

CHRIST, THE ETERNAL PRIEST

BERNARD M. SCHNEIDER, O.P.



URING this month throughout the world hundreds of young men will be ordained to the holy priesthood. Thousands of priests will celebrate the anniversaries of their ordination. In order better to appreciate the ineffable dignity and power which are conferred on these chosen souls what could be more helpful than a consideration of the priesthood of Christ, the priest and victim of the only perfect sacrifice? Just as all sacrifice has its efficacy from its relation to the bloody sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, so all sacerdotal power and dignity has its source in the inexhaustible virtue and sanctity of the Eternal Priest, Jesus Christ.

That Christ was and is the Eternal Highpriest is no mere pious tenet of the simple faithful, but a dogma of Catholic Faith which has been held and taught from the very beginning of the Church. Nor was Christ a priest in a mere metaphorical sense, but in Him is found the plenitude of priestly power.

Long before the birth of Christ, the Royal Psalmist foretold His sacerdotal office: "Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech."¹ Saint Paul records for history the fulfillment of this prophecy: "Having therefore a great highpriest that hath passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God."² The writings of the Fathers abound with expositions on Christ's priesthood. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem says: "Christ has an immutable priesthood."³ Hear what the saintly Bishop of Hippo has to say: "Who is a priest, unless the one priest Who has entered into the Holy of Holies? Who is a priest, unless He Who was both victim and priest? Who, unless He Who finding nothing clean in the world which He might offer, offered Himself?"⁴ The Council of Trent gave infallible approval to this doctrine.

¹ Psalm cix, 4.

² Hebrews iv, 14.

³ Catechetical Lectures 10.

⁴ In Ps. 132.

“Since under the former law, according to the testimony of Paul, there was no consummation because of the weakness of the levitical priesthood, it was necessary, the Father of mercies so ordering it, that another priest according to the order of Melchisedech should rise, Jesus Christ, Our Lord.”⁵

Besides the authority of Sacred Scripture and the Fathers that Christ was a priest, we can easily adduce from His life that He exercised all the functions of the priestly office. “The office proper to a priest,” according to St. Thomas, “is to be a mediator between God and the people: to wit, inasmuch as he bestows divine things on the people, wherefore *sacerdos* (*sacer-dans*—priest) means a giver of sacred things—and again, forasmuch as he offers up the people’s prayers to God, and, in a manner, makes satisfaction to God for their sins.”⁶ Lacordaire has very eloquently expressed this same idea: “To go daily from men to God; to offer Him their homage and petitions; to return from God to men to bring them His pardon and His hope;—to pardon and console; to bless and be blessed forever! Oh God! What a life, and ’tis thine, Oh priest of Jesus Christ.” Who can doubt that Christ fulfilled in a most eminent degree all the offices of a mediator. Saint Paul says: “There is one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Jesus Christ.”⁷ It was precisely for this that Christ came into the world, to act as the mediator between the offended Godhead and the offending creatures. He came to redeem man and to offer an appropriate satisfaction for the sins of mankind. This He did by the sacrifice on the Cross. To offer sacrifice is reserved to priests,⁸ and thus the fact as well as the dignity of Christ’s priesthood is shown by the eminence of the sacrifice which He offered. Again it is the duty of the priest to instruct and teach. Christ solemnly affirmed that He had done this. To Pilate He answered: “For this was I born, and for this came I into the world; that I should give testimony of the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth My voice.”⁹ With Saint Paul, then, let us proclaim Christ the

⁵ Council of Trent, Session xxii, Chapter 1.

⁶ St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 22, a. 1.

⁷ I Tim. ii, 5.

⁸ Council of Trent, Sess. xxiii, Chap. 1 “Sacrifice and priesthood are by Divine ordinance so inseparable that they are found together under all laws.”

⁹ John xviii, 37.

