

THE CHRISTIAN PRIESTHOOD

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HE priest is appointed mediator, and stands so to speak between the people and God, as we read of Moses. Therefore it belongs to him to set forth the Divine teachings and sacraments before the people; and also to offer up to the Lord things appertaining to the people; as for instance, their prayers, sacrifices and oblations. Thus the Apostle says: 'Every high-priest taken from among men is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins.'¹ With the notion of priesthood is united essentially the notion of sacrifice. "Sacrifice and priesthood are by divine ordinance so inseparable that they are found together under all laws."² Thus when people worship God without offering up to Him sacrifice, there can be no true priesthood in the common acceptance of that term, although there may be and usually is, a sort of ministry.

That God may be honored with due solemnity, and that the people may be guided in their worship, a priesthood is necessary. This fact is not admitted by all, as is evident from the various sects which have no priesthood in the ordinary acceptance of that word. For the Catholic however, the divine institution of the priesthood is a sufficient guarantee of its necessity, for God is an intelligent being and does all things wisely. The necessity of the priesthood can also be shown from a human point of view. A priesthood is necessary for the same reason that doctors, lawyers, etc., are necessary. Just as a person does not have time to learn of all the ills "that flesh is heir to," and to discover remedies for them, but leaves this work to men who can devote all their time to it; so it is with the things that pertain to God. The ordinary person because of the burdens and cares of life, cannot devote all the time that is necessary for the fitting honor and service of God, and for learning God's will; he therefore leaves it to the priest to offer prayer and sacrifice to God in a becoming manner, and to learn the will of God, and to make it known. However because there are doctors, a person is not relieved of the obligation to use all the means at his disposal to safeguard his health. Likewise because there are priests, that does not

remove from the laity the obligation of honoring and serving God to the best of their ability.

When Adam sinned, God promised him a redeemer. Since this sin was an infinite offence because of the person offended it needed an infinite reparation. That this degree of atonement might be made, God's promised Redeemer was none other than His only Begotten Son. Thus the very nature of Christ's mission constituted Him a Priest. In the name of the people He was to offer up a sacrifice which would be pleasing and acceptable to God, as an atonement for the sins of men. On the other hand, He was to bestow on the people God's pardon and blessing, and to teach them how to live in a manner pleasing to God. Before His coming the priesthood of the Old Law performed in an imperfect manner the work which He took over. The sacrifices of the Mosaic Law were not sufficient in themselves to restore man to the friendship of God. Their only efficacy came from the fact that they were figures and types of Christ's great sacrifice. Once Christ had offered up "the clean Oblation," the types and figures of it no longer retained their value, as was signified by the tearing asunder of the veil in the temple.

Since sacrifice is the most perfect method of honoring God, it was fitting that the Church established by our Lord should have a perpetual sacrifice. The prophet Malachy had foretold that Christ's sacrifice would be universal and perpetual. "From the rising of the sun unto the going down, my name is great among the Gentiles, and in every place there is a sacrifice, and there is offered to my name a clean oblation." Christ also intended that His oblation should be universal and continual; and in order that this might be, He instituted His priesthood. The work of this priesthood was to continue to offer His sacrifice and to make known His teaching. In other words, the priest was to be a substitute for Christ, he was to be "another Christ."

It was at the last supper the night before He died that Christ instituted the priesthood, and ordained His first successors in the sacred ministry. When He spoke the words: "Do this for a commemoration of me," He conferred the priesthood on the Apostles and gave them power to offer up His sacrifice. After His Resurrection He gave them power to baptize and to forgive sin; commanding them at the same time to preach His doctrine, and promising to be with them "all days even to the consummation of the world."

