

Priesthood: Gift And Mystery

From the FAITH Magazine January-February 2005

Gerald Bradley

The Priesthood as a Gift

I remember on the night of my first Mass, sitting in a Wimpy Bar feeding the choristers who were to sing at the solemn Mass. The choir master, himself a priest, said to me "You know, you and I are very fortunate to have been given two very special gifts: music and the priesthood." Now he wasn't regarding the two gifts of equivalent value, but the remark has never left me. It reminds me constantly that being a priest is a great privilege, but it is also a gift, something given by God. But we must be careful, because it is not a gift given to me for my possession. All gifts, which come from the Father through the Son, are given for others and given precisely for our eternal salvation; given to give us the fulness of spiritual life. "I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance". (Jn 10:10) And so in the first place we must recognise this office in the Church as a Gift given by God to His Church and for the Church. Its purpose is for the growth of the Church and the salvation of mankind. Since the priesthood is a gift from God and not a construction of mankind we must be careful not to recreate it as a human job although it will have many human traits and characteristics.

Mystery Of Love

John Paul II calls this a gift of the mystery of love and we must pray to God that we may deepen our understanding of this gift given to the Church. Because the priesthood is not only something we experience Sunday by Sunday, but is also a part of the mystery of our faith. The priesthood is something in which we believe. And all that is revealed to us can be usefully reflected on for our own growth in holiness. So I am hoping that this evening may do two things: Firstly I hope it may help you to understand what the priesthood is. I am sure I will not really tell you anything new that you didn't already know, but it is good to hear it again in order to be encouraged. In the contemporary climate when the media seizes on the faults of some priests there is a great danger that the world will lose sight of the meaning of priesthood. It is by studying our faith more deeply that we can come to a deeper understanding of those mysteries of love, which the Lord Jesus Christ has entrusted to us. Meditating on them can help our faith grow. The second thing that I hope to do this evening is to give you some thing on which to meditate. Think of the priesthood as something to meditate on and perhaps an aid to prayer. For we must be grateful to God for this gifts of the priesthood among us. In particular we must be grateful for the priests he has given us who work steadily in season and out of season, to dispense the mysteries of God among us. We need to pray for our priests and our seminarians, encourage them and promote the priesthood among our young men. They need to hear the call from Christ and it is among you that they will hear that call.

Who is the Priest?

I have described with the Holy Father the priesthood as a gift of the mystery of God's Love. Why is that important? Firstly it is important for us to be reminded that the priesthood is something different from the run of the mill job. It is something sacred; supernatural; it encompasses the divine. During the last forty years the identity and role of the priest in the Catholic Church have come under heavy attack and much questioning. In an effort to give it a modern stamp, the essence of the priesthood in some ways has been forgotten. It is not that the Second Vatican Council reinvented the priestly ministry, rather it confirmed what we always believed. The current Pope ever since the beginning of his pontificate has repeatedly and tirelessly taught us about priesthood in a variety of contexts. He has given much thought and prayer to the meaning of the priesthood and taken every opportunity to present the meaning of this mystery of love in all its fullness. He has called us back to the identity of the priest as the true presence of the mystery of Christ's own High priesthood working among us and in some ways developed our understanding of this gift.

Origins of Priestly Identity

The origin of the priesthood has its source in the Blessed Trinity, like every Christian identity. When the Bishop lays hands on a man during the Rite of Ordination the priest is consecrated. He is sent forth by the Father through the mediatorship of the Jesus Christ in order to live and work by the power of the Holy Spirit in service of the church and for the salvation of the world. Perhaps it is obvious to say, but the priest is a sacrament of the Crucified and Risen Christ and therefore a sacred symbol of the real presence of Christ in a certain but guaranteed way among us. This springs from the Person of Jesus Christ: true God and true Man. First of all we have to understand the relationship between Christ and His Church and from that we see precisely who the priest is in relation to the People of God i.e. the consecrated religious and lay faithful of Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ in time and in space. Christ is the Head of the Church as St Paul tells us and we are His Body. Therefore it is just this relationship between Christ and the Church that we see present and tangible in the person of the consecrated priest. You can see already that it is important for us to consider who the priest is before we talk about what he does. What he does is important because he is set aside for sacred duties. But the thought patterns of the society in which we live seem to value what a person does rather than who they are. It prizes usefulness over the value of life itself.

We have only to look at the culture of death in which we are steeped to see that human life both at its beginnings and at its end are being threatened and some of that is attributable to a prevailing utilitarian way of thinking. That is why, it seems to me, that it more important in the first place to ask who the priest is rather than to ask what he does. So I am a priest and the symbol of Christ the priest, even when I am doing my shopping, filling the car with petrol and going on holiday. I am always a priest of Jesus Christ and in what ever I do.

