

# A magnanimous priesthood for a pusillanimous time

Why the Church needs priests who are not afraid to be great.

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If a man has made it through seminary to the moment of ordination these days, he has likely studied the classical virtue tradition. He has learned that virtue lies between excess and defect. And he may have seen, with growing clarity, that in our cultural moment, it is the vices of defect that prevail. **We do not suffer from an excess of passion so much as a shrinking back from the good.** We hesitate to speak the

truth clearly, to call others to holiness, to risk being conspicuous in our fidelity. In such an age, true virtue appears radical, and even the desire for excellence can be misread as vanity, vainglory, or toxic masculinity.

**This cultural air seeps into the Church, and nowhere is it more dangerous than in the priesthood. For this reason, newly ordained priests should hear a call that is not often voiced: the call to magnanimity.**

**Magnanimity, or greatness of soul, is the virtue by which a man seeks great things and becomes worthy of them. It is not the same as ambition. Ambition craves honor without deserving it. Magnanimity seeks to be worthy of honor.** Not for applause, but because honor is the sign of something truly good. In an age prone to suspicion of strong personalities, magnanimity may seem dangerous. But it is not pride. It is not opposed to humility. As St. Thomas Aquinas writes, “There is in man something great which he possesses through the gift of God; and something defective, which accrues to him through the weakness of nature.” **Magnanimity concerns what is great in us by grace. Humility concerns what is weak in us by sin. The two virtues work together and the priest must possess both.**

A holy priest must not flinch from greatness. And yet today, there is a subtle temptation—especially among the well-formed, the cautious, the careful—to confuse humility with self-effacement, to believe that to avoid ambition one must also avoid aspiration. But this is not the path of the saints.

**Priests are given an office that demands greatness. They are charged to teach, sanctify, and govern in the name of Christ. They offer sacrifice. They forgive sins. They act in persona Christi. To trivialize that office by shrinking from its demands is not humility, but a failure of to live up to the vocation to which they have been called.**

So let us speak of honor. Honor can be perilous, especially when it becomes vain. But honor also serves a good: it trains our eyes to see and praise what is good in others. It is true that the desire for honor can be distorted into vainglory or ambition. **But honor, rightly understood, is the witness others bear to real goodness. It is the sign—not the substance—of virtue. And while you should never act for honor, you should act in such a way as to deserve it.** This is why we honor saints. This is why we honor Christ. It is good to recognize what is good—and to honor it.

That means: **priests should want to become men worthy of honor, not because they crave applause, but because they want to give their flock something worthy of praise.** Not because they desire praise for themselves, but because they desire to be good according to the grace they have been given, all the while referring any honor they receive to the God whose gifts are responsible.

**We need priests who are unafraid to be great. Not cartoonish caricatures of power, not influencers or celebrities, but great in service, great in wisdom, great in courage, great in holiness.**

This will not come easily. Nor should it. As Aquinas reminds us, the good and the difficult are the same. **The priest is not ordained for comfort, but for the Cross.** He is ordained to suffer with and for Christ. He is ordained to lay down his life for his flock.

And that, paradoxically, is the path to glory. Our Lord's exaltation was His crucifixion. His moment of glory was not His escape from death, but His willingness to endure it for the love of the sinner and in obedience to the Father. **If Christ's throne was the Cross, then the priest must not only be willing to endure suffering—he must desire to share in it. This is the greatness of the priesthood: to pour oneself out, to be spent, to disappear into the mystery of Christ's sacrifice.**

In such a time as ours—marked by ecclesial confusion, institutional fragility, and cultural decline—it is tempting to lie low, to bury talents, and hide lights under bushel baskets. But the Church does not need priests who hedge their bets; she does not need pusillanimity. She needs builders. She needs fathers. She needs men who are not afraid to be crucified as their Master was.

**The priesthood is not earned. It is a gift. But because it is a gift, it confers authority: the authority to teach with the voice of Christ, to sanctify with His power, to govern with His authority. That is why we call priests Father. They are entrusted with a treasure that is not theirs to hoard. They must not bury it. Now is not the time for pusillanimity.**

To young priests beginning their ministry: do not be afraid of what God has given you. Do not be afraid of the greatness to which He calls you. Do not be afraid of the honors that may come—even if they are the honors of the martyr.

You are being sent into the deep. So cast out your nets. Trust the One who called you. And strive—by His grace, and for His glory—to be great.



### About Thomas P. Harmon [20 Articles](#)

Thomas P. Harmon is Professor and Scanlan Foundation Chair in Theology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, TX. His most recent book is [The Universal Way of Salvation in the Thought of Augustine](#) (T&T Clark, 2024). He lives in Sugar Land with his wife and five children.

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