

CO-LABORERS WITH CHRIST

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ESUS CHRIST came into the world to offer Himself in sacrifice for the sins of the world. But since the offering of sacrifice is a priestly function, wherever there is a sacrifice there must also be a priesthood. Thus, at the very first moment of the Incarnation, when the Divinity of the Word was poured out like a sweet oil upon our humanity, Christ was constituted the Anointed One of God, the supreme Highpriest and universal Mediator between God and men. The sacrifice He came to offer in fulfillment of His office as Priest was consummated on Calvary, when, on the Altar of the Cross, He presented Himself as a "clean oblation and an unspotted victim to His eternal Father."

But Calvary, being an historical event, is over and yet not over; Christ, having died once, now reigns gloriously at the right hand of His Father in heaven. But, because death was not to put an end to His Priesthood, our divine Lord, after giving us His sacrifice, which was henceforward to be offered under the sacramental species of bread and wine, provided for its perpetuation by the institution of the sacrament of Holy Orders. "Do this in commemoration of Me," He told His Apostles. By these words Christ gave the Apostles and their successors in the priesthood the power to offer sacrifice, the power to renew and continue in a mystical, yet none the less real, manner throughout the ages the one supreme sacrifice of Himself on Calvary. And when three days later the Risen Christ appeared to the Apostles, breathed upon them, and said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost," He gave them the power of absolution, that is, the power to forgive sins. With these two powers, the one over His real and the other over His Mystical Body, the priesthood of the New Law was complete.

All religions have felt the need of a priesthood, that is, of men especially appointed for the exercise of religious cult. And all peoples, pagans as well as Christians, have held their priests in the highest esteem. Among the pagans the priest appears as a moral power surpassing all else. For example, in the Grecian world no state function took place, no peace treaty was made without priests. In Athens, priests were given the best seats in the theatres and were entrusted with the guardianship of the sanctuary. In the Roman world also, priests were invested with the same dignity and held a similar position

of esteem and respect. Under the Old Law, the Law of Moses, in order to impress upon the Jewish people the need for sacrifice, God instituted a priesthood. He chose the tribe of Levi as the priestly tribe, investing its members with a special dignity and bestowing upon them special prerogatives. Because the life of Israel was centered around the sanctuary, we know with what great reverence and esteem the Jewish people held their priests.

It is only under the New Law, however, that we begin to see the true excellence and dignity of the priest. The dignity and extraordinary prerogatives of the priests of the pagan world, or even of the Old Law, are as nothing in comparison with the dignity and powers of the priesthood established by Jesus Christ. St. Paul affirms this superiority when he says: "God hath made us fit ministers of the New Testament, not in the letter, but in the Spirit; for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life. Now if the ministration of death engraven with letters on stones was glorious, how shall not the ministration of the Spirit be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation is glory, much more the ministry of justice aboundeth in glory." (II Cor. III, 3-9.) When Christ conferred the office of priest upon the Apostles and through them upon their successors, He did not institute another priesthood distinct and separate from His own eternal priesthood. There is only one priesthood, just as there is only one sacrifice. The real dignity of the priest of the New Law, then, arises from his participation in the one eternal priesthood of Christ. The God-man, Jesus Christ, is the supreme High Priest Who offered to God the one perfect and adequate sacrifice for man's redemption. Through the sacrament of Orders, however, which Christ instituted for the good of His Spouse, the Church, a man is made to share in the priesthood of Christ. By the indelible seal which is stamped on his soul he is set apart from the rest of men and marked forever as a minister and an ambassador of Christ. The priest is indeed a man, but he is a man of God. St. Paul expresses this beautifully when he says that a priest is indeed "Taken from amongst men," yet, "ordained for men in the things that appertain to God." Not for human things and the things that pass away is a priest ordained but for things divine and enduring. Like his Model, Christ, a priest's only concern is the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Indeed, there is no more sublime office, no greater power and, therefore, no more exalted dignity on this earth than the office and power and dignity of the priest. A priest is an instrument in the hands of the Divine Redeemer and is entrusted with the noble office of continuing the work of our redemption. In the language of Sacred

Scripture he is called the Salt of the earth. "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt lose its savor wherewith shall it be salted?" (MT. V, 13.) Just as salt is used as a preservative against corruption, so the priest is placed among the faithful to guard and preserve them from moral corruption by the influence of his example and instructions. He is called the Light of the world. "You are the light of the world. A city seated on a mountain cannot be hid." (ibid, 14.) A priest is placed in a conspicuous position in the Church so that he may be seen and heard by all, his words and example being a light to those walking in the shadows and darkness of sin. A priest is called also an Ambassador of Christ. "For Christ, therefore, we are ambassadors, God as it were exhorting by us." (II Cor. V. 20.) As an envoy of Christ the priest upholds and safeguards the rights of God among the people. Expressive as these titles and figures are of the sublime office of the priest, there is none, perhaps, which so well explains this sacerdotal office as the expression of St. Paul: "We are laborers with God." (I Cor. III, 9.)