“Highpriest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and made higher than the heavens.”¹⁰

But let us not be satisfied with merely knowing that Jesus is our Highpriest. Let us look into His priesthood that by a more profound study of it we may learn something of the dignity and power of the chosen souls who carry on in His name and by His authority. Let us learn from Christ what it means to be Another Christ, for the priest is an *Alter Christus* by his participation in the priesthood of Christ.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews we find the requirements for all priests. We shall try to show how Christ fulfilled all these requirements and is the one perfect priest. “Every highpriest taken from among men is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sin; who can have compassion on those that are ignorant and that err; because he himself also is compassed with infirmity.— Neither does any man take the honour to himself, but he that is called of God as Aaron was.”¹¹ There are then four requisites for the true priest. First, he must be taken from among men; secondly, he must be ordained; thirdly, his duty it is to offer up gifts and sacrifices for sin; and finally, he must be called by God, that is, he must have a divine vocation. Now all these requirements find their most complete fulfillment in the Priest, Jesus Christ.

He was chosen from among men. Christ was a priest not by reason of His divinity but according to His human nature. This is clear both from the office of priesthood and the sacrifice which Christ offered. As we have seen, the proper office of the priest is to be a mediator. Saint Paul tells us that there is one mediator of God and men, the *man* Jesus Christ. The reason for this is most evident. In any mediatorship there are two things to be considered: the mediator must be distinct from each of the parties and he must join them in some way. Now Christ was distinct from God and men only in His human nature, for the divine nature was in no way distinct from God and hence could not be a medium. On the other hand, the human nature was distinct from God, as is apparent, and likewise it was distinct from men because it was set high above the most perfect specimen of pure humanity by the dignity of grace and glory. The

¹⁰ Hebrews vii, 26.

¹¹ Hebrews v, 1-4.

office of conciliation, too, could only be fulfilled by the Man Christ, for in His divine nature he could not give to men any divine gift which was not at the same time a gift from Him as well as from the Godhead, whereas it is required that the mediator give the gifts of another.¹² The divine mediator is to hand down to men divine gifts and to offer to God prayers and sacrifices for the people. The mediatorship, then, was an office of Christ as man. This is also evident from the fact that Christ was at the same time priest and victim. Most assuredly He could not be a victim according to His divinity; it was only in the flesh that He could suffer and offer Himself as a sacrifice and victim for the sins of men.

In the second place, it is necessary that the real priest be ordained. Was Christ ordained? His very Incarnation was His ordination. "Just as in the old dispensation ministers of sacrifice were constituted such by anointing, so the Repairer of our fallen nature is called by an extraordinary prerogative the Anointed of God. And here we must not understand some kind of a bodily anointing; that which anoints our Highpriest is the divinity itself of the Word of God."¹³ Christ was constituted a priest not by the sacramental character as are the priests of the New Law, nor by any quality superadded to His perfection. Saint Thomas says: "It was not befitting for Christ to have the character, but the power of His priesthood is compared to the character as that which is full and perfect to some participation."¹⁴ It was precisely to exercise the functions of His priestly office that Christ became man. In other words, His priesthood was immediately consequent upon His Incarnation. He became a priest and mediator of God and men at the very moment the Person of the Word assumed the human nature. "For Him, to be and to be a priest are one and the same thing. He was born a priest. Nay more, the same act which by uniting His holy humanity to the Word called it into being personally effected His priestly consecration. Existing only as a priest, He is a priest entirely and, in a manner, substantially."¹⁵

It is worthy of note that Saint Paul says a priest is "or-

¹² St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 26, a. 2, and St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, lib. 9, cap. 15.

¹³ Bossuet, *Premier serm. pour le 2e dim. de l'Avent* (Vives VIII, 163).

¹⁴ St. Thomas, *op. cit.* IIIa, q. 63, a. 5.

¹⁵ J. Grimal, S.M., *The Priesthood and Sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia, 1915), p. 81.

