has changed my heart towards all women. There is deep spiritual protection for me in this. I received a great healing from lust and felt the fires that can burn in a man’s heart tempered and purified. I don’t find myself seeking attention from women but desire more to serve others and to facilitate the healing of women. I notice that I possess a greater love and respect for women.”

With such testimony in mind, not surprisingly, several dioceses, for example the Diocese of Tulsa, Oklahoma, have instituted processes to form and consecrate spiritual mothers for the priests. In the Archdiocese of Miami, Father Jordi Rivero and Mrs. Lourdes Pinto have organized *Love Crucified*, a new lay community composed of Mothers of the Cross and Missionaries of the Cross, a complementary group of spiritual mothers of priests and of priests who are charged with forming other priests in lives of fervent prayer and self offering. In addition, two years ago, the

Institute of Priestly Formation in Omaha, Nebraska started a program of spiritual motherhood to support each of the seminarians that come from all over the United States for their summer formation process.

Some dioceses that have implemented programs of spiritual motherhood of priests, have organized them as double-blind arrangements, where the spiritual mother and the priest himself do not know each other’s names. The women know only that they are praying for the priest assigned to them, and the priest, that they have a generous personal intercessor. In the Diocese of Tulsa, receiving a spiritual mother is voluntary for priests. Spiritual moms attend an informational meeting and then five consecutive weekly meetings of formation that end with a public consecration ceremony at the cathedral in the presence of the bishop.

The Statement of Cardinal Hummes encourages such creative initiatives in the words: “All diocesan Ordinaries are to take an active role and promote, in different portions of the People of God entrusted to them, true and proper, prayer cenacles of clerics, religious and lay people in common action in support of the ministerial priesthood.” Likewise, he charges them to form and equip feminine souls as spiritual mothers to spiritually walk alongside priests, seminarians and those considering religious life. In his document, Cardinal Hummes even includes a leaflet for each diocese to use to organize this initiative.

Holding the leaflet in hand from Cardinal Hummes, and after considering the concerns and dire predictions voiced by the chairman of pastoral planning in my own archdiocese, I sit with greater conviction in the power of spiritual motherhood of priests. Likewise, I resonate with the voice of our tradition, to fight spiritual realities with spiritual endeavors by bringing together cooperative and complementary initiatives that bring men and women together for prayer, sacrifice and Eucharistic adoration. All this springs from the movement of the Spirit that calls to feminine souls, to offer themselves for the renewal of the Church and priesthood through the vocation of spiritual motherhood of priests.



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