

THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

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HO can adequately describe the emotions of those whose privilege it has been to witness an ordination to the priesthood? What happiness, what sentiments of wonderment and awe was theirs! In the words of St. Ephrem: "O glorious miracle! O ineffable power! O tremendous mystery of the holy and sublime priesthood! On bended knees must I beg the grace to comprehend this celestial gift."¹ These are our sentiments, but from whence do they arise? They find their source in this, that whereas a mere man enters the sanctuary on ordination morning, an *Alter Christus*, another Christ returns. The sacrament of Holy Orders, imprinting a sacred character upon his soul, makes him a partaker of the priesthood of Christ. And being a member of this sacred priesthood he becomes another Christ, for Christ is our great High Priest. Our sentiments are based, then, on our faith which recognizes the priest as a participator of the priesthood of Christ.

Now, to appreciate the prerogatives of the *Alter Christus* we must know the *Christus*; to understand the dignity of the partaker, we must study what is participated; true knowledge of what the priesthood implies, postulates an appreciation for the priesthood of the Son of God. What then constitutes the priesthood of Christ? It consists in this, that Christ is a priest, a victim, a priest forever, a priest according to the order of Melchisedech.

Christ is a priest. "Having therefore a great High Priest that hath passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God."² St. Thomas tells us that *sacerdos* signifies *sacra dans*, that is, that the priest is one who offers sacred things. These sacred things which the priest gives are, first, the doctrines of faith and grace that he brings from God to man; secondly, prayer and sacrifice that he brings from man to God.³ These being the offices of the priest, Christ is manifestly the priest

¹ Oratio de Sacerdotio.

² Hebrews, iv, 14.

³ St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, q. 22, a. 1.

preëminent. He is the way, the truth and the life, the light of the world, and at His coming all other teachers of mankind fade into insignificance. He is, moreover, the font and source of all grace. St. John says of Christ that He is "full of grace and truth—and of His fulness we all have received."⁴ Christ is the head of the mystical body, the Church, and His own sanctifying grace is participated by us, in that we are members of His mystical body. Hence, from God, Christ brings to us grace and truth. Again, not only as God but as a member of the human race He offers a sacrifice; not indeed, the spotless lamb of the ancients, but His own Most Precious Blood. Such a sacrifice was the prayer of prayers of the human family. Thus, Christ brings to God, prayer and sacrifice.

Being a true priest, Christ is a true mediator between God and man. Indeed, He is the one true mediator, for His mediatorial office is unique. "For there is one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Jesus Christ who gave himself a redemption for all."⁵ He alone could reconcile God and man by a perfect satisfaction. His is the mediatorship of redemption. The *Alter Christus*, on the other hand, is a mediator, only in so far as he disposes man for this redemption by administering the means the great High Priest has given him, only in so far as he is the minister of the one true mediator.⁶ The unique character of Christ's mediatorial office is also seen in the interpretation which is ordinarily given the word "mediator." According to the common acceptance, a mediator is one who is an arbiter between two adverse parties, whose office it is to bring about harmony between the two disputants, he, the mediator, being *distinct* from the parties to be reconciled. If, for example, two men quarrel, the third disinterested party who reconciles them is the mediator. But Christ is not distinct from both parties, God and man. He possesses a perfect divine nature, a perfect human nature, He is God-man, the two natures being united in the one Divine Person.

Since he is both God and man, how can He in any sense be a medium between the two? Christ can be, and is, a mediator in that He is God-man. If He were God alone, Christ could not be distinguished from God, if he were man alone he could not be distinguished from men. But, Christ is God-man. His human nature distinguishes Him from God, makes Him a member of our human family; His divine nature separates Him from mankind, places Him

⁴ John, i, 14-16.

⁵ I Timothy, ii, 5-6.

⁶ St. Thomas, *op. cit.* 1a, q. 26, a. 1.

above all men. Thus He is constituted by nature a medium between the two. And because He is not man alone, His priestly mediatorship, His giving of the *sacra*, assumes an infinite merit and effects a conciliatory union of God and man.⁷

We now come to the second element in the divine priesthood—Christ is not only priest but victim as well. He it is who offers, He it is who is offered. “Christ also hath loved us and hath delivered himself for us, an oblation and a victim to God.”⁸ He sacrifices, and thus He is a priest. He is sacrificed by His own free will and thus He is a victim, a sacrifice. Again, Saint Thomas tells us that “whatever is offered to God in order to raise man’s spirit to Him may be called a sacrifice.” Christ by His death raises man to God by blotting out man’s sins, for, “He was delivered up for our sins;” He raises man to God by preserving him in the state of grace, and finally by uniting him to God in heaven. It follows then, that Christ is truly a sacrifice, a perfect victim.⁹