Realizing that the priest is but "another Christ" we can conceive some idea of the dignity of the priesthood. "Oh, how great and honorable is the office of priests, to whom it is given to consecrate with sacred words the Lord of Majesty, to bless Him with their lips, to hold Him with their hands, to receive Him with their mouths, and to administer Him to others."³ True the priest is only a substitute, but he is a substitute of the Most High. What earthly honor can be compared with the honor of taking our Lord's place and doing His work? Saint John Chrysostom answers the question: "The power of priests is more venerable and greater than that of kings. Speak not of the royal purple, of diadems, of golden vestures—these are but shadows, frailer than the flowers of spring, compared to the powers and privileges of the priesthood."⁴

When one contemplates the dignity of the priestly office, the question immediately arises, where can anyone be found who is worthy of this sublime vocation? The answer is that no one is truly worthy of this office. "If thou hadst the purity of an Angel, and the sanctity of a Saint John the Baptist, thou wouldst be neither worthy to receive nor to handle this sacrament. For this is not due to man's merits, that a man should consecrate and handle the Sacrament of Christ, and receive for food the bread of Angels."⁵ It should be remembered, however, that Christ, who instituted the priesthood, knew that it was a dignity beyond the scope of all human perfection, and still He instituted it. Furthermore no one chooses this office for himself, but he is chosen by Christ. "Neither doth any man take this honor to himself; but he that is called by God as Aaron was." It certainly follows then that all our Lord demands of those chosen ones, is that they fulfill the priestly office to the best of their ability, for Christ will not ask of any man that which is beyond his power. Thus he who feels a divine vocation to the service of God should not tremble and draw back when he considers the dignity of the position to which he is called. He should answer the call with the firm resolution of making himself worthy as possible, trusting the God who called him to give him the grace to be successful.

Since the priest is a mediator between God and men, it follows that he has a twofold occupation; namely, his duty toward God, and his duty toward the faithful. His primary duty toward God, or his essential work as a priest is to offer the sacrifice of

the Mass. This work, as we have seen, was imposed on the priest at the Last Supper. Prayer also pertains to the priestly occupation. Saint Paul has admonished all Christians that they "pray without ceasing." If this is the duty of all Christians, and the priest as the leader of the faithful in the things that pertain to God, it is clear that the priest has a graver obligation to pray. The Church recognizing this duty of her priests has instituted the Divine Office. The priest's second duty is in regard to the people, and consists in administering to them the sacraments, and in teaching and guiding them in the way of eternal life. Of these two occupations, the administration of the sacrament of Penance and the instruction of the people require the most attention. It would be well to note what St. Thomas has to say regarding the requirements necessary for these two duties. He places the same two requisites for each. Speaking about the priest as confessor, he says: "With regard to the penitential judgment two things are necessary to the priest; namely, cleanness of life and the knowledge of discerning between sin and sin. Cleanness of life is necessary in order that he may not be judged in any of those things which he is prepared to judge in others, according to the words of Christ: 'He who is without sin let him cast the first stone.' Similarly the knowledge of judging is necessary, that he may know what he ought to judge, and that from error he may not impose a false penance which is the means of leading souls to hell; because according to the words of Truth, if a blind man presume to lead a blind man 'the leader first falls into the pit, and then the follower'."⁶ Speaking of the instruction of the people the Angelic Doctor says: "In regard to the instruction of the people two things are necessary; namely, doctrine and a pure life, that he may teach the people by word and work and build by example. A good life is not sufficient without doctrine, for if a priest from ignorance or negligence does not preach the truth to his people, nor expose to them the way of salvation, he will be a criminal before God because of those who perish from the lack of doctrine. If the priest is of evil life, he destroys the fruit of the doctrine, for the laity are easily corrupted by the example of the priest's evil life, and thus condemn the word of God and the sacrifice, and from the bad example of the priest they become worse."⁷

From the above it is evident that the priest because of the character of his work, takes on a greater obligation of perfec-

tion. The priest is in much closer union with God than a lay-person is, and thus any imperfection in him reflects on God. The priest should therefore avoid even those things which of their very nature are slight imperfections for in him they often take on a more serious aspect. Such an offence in a lay-person and in a priest may be illustrated by some water dropping on a bar of iron and on some melted iron. In the first case there is no immediate reaction, but in the second case there is, and it is often dangerous to the bystanders. The difference is caused by the difference in the condition of the metal in the two instances. Thus the difference in the state of a lay-person and a priest demands that a priest avoid even those things which are of little or no consequence in one who is not a priest. The priest since he is "another Christ" should imitate the perfection of Christ. He should be able to say with St. Paul: "Be ye imitators of me, as I am of Christ." That the priest may attain this perfection required by his vocation, the words of Cardinal Manning might serve as a good rule. "A priest ought to be in no place where his Master would not go, nor employed in anything which his Master would not do."⁸ If a priest does not strive after the perfection required by his office, it would have been better had he not become a priest, for as St. Thomas tells us: "Though it were impossible to find as many ministers as there are now, it were better to have a few good ministers than many bad ones."⁹

