

Homily based on the readings from May 21, 2025 (Acts 15.1-6; John 15.1-8)

Even though it is somewhat subtle, there is an exceptionally important phrase that appears three times in today's first reading – and, for good measure, once tomorrow and twice more on Friday. That phrase is “Apostles and presbyters.”

I suspect most of us here are already familiar with the word *Apostle*. The word *presbyter*, though, might require a bit more explanation. In ancient Greek, this word essentially means *elder*. In fact, this past Sunday, when we heard that Paul and Barnabas “appointed *elders* for them in each church,” that is just a different translation for the same word.

The most accurate way to interpret the word *presbyter* – throughout the New Testament – is as a synonym for *priest*. Not only is the English word *priest* directly derived from the Greek word *presbyter*, but many

official documents of the Church still use *presbyter* to refer to a priest who has not been ordained a bishop. Likewise, we continue to employ terms such as *presbyteral* and *presbyterate* to refer to institutions and organizations pertaining to priests.

So what should we make of this phrase: “Apostles and presbyters”? To answer that question, it is actually worth spending a bit more time with the word *Apostle*. In the original Greek, the word means something akin to *ambassador* or *envoy*. As we know from the New Testament, the Apostles were selected by Christ himself to serve as his personal ambassadors to the world. As the need arose, these Apostles appointed successors, who appointed successors, and so on to the present day. These successors, of course, are our modern-day *bishops*. To quote the fathers of the Second Vatican Council:

[I]n order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the Apostles left bishops as their successors, “handing over” to them “the authority to teach in their own place.”

When we say the Nicene Creed every Sunday, this is *precisely* the principle we are affirming when we say that the Church is *apostolic*.

The point, of course, is that the ministry of bishops and priests – of Apostles and presbyters – has been fundamental to the Church since the very beginning. To put it plainly, the Church cannot exist without them. When we reflect on the current shortage of priests, the problem is not so much that Mass schedules may be curtailed or even that some parishes may be forced to close. The problem is that – for the Body of Christ to remain whole and healthy – it is absolutely *essential* that the priesthood continue to be vibrant and dynamic.

As you may have heard, the Diocese of Norwich now has a full-time vocations director – Father Jeffrey Ellis – whose sole job is to assist men in discerning whether God is calling them to ordained ministry. While it is right and fitting for a priest to oversee this effort, this is not a task that one man can *ever* perform on his own. Every single one of us – man or

woman, young or old, single or married – must do our part to help. Our objective is not to bring in new priests from somewhere else (although they would certainly be welcome). We are looking for future priests right *here*, right *now* – in our parishes, in our schools, and above all in our *families*. The priests of tomorrow must be our own brothers, sons, grandsons, uncles, and nephews – or even, for some of us here today, possibly *ourselves*.

From a human perspective, the challenge we are facing may seem insurmountable. On the other hand, fostering priestly vocations is more straightforward than most people realize. Whenever an opportunity arises, we should certainly encourage the people around us to consider whether they might have such a calling. On a more basic level, though, our main responsibility is simply to live out our faith – joyfully, authentically, and publicly. As we heard in this morning's Gospel, whatever successes we experience are *never* the result of our own efforts, but of our relationship with Jesus Christ:

Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own
unless it remains on the vine,
so neither can you unless you remain in me.

In the end, there is nothing that you or I – or Father Ellis or Bishop
Reidy or even Pope Leo himself – can do to *create* a priestly vocation
where one does not already exist. On the other hand, if we entrust our
lives fully and totally to Jesus Christ – and give witness to others to do
the same – then he will *surely* bless us with a rich and abundant harvest.