The Fathers of the Council of Trent teach that the priesthood and sacrifice are so united by the ordination of God that they coexist in every law. This union is present in a preëminent degree in the priesthood of Christ for He is both priest and victim. And when He offers Himself a victim for our sins He is doing that which his priestly title implies, He is offering that which is most sacred. It is in the offering of this sacrifice that the *Alter Christus* becomes most intimately united to his High Priest. For it is Christ who “offers the sacrifice of the Mass through the priest, who is His representative and not merely His successor in the priesthood. Hence it is that the priest assuming the person of Christ at the consecration, does not say, ‘This is the body of Christ’; but, ‘This is My body.’”¹⁰ Thus, in the sacrifice of the Mass the priest becomes, as it were, a victim with his High Priest.

The priesthood of Christ is eternal. The Royal Psalmist had foretold its unending duration when he prophesied: “The Lord hath sworn and he will not repent, Thou art a priest forever.”¹¹ This priesthood is not eternal in the sense that the sacrifice it connotes will exist forever, for, “Christ was offered once to exhaust the sins of many—by one oblation he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified.”¹² The Prince of Priests through the ministry of His vicars

⁷ St. Thomas, *op. cit.* 1a, q. 26, a. 2.

⁸ Eph., v, 2.

⁹ St. Thomas, *op. cit.* 1a, q. 22, a. 2.

¹⁰ Wilmers, S. J. *Handbook of Christian Religion*, (3d ed., New York, 1891), p. 345.

¹¹ Psalm cix, 4.

¹² Hebrews, ix, 28; x, 14.

will offer a clean oblation, a continuation of the sacrifice of the cross, until time is no more. But in heaven the Eucharistic sacrifice will cease, for immolation and the Eucharistic species must give way to Christ's eternal glory and our own beatific vision. But the priesthood of Christ is eternal because Christ Himself is eternal, and because the heaven it gains for us is as immutable as God.¹³ St. Paul expresses these thoughts when he writes: "But this (priest), for that he continueth forever, hath an everlasting priesthood—and being consummated, he became to all that obey him, the cause of eternal salvation."¹⁴

Finally, the priesthood of Christ is according to the order of Melchisedech. We frequently see the inscription: "Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech." As we have noted above, the prophet David first annunciated it, and the Apostle in his epistle to the Hebrews frequently applies the prophecy to Christ. What is its signification? Saint Paul gives us this explanation: "For this Melchisedech was king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him. To whom also Abraham divided the tithes of all: who first indeed by interpretation, is king of justice, and then also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. Without father, without mother, without geneology, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but likened unto the Son of God continueth a priest forever."¹⁵ In Genesis we read: "But Melchisedech the king of Salem bringing forth bread and wine, for he was a priest of the most high God, blessed him (Abraham)."¹⁶

In these two citations Christ and His priesthood are prefigured by Melchisedech, a priest of the old law and because of this prefiguration the sacerdotal office of Christ and His priests is said to be according to the order of Melchisedech.

The superiority of Christ's priesthood over the Levitical order is prefigured in the fact that Abraham, the forbear of Levi, gave tithes to Melchisedech and was blessed by him. For, as Saint Paul points out, it is the superior who receives tithes and blesses. Again, the name Melchisedech signifies king of justice; and king of Salem is interpreted king of peace. These titles belong to Christ in a special manner for He is referred to in Sacred Scripture as the Prince of

¹³ Hugon, O. P. *Tractatus Dogmatici* (5th ed., Paris, 1927), II, 628. This work contains an excellent commentary on St. Thomas' doctrine of the priesthood of Christ.

¹⁴ Hebrews, vii, 24; v. 9.

¹⁵ Hebrews, vii, 1-3.

¹⁶ Genesis, xiv, 18.

Peace and just. The eternity of Christ and His priesthood is pre-figured by Melchisedech in that Sacred Scripture says nothing of the king's parentage, birth or death. He appears in Genesis and then vanishes. Abstracted from the things of time Melchisedech is, as it were, eternal, and thus he is a type of Christ the eternal priest. Finally, Melchisedech offered, not the sacrifice of animals as did the order of Levi, but bread and wine, the matter used by Christ in the sacrificial service of the New Law.

This is the priesthood of the Son of God—a priest and victim, a priest eternal according to the order of Melchisedech. This is the priesthood of Him who “is not entered into the holies made with hands, the patterns of the true, but into heaven itself that he may appear now in the presence of God for us.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Hebrews, ix, 24.