Jesus Christ the Eternal High Priest

There is, strictly speaking, only one priesthood; that is the High priesthood of Jesus Christ. The priesthood share by a priest links him to Christ's own priesthood. The man who is a priest allows Christ the crucified and risen Lord to exercise His own priesthood for us. This means that in every age and in every place where there is a man ordained Christ exercises His priesthood for us and for our eternal salvation. We understand this by the Latin phrase which describes a priest as *in persona Christi* i.e. in the Person of Christ or as an *alter Christus*. He stands in relation to the Church in the way that our Lord does to us. Jesus is Head of the Church, which is His Body. He is Bridegroom of the Church, which is His Bride, and He is Shepherd to the Church who are His Sheep. The priest stands in relation to his people in just the same way that Christ does.

Priesthood and the Holy Eucharist

If we want to understand this relationship between Christ and His people and therefore between the priest and his people the best thing is to look at the Holy Mass we celebrate. We will discover there a picture of who the priest is. We will see in it the priesthood of Christ as if we were looking in a mirror. This is because the Liturgy of the Church is the centre of its life and it is from the Liturgy of the Church that all the power and grace of heaven flows.

It was at the Last Supper on the night before he died that Jesus instituted the priesthood when He gathered the twelve and shared the paschal meal with them saying "Do this in memory of me." This is the commandment we keep every time we celebrate the Mass. But it is not just the Last Supper that we celebrate in the Mass, but the supper and also what occurred on the next three days: namely the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. (as a matter of fact the Ascension is celebrated too.) We call this the Paschal mystery. All of this is part of the saving work of Jesus Christ. All of this has been given to us in every time and place through the sacrament of Holy Orders, in the Episcopacy and Priesthood. As I said, we can use the Holy Mass as a picture for understanding the priesthood of Christ and therefore the priesthood of all priests. Think of the Mass and picture in your minds the different places where the priest stands. There are three important places from which the priest performs his priestly duties. These places are associated with three sacred furnishings: the chair called the presidential chair; the altar, and the ambo from which the Sacred Scriptures are read. These have a deeper significance than you might expect. Each of them relates to a specific sacred office of ministry. Let us meditate on them one by one.

The Chair

The Chair is not just a place to sit on. It is a place from which the priest governs the praying people in the name of Jesus Christ. It is from this position that he calls them to worship the Father, and in the name of Jesus Christ. This is the place from which he takes the prayers of the people to the Father. Here he presides over the faithful people of God who by virtue of their baptismal life in

Christ are called to worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth. Typically it is here that the priest prays and leads the prayer of the people: the opening rites and opening prayer, the Prayers of the faithful should be led from here, as well as the Creed, and the final prayers and blessing. Even when he is sitting and other people are fulfilling their functions; singing or reading he sits in the chair which is symbolic of Christ governing His people. This is what we call the kingly office or service of Christ among his people. Christ is the proper authority in the church and it is his kingship or government, which orders us. He does this so that we can receive His saving gifts and so that He can use us, however lowly we may seem to ourselves, for his work of calling men and women to life in Him. It is here that in the Mass the priest asks the people to call to mind their sins so that they might worthily prepare themselves to partake in the sacred mysteries. Although his moment is not sacramental confession we should remark here that the authority of Christ is given to the priest to forgive sins. His task is to use the power of Christ to break the bonds of sin, which bind a person and so free the sinner to go to God. This is also true in the sacrament of the sick in which the compassionate forgiveness of Christ is given and a person freed from sin as well as the healing of mind and soul (and occasionally of body) The priest has the duty to be a shepherd to the flock entrusted to him in the image of Christ the Shepherd even as the bishop is the supreme shepherd and pastor of his diocese. Here we have to remember that the staff of the shepherd is also the sceptre of the king. The shepherd image in the Old Testament and the new is one of leading, guiding, correcting and nourishing. All of them are part of the priest's life in building up the faith of his people so that they may come closer to Christ and fulfil the mission, which He gives them to accomplish.