In his book, *The Ambassador of Christ*, Cardinal Gibbons writes: "The priest is more than an ambassador of Christ: he is also His co-adjutor in the moral government of the world. He not only represents Christ, but he personates Him, and becomes identified with Him in his ministerial functions, as far as two personalities can be considered identical. There exists between Jesus Christ and His priesthood, not only a succession and continuity, but an identity of ministry. The priest not only acts with Christ, by the authority of Christ, in the name of Christ, but his official acts are Christ's acts. If a priest addresses to heaven the prayers of the faithful, Christ presents them to His eternal Father. If he sows the Gospel seed, Christ giveth the increase. If the priest offers the adorable sacrifice, Christ is invisibly present, the High Priest and Victim." (p. 15) To be a priest, then, is to be in truth another Christ. And just as Christ is the firm and unshakeable bridge which joins heaven and earth, so too the priest, by the power he has from Christ stands midway between God and man. As a true mediator, sharing in the Mediatorship of Christ, he offers to God the prayers and homage of the whole Church. And in return, he brings down upon the earth the graces and blessings of God. A priest is an advocate of the people, begging God to show them mercy: "Between the porch and the altar the priests, the Lord's ministers, shall weep and shall say: Spare, O Lord, spare thy people, and give not Thine inheritance to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them." (Joel II, 17.) We shall probably never realize the power and efficacy of the daily prayers of Christ's priests. And yet how often they stop the wrathful hand of God from striking sinful humanity!

On this oft-forgotten point, Pope Pius XI, in his Encyclical on the Priesthood, says: "Who can tell how many chastisements priestly prayer wards off from sinful mankind, how many blessings it brings down and secures? The Christian, though in prosperity so often forgetful of God, yet in the depth of heart keeps his confidence in prayer, feels that prayer is all powerful, and as by a holy instinct, in every distress, in every peril, whether private or public, has recourse with special trust to the prayers of the priest." Such, then, is the sublime office of the priest. A priest is a mediator between God and men, an ambassador of Christ, a co-laborer with God. In a word, he is another Christ.

If we are struck with wonder at such a noble office being given to mortal men, still more wonderful are the powers of the priest. The priest has power over the real and mystical Body of Christ. When he stands at the altar and pronounces those solemn words of consecration: "This is my body . . . This is my blood," Jesus Christ, true God and true man, becomes really and truly present under the appearances of bread and wine. There is no symbolism here, for the sacrifices and consecrations of the Jewish priests, which were mere shadows and figures of this sacrifice, passed with the coming of Christ. The words of the priest actually, in a real manner produce their effect. He speaks and God obeys. By the words of consecration the priest renews and reproduces once again the sacrifice of Calvary, the only difference being the manner of offering. On Calvary Christ offered Himself in a bloody manner. But in the Mass He is offered in an unbloody manner. Moreover, by this act in which he offers Jesus Christ in sacrifice, a priest gives more honor and glory to God than could the whole Church without a priesthood, because the Mass, being the same sacrifice as Calvary, is of infinite value. Indeed, so efficacious and pleasing to God is this sacrificial act of the priest that were he to exercise no other function, this would be a sufficient reason for his ordination. The power of consecration is the greatest possible power on this earth. It is greater even than that of the Angels or the Blessed in heaven. So impressed was St. Francis of Assisi with the power of the priest that he used to say: "If I saw an angel and a priest walking together, I would bend my knee first to the priest, and then to the angel."

Over the mystical body of Christ the priest has the power of the keys. He liberates sinners from the bondage of sin and makes them worthy of Paradise. He enables them, freed from the slavery of Satan, to enjoy once again the glorious liberty of the children of God. And God Himself abides by the priest's judgment. God pardons or refuses pardon according as the priest extends or withholds his absolv-

ing hand. In the words of St. Peter Damian, "The sentence of the priest precedes, and God subscribes to it." In this tribunal the priest is only God's instrument and servant. And yet, the Master of the universe confirms in heaven what the priest decides upon earth. "Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven. And whatsoever you shall loose upon earth, shall be loosed also in heaven." Great, indeed, is the power of Kings and Emperors. Greater still is the power of the angels. But to no creature has divine goodness given such power as Christ gave to the Apostles: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain they are retained." Kings have power over the bodies of men, but the priest has power over their souls. The angels can lead a sinner to the confessional, but only the priest can absolve him, for to pardon a single sin requires the omnipotence of God. When Christ said to the man sick of the palsy, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," the Pharisees said in their hearts, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And how right they were! Only God can forgive sins. But the God-man Jesus Christ has communicated this divine power to the priest. He has given him a power which, in a way, is greater than that of creation. Cardinal Hugo represents the Lord addressing a priest who absolves a sinner in these words: "I have created heaven and earth, but I leave to you a better and nobler creation; make out of this soul that is in sin, a new soul, that is, make out of the slave of Satan, that the soul is, a child of God. I have made the earth bring forth all kinds of fruit, but to thee I confide a more beautiful creation, namely, that the soul should bring forth fruits of salvation." When the priest, then, pronounces these consoling words of mercy over the penitent, "I absolve thee from thy sins," it can be asked, not with pharisaical scandal, but with wonderment and reverence: "Who is this man who even forgives sin?" He is an instrument of Christ, a mediator between God and men. He is a priest of Jesus Christ.

Thus, there is no greater dignity on this earth than the dignity of the priest since no more sublime office was ever entrusted to, nor greater powers ever conferred on man than the office and powers of the priest. Thomas Carlyle, although a non-Catholic, said of the Catholic priesthood: "Higher task than that of the priesthood was allotted to no man. Wert thou the meanest in that sacred hierarchy, is it not honor enough therein to spend and to be spent?"¹ This is what is meant to be a minister of God, a bringer of forgiveness and blessings from God to sinful man, this is the ennobling of the human race by God when He chose men to be other Christs.

¹ Quoted from *Ambassador of Christ*—Cardinal Gibbons, p. 11. John Murphy & Co., N. Y. 1896.