
The Good Priest

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

I sing a song of good priests today, or whatever your tradition might call the minister, the pastor, the caring soul, who leads you in prayer week after week. The one who gathers you in holy community. Wherever you were this past weekend, here is what happened.

Coming to church today is the recent widow, reminding her priest that it has been one year now. A little girl is skipping, quite fast, down the hall. The old man on his walker is not scared of her skipping at all. Here comes a young couple who just started visiting two weeks ago – and they are already married (so it's not like they're just looking for a wedding location). A busy lawyer walks in, without her children this Sunday; she is teaching a Sunday School class today.

An eager young acolyte is hanging around dutifully, just in case he needs to serve today. The man over there has just been diagnosed with cancer. A woman arrives who divorced her husband two years ago; she is smiling and happy. Her ex-husband will attend the later service that day. One of the city officials arrives, whose politics not everyone enjoys; but he knows he is not simply an elected official at church. He will not be reminded of that.

“Let me show you a picture of my granddaughter,” a woman announces as she delays the people behind her in line. The priest smiles and squints at the tiny screen; she will try to remember the girl's name. One of the neighborhood guys without shelter walks in with his stuff; the congregation knows where he usually sits and makes room for him.

One man is wondering, with the banking industry seeming so fragile, how he will make a decision next week. Another guy is glad his team is still in the basketball tournament. Still another guy is asking for prayer because a family member is dying. One young person is complaining about the coffee, while another is eagerly drinking her third cup.

The service itself may not be what some people consider perfect. Someone mispronounces a name. The music is beautiful, and one piece seems too slow. Some wish the priest had a different tone of voice. The sermon—well, the sermon—can be wildly erratic, sometimes striking a chord with people. The good priest knows that the minds of the congregants are wandering all over the place. But people are serving faithfully.

The good priest meets all these people and stays with all these people. The good priest cares for her people, absorbs his people's pain, delights with her people, cries with his people. The good priest does not scold, or complain. The good priest bears the burdens of people. The good priest does not turn every issue into a fad of the day, or into some political message of the day.

The good priest knows that she is serving inside a community that is much bigger than she is. The good priest knows he is representing something larger than he can explain. The good people in the congregation know this, too. We are gathering to say something, to hear something—a holy tradition—that was delivered to us and that we are now delivering onward.

Not everyone in church on Sunday always thinks specifically about the Holy, even the priest. And, yet, in all these people, in all these situations, in all these joys and cares of life, the Holy is meeting us, even when we are too distracted to realize Holy presence.

Where else does this Holy happen, that the Holy meets us? Yes, it can happen in other places, but churches and faith communities have a long tradition of it happening. All these people, young and old, black and white, have come to be with the Holy for a couple of hours, whether they say it that way or not. Church is where

people touch the Holy; Church is where the Holy touches people. We are touching something bigger than us. Each of us, even the priest, have only meager ways of expressing that encounter.

But the Sunday liturgy of that encounter is a billowing mystery, full of prayers and structures and actions and postures which carry centuries of wisdom with them. The priest or community who does not realize what our service contains is missing the mystery! No matter how errantly we pray, yet the power of the Holy Liturgy is changing people.

The eucharistic prayer is reciting something, rehearsing something, remembering something, that has been told Sunday after Sunday for two thousand years. That story is what generates new life in people, year after year. It's not our political platform. It's not our social statement. It's not our latest fad, of whatever sort. It's not our skill. It's not our wisdom. It is the unseen power of God revealing Godself in the telling and hearing of Christian tradition.

The good priest, the good pastor, the good minister, graciously bears the ancient story of the Holy – delivered this week among skipping children and aged walkers, among the worried and the happy, among the political and non-political, among all sorts of shapes and sizes, and colors and conditions, of God's humanity.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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