The Hierarchic Nature of the Church

The priest, as a delegate of the bishop has a role of authority in the Church at a local level. This authority is to guide and govern the community. The Church is not simply a democratic entity that operates by the vote of the majority. The priest has entrusted to him the task of leading the people to holiness and seeing that their spiritual needs are met. In this way he mediates the kingship of Christ, because it is Christ who governs us. This does not exclude the valid and valuable involvement of the laity. There are many things that the laity can and must do which the priest cannot and shouldn't do. But the work of the laity is principally to be in the world as bearers of Christ where they live and work and come into contact with the world. The Church, whether we like it or not, is hierarchically structured. That means that it is governed by priesthood. That may not be very popular or fashionable but that is the mode of the Church given by Christ. Christ Himself proclaimed himself a king and shares that with his Church. Peter is placed at the head of the apostles not because he was better or more competent, but to be the voice of Christ among his people to articulate what the mystery of faith holds for us.

The Ambo

The next place in the Mass to which we must turn our attention is the ambo, the lectern from the Word of God is proclaimed. It is here that the Gospel is read by the Deacon or Priest. However, it is symbolic of the prophetic gift of Christ in His Church. Jesus is Priest, prophet and king. Christ of course is more than the Old Testament prophets. All the prophets and prophecies of the Old Testament point to Him. There is a prophetic charism, which Christ offers us and which is given to the Church. To be a prophet does not mean that a person is engaged in the reading the future like reading someone's palm or tea leaves. The word prophet comes from a Greek word *prophasko* meaning to speak forth, or speak on behalf of someone. Jesus Christ is the Word of God promised from all eternity. He is the Word made flesh. Jesus is both the Prophet of God and the message, because the Word of God is Truth. Jesus says I am the way the Truth and the Life. He himself is Truth. Truth is not an idea, or an opinion nor an ideology. Truth is the fulness of the Person of God revealed to us in the Divine Person of Jesus Christ. And so the priest has the office of proclaiming the Truth in season and out of season. It is his responsibility to teach Christ's Truth and the Truth of the Church. This is important because today we live in a world in which people distrust institutions and the Church is one of those. What has happened is that in many people's mind they have driven a wedge between Jesus Christ and his Church. As we have already said the Church is His Body. Therefore the church is not merely a human institution. It has a human dimension but it also has a divine nature rooted in the Divinity of its Lord and Saviour. Therefore it must be true to say that when the Church teaches officially it is Christ who teaches. People do feel let down by priests who are unscrupulous in their moral behaviour. But they rarely feel outraged when they do not teach what the Church proclaims. So the principal catechist in a church is the Bishop. His role is one of teaching and holding the Church in his diocese in unity. The priest has to be the chief catechist of his parish and is responsible for the passing on of the Church's teaching. It is not a teaching, which is discovered by experience because it is revealed to us by God and therefore needs to be passed on authentically. This has all sorts of ramifications from providing talks like these, to taking care over the content of faith taught in the parish school in collaboration with the teaching staff. It might even affect whether or not you have a certain hymn at Mass, because there are some which clearly teach material contrary to the mind of the church. And that matters because the formation in faith of his people is always in the forefront of the priest's mind.

The Altar

I come lastly to meditate on the altar. The most significant of the pieces of furniture that lies within our sanctuaries. It is here not exclusively but perhaps above all that we find the identity of the priest reflected and lived. When we celebrate the Holy Mass, Christ offers Himself to the Father. This is the representation of the Sacrifice of Calvary. This is the mountain of Calvary on top of which the whole of history and the whole of the universe finds its meaning. Christ offers Himself to the Father in love for the Father and in love of us.

Of course through His whole life Christ was offering Himself in obedience to the Father. All His actions are done in obedience to the Father and in an outpouring of Himself for us. From the smallest parable to the greatest healing. All of them speak of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. This is the heart of the Paschal mystery and why he gives the gift of priesthood to the church during this important meal of the Passover. This means that what we experience in the Last Supper is not merely a meal. It was not for the Jews. It was a solemn commemoration of the power and initiative of God to liberate the people from slavery and death in Egypt . So too Christ interprets this same solemn ritual meal in the light of the liberation from sin and death that Good Friday and Holy Saturday contained. And it is not merely about liberation but the bestowal of a new life in the Spirit. What that Sacrifice gives is access to the Father and the gift of eternal life. This is eternal life: that you may know the true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. So it is the offering of Christ, which is at the heart of the Eucharist.

