

## ON THE NATURE OF PRIESTHOOD

Confusion in the Church over the role of the sacramental priesthood has become widespread in recent times. Popular ideals rooted in the American experience have led to a more democratic concept of the hierarchy not only among the laity, but even within certain sectors of the clergy. This grassroots theology has resulted not only in greater involvement in Church affairs on the part of lay people, but also in a more Protestant perception of the priesthood as being shared equally by all believers.

What is a priest? Is the designation of priesthood merely a job description, referring to no more than the representative capacity of a particular individual? The answer of traditional Catholic theology is of course, no. A priest is much more, bearing a mark within his soul that, once conferred, changes him and his relationship to other beings for all eternity. This statement may seem arbitrary to those not weaned on Thomas Aquinas, but there is nevertheless a biblical foundation to this view which when properly understood can shed much light on the life of the ordinary believer.

The biblical notion of priesthood is of profound significance because it points to the ultimate nature of things, the very architectural design of creation (1 Pet 2:5). A glimpse of this may be seen in the Old Testament sacrificial system, which distinguished among the sins of priests, rulers, and commoners (Lev 4:1-35). According to the Mosaic Law, the sacrifice prescribed for a commoner who sinned inadvertently was an unblemished female goat, whereas that of a prince was somewhat greater, his being a male of the same species. The sin of an anointed priest, however, was considered as grave as one committed by the entire community, for the offering required in both cases was a young unblemished bull. Thus, according to this scheme the priest was an "icon" or mystical likeness of those whom he represented, so that he not only offered sacrifices in the name of the people, but also "contained" them in his person. This meant that the ritual purity or holiness of the priest was in a real sense that of the entire population. At the same time, the priest was also an icon of God, for the sacrifices and tithes that were offered to God were eaten and enjoyed only by the priest (Nm 18:8-20). The objects appropriated by the priest were so holy that the layman who approached them was put to death (Nm 18:7, 22).

The consequences of this standard of holiness were rather dreadful, as the subsequent history of Israel reveals. The Bible speaks of only two occasions when the Ark of the Covenant was ever withdrawn from the Jewish people. The second of these came after several generations' worth of folly on the part of Israel and Judah's kings, whom the Israelites set over themselves in their desire to be like other nations, not appreciating that from then on, their standing before God would hinge even more crucially on the personal conduct of their rulers (Is 1:21-26). The first occasion, however, resulted from an apparently more trivial folly- namely, the stealing of the sacrifices at Shiloh by the gluttonous sons of the high priest, Eli (1 Sm 2). This, however, was sufficient cause for God to destroy the sanctuary at Shiloh through the instrumentality of the Philistines and remove the Ark from Israel.

It was the failure of Israel's kings and priests that fueled the messianic hope, for only the Messiah could afford to bear the double yoke of king and priest without the threat of devastation to his people should he fail, hence Psalm 110 refers to His priesthood as being of the order of Melchizedek, who was also a king. While both king

and priest represented Israel before God and God before Israel (Prov 16: 10, 24:21), the weight of the latter's position rested not merely on his office, but on his being, a fact demonstrated in many ways by the Scriptures. Whereas the legitimacy of a king, for instance, did not always depend on his lineage (David was not a descendant of Saul, nor did the kings of the northern kingdom always follow a simple line of succession), that of a priest did, for a priest by Mosaic definition, had to trace his descent from Levi. Moreover, even the physical state of the Levite priest affected his standing before God, for no blemish could appear on his body for him to minister the sacrifices of the temple (Lev 21: 16-23). In contrast, the leper Uzziah once occupied the throne of Judah (2 Chron 26: 16- 23; ironically, he became a leper for usurping the role of the high priest). In all this we may see that priesthood under the old covenant pointed towards the sacramental in that it communicated the Divine Presence in and through material realities.

It is Jesus Christ the God-Man in whom the ultimate character of the priesthood is revealed. The gospel of John records Jesus during the Last Supper as saying: "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5). Whatever happens to the vine happens also to the branches. It is because all creation is **in** Christ (John 1:3-4; Col 1:16-17), that Christ can redeem mankind through a single bodily sacrifice of Himself. This is why Jesus is our High Priest- not only because it is **through** Him that we have access to the Father, but because we are **with** Him and **in** Him. That all believers share in some measure the priesthood of Jesus is explicitly stated in 1 Pet 2:4-9, which compares the Church to a temple of living, priestly stones. There are, however, degrees of priesthood, for just as the verses referred to earlier speak of Jesus, the High Priest, as the cornerstone, Eph 2:21 refers to the same temple as rising on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. That there should be such a hierarchy of priests follows from the "vinelike" character of priesthood, i.e., the closer a branch is to the trunk, the more dependent on that branch is the rest of the vine, just as the random stones of a temple are supported by those lying at the foundation.

The ultimate measure of a believer's priesthood is the extent to which he participates in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary, which Heb 5:1-9 refers to as the basis for Christ's office as High Priest. This definitive and eternal sacrifice, while never repeated, is made continually present in the Eucharist, of which Christ Himself said "This is my body which will be delivered up for you," and, "This is the blood of the new covenant, which will be shed for you," and then again, "Do this in memory of me." It is not surprising, therefore, that those whom Jesus empowered to minister this sacrifice in His name, that is the apostles and their legitimate successors, are regarded as sharing most fully in His priestly identity. However, this does not mean that the priests of the new covenant are like those of the old, who "stand ministering day by day, and offering again and again those same sacrifices which can never take away sins (Heb 10:11)." Their own priesthood is not derived from any physical life transferred from one generation of priests to another (Heb 7: 16), but from the supernatural life communicated eternally **in** Christ, hence every sacramentally ordained priest is but an *alter Christus* ("another Christ") who presents to God the one offering by which Christ "forever perfected those who are being sanctified (Heb 10:14)." Moreover, as representatives and icons of Christ the apostles and their successors have the power to speak and judge in His name, for as Jesus said "whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Mt 16:19)".

