

We Love Our Priests

by George & Terri Brass
(Excerpted from Summer 1992 *Matrimony* magazine)

That's not simply a catchy phrase to us – we really do love our priests! But if you are someone like we were a few years ago, you're probably thinking, "Ya, ya and we love everybody too". We would like to share our journey with you as to how we have come to a deep love and caring for those special men in our lives.

We made our Weekend in January, 1982. We were married 9 years at the time of our Weekend and had 3 pre-schoolers. Prior to our Weekend, the extent of contact we had with a priest consisted of one at our large-group Pre-Cana classes, Fr. Jeremy, who married us, and the priest at our parish who said Sunday Mass. We did not seek out a relationship with any of these men. In fact, we didn't really see a "need" for a priest personally until we had our first child.

GEORGE: I have to be honest with myself and admit that my perception of a priest was that he was a man close to God, a few notches higher than the rest of us plain folks and a person who was to minister to my faith needs throughout my life. In some ways I felt sorry for the priest because I saw him as having to live a life alone, meaning, to me, without a wife to care for him. I judged it to be a noble thing for a man to be committed to the priesthood, but most priests I saw did not seem very happy. I often wondered what kept them going, but I really didn't take the time to get to know any of them in our parish.

TERRI: My views and judgments about priests were that they were a strange group of men. In my limited knowledge, I couldn't understand how a man could choose not to be married. I wanted the priesthood to stay as it was because this best suited my needs, but I still had feelings of sadness for the priests. I presumed a priest must come from a very holy, faith filled family and he must love God very much to give up marriage for a life of service to others. I had a deep respect for priests along the lines of the respect I had for my boss at work. The priest held a certain position of authority in my mind and he was very un-approachable as a person.

So there we were, Mr. & Mrs. Catholic Couple, married nine years and showing our face at Mass every Sunday. We literally were uninvolved with our church and therefore not with our pastor or any other priest. After 9 years of marriage, we found ourselves in some pretty deep disillusionment and quite uncertain what to do. George was "Mr. Executive" in his work and Terri was "Mrs. Socialite" with her women's club. But fortunately, the Lord saw to it to place a priest within range of our lives, Fr. John. When we asked to see him, he made time for us. He recruited us for our Weekend. He pushed us where we needed to go-away from the world to re-focus on one another and to learn about communicating with one another.

What a gift he gave to us by sending us on that Weekend! There we met Fr. Jim, who presented our Weekend. Through his honest sharing of himself, we came to realize the humanness of our priests. After the Weekend, he took a special interest in us and spent many evenings at the house just clowning around with the kids and letting us pick his brain about religion.

TERRI: I'll never forget the first time Fr. Jim was coming to the house for dinner. My mother-in-law had me in a tizzy. She was so worried if I had the good china out. Did I iron the good table cloth? What was I having for dinner? What was I going to do with the kids so they wouldn't bother Fr. Jim at dinner? Was the bathroom clean? The list went on and on. I was a wreck that first evening. That is until Fr. Jim started clearing the table with me. I almost fainted. That really broke the ice and we began a relationship that deepened with time.

GEORGE: Within a year of our Weekend we had our fourth child, our third son, Elliot. We asked Fr. Jim to be Elliot's godfather. We believed he was a tremendously strong example to us and our children and we wanted that to continue. Fr. Jim agreed and he asked us if we had thought about Elliot becoming a priest. My honest answer was that I hadn't really given it a lot of thought. This was the start for me to really look into where I was with the priesthood. Up to that point, my hopes and dreams for my children were that they grow-up healthy, they get a good education and a good job and they find that special person to share their life with. I hadn't thought of even suggesting to them the priesthood as a way of life. And why not, didn't I want my faith to continue on with the priesthood? It was after this discussion that we made opportunities to learn from Fr. Jim what his life and vocation are really about.

TERRI: When Fr. Jim asked us if we had hopes of Elliot becoming a priest, or any of our boys for that matter, I slithered out of the question by saying, "Maybe one of them will, you never know". But inside I was thinking, not my sons, let someone else's son sign-up for a life of loneliness. I was feeling very uncomfortable with the question. George & I did a lot of talking and praying about this area. We wanted to learn why we struggled with this idea of our sons becoming priests.

Fr. Jim had to move to Texas and that cut into our personal time with him, so we made it a point to meet some of the other priests in our area on a more personal level: Fr. Bob, Fr. Dan, Fr. Tom, Fr. Dennis and Fr. Ed. All these men continue to broaden our understanding of the vocation of Holy Orders, but none more continuously than Fr. Ed, who has been serving in leadership with us for 3 years now. Fr. Ed has let us into the dark corners of his heart, places where others rarely travel. He truly is like an extension of our love and our lives. We've had courage to ask Fr. Ed what goes on inside of him when we take him home and he has to go upstairs alone. What's it like on Valentine's Day? Why did he choose priesthood? What did his parents think? What makes him happiest? And the list of curious questions goes on. But he and the other priests have been very open to sharing themselves. We haven't limited ourselves to priests involved in M. E., Fr. Gene, our pastor, was surprised by the question: What does he do for fun? Boy, did we get an ear-full on organic gardening!

Through our experiences with all of these men we have come to recognize quite a few facts that were barriers to our truly loving our priests. First of all, we evaluated their human relationship using our married relationship as the measuring stick. Naturally, most of what we thought about was the lack of sexual involvement for a priest. But we have come to truly appreciate what a gift celibacy is to all of us, that a man loves God and his call to priesthood more than the physical expression of love we share in marriage. That he is willing to give himself to all of us instead of just one of us. That is awesome.

Secondly, we were allowing Modern World goals to be the priorities we set before our children: job, income, and career. Part of that was the realization that we evaluate the success of our parenting by the bragging we can do about our children's worldly accomplishments, like Emily is doing fantastic in piano, Eric got straight A's on his report card, Evan is really achieving in art class, Elliot hit a home run in the ball game. We've never really bragged to anyone or made much about the fact that Eric stuck up for his over-weight teacher when the rest of the kids were teasing her, or when Emily went over to her aunt's house to visit with Mr. Johnson, the blind man around the corner, or when Elliot and Evan gave up afternoon playtime to occupy their cousin who's in a body cast. Where were our priorities?

Thirdly, we were making across the board assumptions about a group of men we didn't really know or even vaguely understood. Judgments, judgments, judgments! We had to let go of our judgments and start from square one and build relationship with our priests to truly know and love them. How else can we truly and earnestly invite our children to a lifestyle of service to the Lord?

We have to admit, this is a blessing to us; to have had the opportunity to know and love these men. We will continue to seek out their involvement in our lives. As part of the Body of Christ, we want to continually feed and strengthen this part of our faith body and we realize we cannot do it from a distance or even an arm's length...it has to be with a full embrace of our hearts and our lives.

We often hear of the priests and bishops discussing and evaluating what to do about the upcoming priest shortage. As a church, the people we need to be talking to are married couples. We, as family, are just as responsible, if not more responsible for the shortage of priests to our faith. Increased vocations to the priesthood rest tremendously in our hands. We now realize that very vividly. We can no longer say, "let someone else's son, not mine" We hope and pray that the Lord is calling any of our sons and they will hear and heed the call. We will do our best to show our children the beauty of the vocation of Holy Orders.

In the meantime, We Love Our Priests!