

Why I decided to become a priest

By Bishop Kenneth Untener

What I have to say about my decision to become an ordained priest, or my feelings about this life, may come as a surprise. At first it may not seem dramatic enough. Believe me, it comes from the depths.

In late high school I knew that I wanted to do something with my life. Trouble was, I didn't know what. All I knew was that I didn't want it to be "normal". I wanted two things: To be free (what high school youngster doesn't!), and to make a difference.

It began to dawn on me (I don't remember how) that being a parish priest held out (for me) the widest possible freedom (speaking, writing, celebrating, helping, connecting), and a chance to make a difference (dealing with people at times of birth, death, marriage, boredom, crises, everyday stuff, and more besides).

But there was more. Being a parish priest meant that I could settle into what I wanted to do, without having to race toward something else. Now that was a big thing for me, and it still is. I need to explain.

Not long ago, I came upon a television news clip about a fellow in a small Nebraska town who made violins, cellos, and violas. He was fairly young, and somehow had acquired this craft, and it was his life's work. The story fascinated me, for in a way it was my own. You see, this young man had a wood shop, and he crafted these musical instruments.

It takes a long time to make a masterly crafted cello, or violin, or viola. You have to select good wood, with tone and beauty. Then you have to shape it, carve it, sculpture it into a musical instrument. There was no machine to do the shaping. It was all by hand. But it was more than just the shape. It was the sound.

Now this fellow did this as his life's work. He wasn't looking over his shoulder to something else. He was doing what he wanted to do. And what he did was helping people to make beautiful music, for people came from all over the world to buy his violins, or cellos, or violas.

Expansion? Branch offices? Upward mobility? Promotions? Big bucks? These were the farthest things from his mind. He was doing what he wanted to do. And what he did was something beautiful for God, and for people. He could settle into what he wanted to do, and what he was good at, and not have to worry about all the things that people often worry about.

The story of what he was doing was so different from the driving force of "expansions" or "mobility" that seem to come at people from all sides because of social pressures.

There are subtle drives that come at us from all sides. Families and friends watch to see if we are moving upward, grabbing opportunities for improvement, higher salaries. They watch the car you drive, the house you live in, the clothes you wear.

You may like the line of work you are in but then ... people seem to expect you to move upward. We live, after all, in an expanding economy. You are expected to get promoted, to have a larger and larger office, a higher and higher salary, better perks ... and it all shows up for all the world to see in the car you drive, the house you live in, the clothes you wear.

If you have a craft, well then, you're supposed to expand, open up some branch offices, be alert to every possibility of growth .. relocate if you have to take a whole new job that opens up, but be sure it's a step upward, and then be ready to do it again in a few years ... and on and on it goes.

To see this fellow settled into making cellos and violins and violas was so, so different. The peacefulness and joy on his face, the feeling of doing something worthwhile, something that helped others make beautiful music ... it was almost too good to be true.

When I saw this news clip, I realized that it was a metaphor for what I was about.

I can craft homilies and articles, speak the right word to someone in need of a good word, celebrate liturgy, anoint the sick, prepare people for marriage, help people approach death as a good friend, speak the good news of the Gospel ... and settle into this art, this craft of being a parish priest ... this life of doing something so good it was almost too good to be true. And to have no pressure to expand, to be alert to new opportunities ... no pressure to look over your shoulder to something else. The only pressure is to do well what you do.

You are in the thick of life, crafting words from the good Word of the Gospel for people who want only the right word to help them make their lives into music.

I honestly think that this is what drew me to this life. I did well in grade school and high school, and I knew I could at least try to go into any number of professions. But as I thought of each of them, they seemed to be on a track that could become a treadmill.

More than that, they didn't have enough "elbow room" ... horizons wide enough to let me be creative, like the fellow making violins. I was drawn to parish priesthood because I saw a wonderful opportunity to write, and to speak, and to lead people in ritual, prayer ... to wake up every morning and go to bed every night knowing that this is where I want to be, what I want to do ... and to do nothing more than that.

This was the "workplace", the shop that I wanted. This was my home, the place from which I could do what I wanted to do.

This was freedom. You think that when I sat down to write this, I had a manual? It was like writing a song. It may be good, or not so good. I can simply try to write something good, and know it is good when people hear it and find it to be helpful.

I don't mean to take it away from other professions ... but there is something so good about this one, and that is all I want to say. There is something good about every life lived for God -- married, single, business, public service ... I only wish to tell you about this one, and say that I have found in it a home, a place to settle into and find fulfillment in using the talents that God gave me.

I think of the words of the beautiful Psalm: "O Lord, my allotted portion and my cup, you it is who hold fast my lot. For the measuring lines have fallen on pleasant sites; fair to me indeed is my inheritance."(Psalm 16:5-6)