While the sacramentally ordained participate fully in the priesthood of Jesus, others too carry on aspects of Christ's priestly work. All believers exercise a priestly ministry with respect to the world, for it is Christians, who are the salt and light of the earth, through whom and in whom the kingdom of God is brought into human history. It is in their suffering, their obedience, and their prayers that Christ's own priesthood is duplicated (Heb 5:7-10, Col 1 :24), so that within their own beings they fight and win the battles of the world. Over the mystical body consisting of all such believers presides the heart which is the visible institution of the Catholic Church. In her subsists the entire Body of Christ, for just as a leaf or a twig is to the trunk of a tree, so are all other ecclesial communities in relation to the one, true, Church: the worth of the former is wholly dependent on the integrity of the latter. In her sacraments and in her communion of saints is to be found the priestly ministry which brings life to the entire Body, for despite the faith of those who find Christ outside her doors, "without us, they were not to be made perfect (Heb 11 :40)." Indeed, should Catholics cease celebrating the Eucharist for a single day, the world would speedily come to an end (Dn 9:27, Jn 6:53), since it is the Church's daily remembrance of Calvary which allows life in this age to continue in being.

Within home and family, too there are priests- individuals chosen by the grace of God through whom and in whom He delivers blessings and curses to those around them. Two Old Testament examples of this are Abraham and Joseph (Gen 12:2-3,37:5-11). The first owed his priesthood to his being a patriarch- that is, a human branch who contained his descendants within himself, both biologically and sacramentally. That God regarded Abraham as a priest is evident from His demanding and accepting Abraham's sacrifices, first the animal sacrifice that marked the beginning of his covenant with God, and secondly the spiritual sacrifice of his son, Isaac, which foreshadowed God's sacrifice of His own Son at Calvary. God also considered Abraham a mediator, hearing his prayers for the sparing of Sodom. Joseph on the other hand, while not the head of his family, was regarded by God as a priest on behalf of his brethren. So special in fact was he that, together with Levi, his name was not used in reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, instead being replaced by his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Levi, after all, was not counted among the tribes precisely because he was a stand-in for all the descendants of Jacob. Joseph, on the other hand, is frequently mentioned as a stand-in for the ten tribes who did not form the remnant of Israel. (Only in Rev 7:4-8 do Levi and Joseph appear as tribes among the twelve, since their priesthood is by then supplanted by the greater priesthood of Christ.) In his suffering at the hands of his brothers and subsequent exaltation at the right hand of Pharaoh, by which means he became a blessing to his entire family, Joseph mirrored the priestly suffering and ascension of Christ to the Father.

It is not only individuals who are identified as priests. Apart from the Church, there are entities within other human categories that have been set apart as holy and endowed with priestly quality. Within the family of human nations, for instance, there is the race of priests that is the Jewish people (Ex 19:6), whose ancient martyrdom is central to their priestly mission. History can neither be understood nor resolved apart from them (Rom 2:9-10). Even in the realm of the sexes, God has ordained that one gender should be the icon of Christ, the priest and king, while the other the icon of His spouse, the Church (1 Cor 11 :3-10, Eph 5:2-24). This mystical correspondence is reinforced by the creation story in Genesis, which portrays the archetypical woman, Eve, as having been

formed out of Adam's rib. Adam therefore "contained" Eve, not merely physically but sacramentally, as befit his priestly role. The Church, in her God-given wisdom, has never allowed women to be ordained as priests because she recognizes that a priest brings his entire being, his sex included, into the sacrament of holy orders. Moreover, she understands that God elects men to the priesthood according to His grace and not according to their merits or abilities.

The priest's capacity to sacramentally contain those whom he represents before God and to be identified with Christ as he speaks in God's name to men points ultimately to a greater reality, of which priesthood is but a sign. That reality, which we are all called to share, is the life of the Godhead, the life of "you in me and I in you" (In 17:21), and of "I living in them, you living in me," (In 17:23). If seven demons may forcibly occupy and possess a human soul (Lk 11 :26), how much more may the saints dwell in one another in love, for this mystical indwelling is the very architecture of eternity. After all, did not Christ refer to John the Baptist as Elijah (Mt 11:14), and do we not refer to the Pope as Peter living in his successor? The experience of saints and mystics throughout history has shown that every Christian is not only a priestly temple, but also a living city within which a whole host of beings are in communion. The prize of eternity is that we may ourselves contain, represent, and rule over many such cities, just as the good stewards of the parable of the silver talents (Lk 19:11-27). It is in such heavenly polities after all, that God, who dwells in each of them, ultimately achieves His aim in creation of becoming "all in all".

One who makes good use of his priesthood in this life can look forward to an even greater union and identification with Divinity in the next, for God Himself is the heritage and portion of every priest (Dt 18:2). But whether or not he succeeds or fails, he takes his priesthood with him into eternity, even if it be to the depths of hell where the weight of all those whom he failed to carry in life shall press heavily upon him, for as Ps 110 declares: "God has sworn, and He will not repent; you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

**--Eduardo P. Olaguer**