This is the heart of the priest's life and identity. The priest stands in the person of Christ offering that unbloody sacrifice on our altars, the same that was offered on Calvary . In doing that the whole Church joins its own sacrifices and lives to that of Jesus through the sacrifice of the priest. That is why the priest invites you in these words. "Prayer brethren that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father." It is in the nature of the priest to offer gift and sacrifice says the letter to the Hebrews. It is important that we do not drain the Mass of this particular and essential content, which has so easily happened in the past. There are other elements, which belong to the Mass just, as there are other elements to the life of the priest. However if we drain the Mass of its sacrificial content then we cut out its heart. When helping a seminarian who is struggling with his vocation I often find myself asking him, "At the end of the day do you want to celebrate the Mass. " It always has a profound affect on the students and puts his vocation, or lack of it into relief. Priests are not Mass-machines. On the other hand as soon as remove its central position from the Mass you remove it from the life of the priest. Similarly if we do that we remove it from the central consciousness of the minds of our people and gloss over the fact that unless you take up your cross daily you cannot follow me. There is a huge danger of forgetting the centrality of the Cross in our loves. But there is no spiritual growth without it. There is no resurrection without Good Friday. And if we desire to experience the kingdom of Jesus Christ within our hearts then we must never sideline the cross. The whole of the mystery of Jesus Christ is contained within those last three days of his life. They sum up the whole of his mission from before time until the end. They define and orientate the lives of all Christians and particularly the priest's.

So you can see that Christ lives as Head of His Church as relates to Her as Priest, Prophet and King. These gifts are given to the Church through the Office of the Bishop and priest and we see them symbolically reflected in the Liturgy of Holy Mass and the Sacraments in the different sacred duties of the priest.

The Gift Of Celibacy

Before I finish I want to make some remarks about priestly celibacy. This naturally follows on from what I have just outlined. As you know there has been much discussion and study on this question in the last forty years. Many people had hoped that the Holy Father would change the Western discipline. The Eastern Catholic Church has retained a practice of marriage for those priests who choose it before diaconate. But their Bishops are always chosen from among the celibate clergy. John Paul II has, not only resisted this change but also taught very extensively about it. The first thing I want to say is that the Church understands celibacy to be a gift and a mystery. Now there are lots of priests who do not feel it to be either of those things. Celibacy seems to be more of a deathly conundrum. But in the first place it is a gift to the Church. Celibacy is a gift given to us in order to make us faithful and fruitful Christians. It must be understood this way in order for it to be received by an individual as a gift for themselves. Celibacy is not the same as being a bachelor. We all know that unmarried men can be the most obstinate, self-centred individuals if they let themselves be. All of us as humans must find in life some way to give our lives to others if we are to be fulfilled and happy. In the Sacrament of Marriage that giving of myself to my spouse and of my spouse to me should make me grow humanly and spiritually. So too in the celibate life. This is a consecrated singleness. I consecrate my life to God. I give it wholly and entirely to Him so that He can be fruitful in me. He does this so that He can give Himself eternally to many other people. It is not a question of being more available, or of economic sensibility. It is for this one spiritual reason that God wishes through my self-donation of all that I am and have to Him that he can call other men and women to holiness. In that self-donation that I make to God I have also to give myself to men and women whom he sends to me. In that self-donation I offer him the deepest part of my being. I have to give to him everything including my sexuality. Sexuality is a gift from God for the giving of life to another and, in marriage for the giving of life to the world. The single consecrated priest directs that life-giving gift to Jesus Christ and in turn it is transformed in grace for the holiness of the Church. It is an act of faith and an act of hope, but no less so than the fruitful and well-lived faithfulness of marriage. It therefore mirrors the self-donation of Christ in the Sacrifice of the Mass. Yes celibacy is a sacrifice. It is a giving up of a married life, and of family. But all sacrifice is ordained towards the resurrection. It is not the giving up of being happy and fruitful. It is ordered towards spiritual fruitfulness and must feed into the priest's personal spiritual life. You may validly say, but a married man can be holy, so could a married priest. That is true. No one denies that. But the world needs to see the visible sign of Jesus Christ the single and poor one in its midst living. The consecrated singleness of the priest is a sign in our midst of the Gift of our Lord Jesus Christ who gives up everything so that we might have life and life to the full. Celibacy must be seen in the light of the call to holiness and it must also contribute to the holiness of the priest. A priest without a deep and regular life of prayer is not really living his celibacy well. The priest's life is one of prayer. It is reflected in his duty to offer the prayer of the Church for the living and the dead. This he

promises to do for you every day of his life. At diaconate he promises to undertake this work of stand in Intercession before God with you and for you.

Conclusion

The priesthood is a gift of Christ to the Church in which Jesus Christ our redeemer is present and working his saving work in us. The priest is a visible sacrament of the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ Priest, Prophet and King, living in intercession and Sacrifice, teaching the truth and enlightening our minds and hearts and guiding us as a true shepherd to holiness and life eternal. This is a great gift to the church I wonder why so few people want it!