dained for men."¹⁶ In the case of Christ there can be no doubt of this, for He had absolutely no need of sacrifice for sin, for although He was a man, He was like to us in all things, sin excepted. His sacrifice was offered not for Himself but for others, for sinners. His whole life on earth is a glorious example of fraternal charity, of forgetfulness of self and devotion to the cause of others. From this the next requisite is manifest: it is the duty of the priest to offer sacrifice. This is one phase of the mediatorship, the offering to God of satisfaction and gifts for the sins of men. Sacrifice is the oblation, effected by the destruction or change of a sensible thing, made to God by a legitimate minister to show the supreme dominion of God over us and the subjection of all mankind to Him.¹⁷ This is exactly what Christ did on the Cross. In a most wondrous way He was both priest and victim. He offered Himself, His human nature, to the Godhead to manifest God's supreme dominion over us and our total dependence on Him. Nor is it of any avail to object that Christ did not offer a sacrifice on the Cross because it was not He but the executioners who took His life. In His own words: "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No man taketh it away from me; but I lay it down of myself and I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again."¹⁸ Although the persecutors inflicted deadly wounds on Christ and were guilty of His death, nevertheless He truly laid down His life and offered Himself in sacrifice. Two things in the crucifixion make this patent. Just before He died Christ uttered a mighty cry, showing that it was not by human exhaustion but by an act of His free and deliberate will that He gave up His life. This it was that made the centurion cry out: "Indeed this was the Son of God."¹⁹ Pilate was surprised to learn that Christ had died so soon. The two thieves who were crucified with Him had their legs broken to hasten their death, but Christ of His own accord had given up the spirit. Certainly the sufferings inflicted on Him were mortal and would have caused His death in due time, had He been an ordinary man. But Christ had the power to retain His life as long as He wished in spite of torture and suffering. Hence Christ's death, unlike that of the martyrs, may be called a sacrifice. Although the martyrs offer their

¹⁶ Hebrews, v, 1.

¹⁷ N. Gehr, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass* (St. Louis, 1927), p. 26.

¹⁸ John x, 17-18.

¹⁹ Mark, xv, 39.

lives willingly in testimony of their religion, they are, nevertheless, powerless of themselves to retain their lives in the face of persecution. This in the temple of the world, on the altar of the Cross, the Highpriest, Jesus Christ, sacrificed Himself, made a holocaust of Himself in expiation for the sins of the children of Adam.

The final requirement laid down by Saint Paul is that the priest must be called by God as Aaron was. No one takes this dignity to himself but only he that is called, he who has a divine vocation. The priests of the Old Law were taken by divine ordinance from the family of Levi. The priests of the New Law need a divine call too as is clear from the words of Our Lord to the Apostles: "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you."²⁰ The same was true in the case of Christ. The Man Jesus Christ did not take this honour to Himself, but was chosen from all eternity by God. By a special decree affirmed with an oath the Son of Man was divinely called to the sublime office of the priesthood: "The Lord hath sworn and He will not repent, Thou art a priest forever."²¹ Saint Paul says: "So Christ also did not glorify Himself that He might be made a Highpriest, but He that said to Him: Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten thee."²² Yet Christ did not accept this office necessarily but of His own free will. "Sacrifice and oblation thou wouldest not; but a body thou has fitted to me; holocausts for sin did not please thee. Then said I: Behold I come; in the head of the book it is written that I should do Thy will, Oh God!"²³

In conclusion we may say that Christ is the only priest of His order, for He fulfilled all the conditions required for a priest in a supereminent way. In Him the priesthood found its most complete expression. All priests before Him were but figures of Him. All priests after Him are but participants in His wonderful power and dignity. The priests of the New Dispensation are priests not by any power inherent in them, but by participation in the sacerdotal grace of Christ, by the impression of the priestly character on their souls at the time of ordination. They exercise their priestly functions in His name and in His power. Each one of them is another Christ by virtue of this participation. Another Christ! Could any higher dignity be conferred

²⁰ John xv, 16.

²¹ Psalm cix, 4.

²² Hebrews vii, 21.

²³ Hebrews x, 5-7.

upon a mortal creature? How great then should be the virtue and zeal for perfection in those who have received this high calling. With the Apostle of the Gentiles they should be able to say: "Be ye imitators of me as I also am of Christ."²⁴

²⁴ I Cor. iv, 16.

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THE CORONATION

EDWARD M. VAHEY, O.P.

Disciples grieving laid in Death's dark tomb
 The Virgin, wasted by the pangs of love.
 With scant delay the Fruit of her chaste womb
 And seraphs bear her to the Throne above.

The Godhead folds this daughter to His heart,—
 Fair lily, spotless kept by grace's fire—
 His side and vision never to depart,
 For Mary shall be queen of heaven's choir.

Upon this favored creature's modest head,
 By God the Father and His Son is placed
 A graceful crown of fragile silver thread,
 With tiny pearls and ardent jewels laced.

Celestial legions to her mantle cling,
 Contending each to serve this gentle queen,
 Whose prayers calm the wrath of Christ the King
 And soften spirits arrogant and mean.