

"...Set in the midst between two fears..." (St. Gregory Nazianzus)

Three documents dominate the patristic literature on the sacramental priesthood. They are: *On the Priesthood* by St. John Chrysostom (4th century); *The Book of Pastoral Rule* by the St. Gregory the Great (6th century); and *In Defense of His Flight From Pontus* by St. Gregory Nazianzus (4th century).

These three church fathers discuss the qualities in character required of a priest, along with the challenges, temptations, and responsibilities of the priesthood. Interestingly, each of these Fathers, understanding the awesomeness of the priesthood, did all they could to avoid election to the office, and each of them failed in their attempts.

St. John Chrysostom disqualified himself by pointing to his proneness to anger, his sinful ambition for the office, and his concern for the salvation of others when he, himself, was "sluggish and remiss regarding his own salvation." Full of self-deprecation, he considered himself unfit for the position because of the "punyness" of his soul.

St. Gregory the Great was less transparent than John when he wrote: "No one presumes to teach an art that he has not first mastered through study. How foolish it is therefore for the inexperienced to assume pastoral authority when the care of souls is the art of arts."*

And St. Gregory of Nazianzus, who actually ran away after he was forced into the office by his father, lamented and defended his flight with great honesty, saying, "I did not, nor do I now, think myself qualified to rule a flock or herd, or to have authority over the souls of men."

All three Fathers would agree with St. Gregory of Nazianzus' sobering description of the awesome task:

*A man must himself be cleansed, before cleansing others:
himself become wise, that he may make others wise; become
light and then give light: draw near to God, and so bring others
near; be hallowed, then hallow them; be possessed of hands to
lead others by the hand, of wisdom to give advice.*

In the end, all three submitted to ordination, and because of their reflections, we have been enriched. However, when contemplating ordination, each found himself in an unenviable position, which St. Gregory of Nazianzus aptly described as being "set in the midst between two fears." One fear was the fear of the office itself. The other was the fear of disobeying God's call. In the end, all three

Fathers preferred to live with the first fear rather than with the second, and eventually humbled themselves under the mighty hand of God. And, through His Grace, God supplied in them "that which is wanting." (Prayer of Ordination)

For those already ordained, those being called to ordination, or those considering the priesthood, the witness of these church fathers and the transparency of their internal struggles gives both pause and also encouragement. They remind us that ordination is a decision of the highest order, a fearful calling.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus concluded his defense with a touching prayer of surrender to God. Each of us should make it our own:

May [God] Himself hold me by my right hand, and guide me with His counsel, and receive me with glory, Who is a Shepherd to shepherds and a Guide to guides: that we may feed His flock with knowledge, not with the instruments of a foolish shepherd, according to the blessing, and not according to the curse pronounced against the men of former days: may He give strength and power unto his people, and Himself present to Himself His flock resplendent and spotless and worthy of the fold on high, in the habitation of them that rejoice, in the splendor of the saints, so that in His temple everyone, both flock and shepherds together may say, "Glory, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to Whom be all glory for ever and ever." Amen.

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* The phrase "art of arts", used by St. Gregory the Great to refer to the pastoral vocation, was originally coined by St. Gregory of Nazianzus.