Along with the obligations of the priest there are certain rights which he enjoys; namely, the right of sustenance, and the right to the honor and respect of the laity. These things are due to him because of the dignity of his office as a priest of Christ. Speaking of the right of the priest to sustenance St. Paul declares: "Let the priests that rule well be esteemed worthy of a double reward; especially they who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture saith: 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn'; and 'The laborer is worthy of his reward'." Since the priest ought to devote all of his time to the service of God it is only right and just that he receive what is necessary for his support, as he has no other means of obtaining his livelihood. This does not mean however that he is entitled to all the luxuries of life, for if he had these he would not be imitating his Master. What it does mean is that he is entitled to enough to keep himself in a simple, becoming manner. With regard to the second right, we read in Scripture: "With all thy

soul fear the Lord and reverence His priests. . . . Honor God with all thy soul, and give honor to the priests."¹⁰ To stress this point seems unnecessary, for wherever the priest lives up to the duties and obligations of his state in life, the respect and honor of the people is seldom lacking.

No priest's life, however, is all happiness. To all priests at some time or other there come trials and difficulties. This should be expected, for our Lord foretold it. "The servant is not greater than the Master. If they have persecuted me they will also persecute you." "They will put you out of their synagogues, yea, the hour cometh, that whosoever killeth you, will think that he doth a service to God." "Behold I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves." Christ also gives the reason for these tribulations, and it is because his disciples "are not of the world." "If you had been of the world, the world would love its own: but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." Thus the priest should be prepared for trials and difficulties, for to those that are of the world, and see through worldly eyes he is a "fool for Christ's sake."

Although the priest may have trials, he is not without helps and comforts. The same Master, who had warned him of the difficulties, has also given him promise of help. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, do I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled nor let it be afraid." "Have confidence I have overcome the world." "Behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world." "I say to you, my friends, be not afraid of those who persecute you." "For my yoke is sweet and my burden light." What then should the priest fear, when Christ is with him, to guard, protect and help him? Surely the priest can cry out with the Psalmist: "The salvation of the just is from the Lord, and He is their protector in the time of trouble."

What is to be the reward of those who "have left all things" for the cause of the Master. Again we have but to listen to the words of Christ. "Amen I say to you, that you who have left all things and followed Me, shall receive a hundredfold, and possess life everlasting." "He that shall do and teach, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." "Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him shall the Son of Man confess before the angels of God." "He that reapeth, receiveth wages, and

gathereth fruit unto life everlasting: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together." Thus the priest who has been faithful to the duties and obligations of his divine calling, when he comes to die will be able to say with St. Paul: "For I am even now ready to be sacrificed; and the time of my dissolution is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. As to the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord, the just judge will render to me in that day." Christ will receive His faithful priest with the words which He addressed to the servant who used his talents well: "Well done good and faithful servant, because thou hast been faithful over few things, I will place thee over many; enter thou into the joy of the Lord."

¹ St. Thomas, Summa Thol. II, II ae. Q. 86; A. 2.

² Con. of Trent, Sess. XXIII, C. I.

³ Imit. of Christ; Bk. IV, Ch. XI, 6.

⁴ St. John Chrysostom, in illud, Vlde Dominum; Hom. V.

⁵ Imit. of Christ, Bk. IV, Ch. V.

⁶ St. Thomas, Opus. LVIII, De Officio Sacerdotis.

⁷ St. Thomas, Ibid.

⁸ The Eternal Priesthood, Ch. III.

⁹ St. Thomas, Summa Theol. III. Sup. Q. 36, A. 4, an lam.

¹⁰ Ecclesiasticus, Ch. VII; 31-33.

