

THE MARK OF A PRIEST

ANTHONY VANDERHAAR, O.P.



TOMORROW this man will be a priest. Today he is not. Today he is an ordinary man, six feet tall, black hair, 175 pounds, his head crammed with knowledge. Tomorrow he is a priest, six feet, 175 pounds, same knowledge. He hasn't changed much. In fact, he has not changed at all. Outwardly he is the same person he was twenty-four hours ago (a little less nervous, perhaps). Yet he *has* changed. He *is* different. And the difference is tremendous, startling, breathtaking, even though it can't be seen. Look as closely as you can at this newly ordained priest, nothing unusual is apparent; the significant change is interior, it is in his soul. Ordination has permanently altered this soul, has given the man that which makes him a priest and forever distinguishes him from all who are not priests.

The sacrament of Holy Orders he has just received confers grace. But grace does not constitute a priest, for this man will be truly a priest even if he should have the misfortune to lose through sin the grace of ordination. No, it is not grace, but something else which is also given at his ordination. It is the *character*. The sacramental character of Holy Orders is the Church's designation of the reality imprinted on a man's soul elevating him to the priesthood. Not the vestments he wears, not the breviary he reads so often, not even grace establishes a man in this exalted state. What does, is the mark on his soul called character.

A layman cannot "say" Mass, or hear confessions. Were such a person presumptuously to masquerade as a priest by putting on vestments and going through the motions, he would accomplish nothing. His "mass" would be a series of physical actions, but there would be no consecration. His "absolution" would be mere words, effecting nothing. Yet when an ordained priest performs these very same acts, something does indeed happen. Bread and wine are changed into Flesh and Blood, personal sins are actually made to vanish. A priest, by his ordination, can administer the sacraments, can produce certain spiritual effects, and the character received at ordination is responsible for such ability. This mysterious character is *power*, power to perform supernaturally fruitful acts, power to accomplish spiritual wonders.

During the last war it was widely observed by American fighting men that the Catholic chaplain was the only one able to *do* something for those dying on the battlefield. Other chaplains employed kind, soothing words, doing their best to comfort the helpless victims, but the Catholic priest, they knew, was really accomplishing things in the dying soldier's soul. He alone had the power to remove sins, to fill the person with grace, to prepare him superbly for eternity, while all who were not priests could only use the *human* means at their disposal. Possessing the character received at his ordination, the Catholic priest-chaplain could do things far beyond the ability of those not having this gift, a fact which was recognized, if not analyzed, by the many witnesses.

THE POWER OF THE CHARACTER

Human power is not in question. The power of a doctor to heal, of a judge to condemn, of an army officer to command—priestly ordination confers none of these. But it does give a *supernatural* power, an ability to produce *spiritual* results from natural actions. Physically a priest has no more power, but spiritually he has powers which are in a very significant way unlimited, because all these acts of the "characterized" priest are God's.

The Mass, a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the cross, is a divine action. Absolving from sin is, too. "Who can forgive sin but God only?" (Mark 2,7). And what mere man can produce the grace which comes through the other sacraments?

This character allows God's power to flow *through* a man to produce its awesome effects, in such a way that his soul becomes a divine instrument. Added to a man's soul, it makes of him a channel through which certain Divine actions can reach other people. An ordained priest, in possession of this power, this ability to cause grace by performing certain supernaturally meaningful actions, is made like Him who alone earned and fully possesses the right to dispense grace, his Master and Model, the glorified High Priest.

FORMER SIGNIFICANCE

In ancient usage the term "character" signified an image or figure carved in stone or wood. Later the word was extended to refer to a sign which caused a resemblance between its bearer and the person in whose name he was acting. Men in military service would wear an insignia, a small image or representation of the leader of the army which likened them to him in a way and which consequently enabled them to act officially in his name. This dis-

tinguishing mark was called a character. Christian tradition borrowed the term to designate the reality conferred by certain sacraments, the reality which conforms men to Christ and gives them certain powers, which they would otherwise not possess, to act in His name, powers to produce graces of which He alone is the official dispenser. The Church's seven sacraments are the principal media of these supernatural graces, and the priestly character is primarily an ability to administer these sacred signs, power to cleanse the leprosy of sin, power to prepare a soul for direct contact with God.

A CHRIST-LIKENESS

Grace was won for mankind by God on the cross. Although every action of the human life of Jesus of Nazareth was infinitely meritorious, only one phase of His earthly existence actually satisfied for sins and opened the gates of heaven to erring man. This was His bloody passion and death on Calvary when, by delivering Himself to be crucified, Jesus Christ offered the most perfect sacrifice conceivable—His own Divine Person. It was on the cross that Christ unlocked the divine storehouse, making treasures of grace available to all men. It is from the cross that the Eucharist gives grace, that Penance forgives sins, that Confirmation fashions athletes of the faith.

And the character which is imprinted on the soul of every human priest is the configuration to Christ on this same cross, to Christ, then, as divine priest. It makes this human person able to offer the Mass and administer the sacraments. It lets this man do what Christ did in the last supreme act of His mortal life, offer sacrifice to God and bring to men the divine graces which lead them to the vision of God.

The character received in Baptism and Confirmation is also a configuration to Christ, also a power given to the soul. But it is a *passive* power, enabling its possessor to *receive* divine gifts, participate in divine worship through reception of the sacraments. The priestly character, on the other hand, is an *active* participation, an active power to *administer* the sacraments, to be the channel through which flow divine gifts of grace. In fact, the priestly character so configures a soul to Christ that the sacramental actions thereafter performed are really Our Lord's.

CHARACTER IN ACTION

A priest is ordained especially to offer the Mass, and it is in this highest act of the priesthood, its apex, that the true nature of

his character is most evident. Here the extraordinary union between human minister and Divine Person is made manifest, for here Christ is clearly acting through the priest to produce divine effects. Christ uses the very faculties of the priest, his mind, will, voice, his powers of judgment and execution, to consecrate the bread and wine.

When the priest says, "This is My body, this is My blood," he doesn't mean the body and blood of himself, this man standing at the altar right now. No, that would be of no value. He means, "I am now Christ, and by these words I am changing this bread and this wine into My body and My blood just as I did at the Last Supper. This is My body which suffered during My passion, and My blood which was shed when I was crucified. This is My body which is now glorified in heaven and can suffer no more. This is My blood which redeemed all of you, which made it possible for you to go to heaven when you die, and to live better lives as long as you are on earth. Here are My body and blood which sustain your life, nourish your soul, make you joyful. Here they are and I am presenting them to you as food and drink so that I can be united to you in a most intimate way, because I love you with an infinite love."

CHARACTER, GRACE AND SANCTITY

Despite its lofty dignity, by itself the priestly character does not make a saint. Every power one has, whether natural or supernatural, can be used for either good or evil. With his eyes a person can see. But he can use these eyes to read Sacred Scripture or to look at obscene pictures. That depends more on the one seeing than on his power of vision. So with a priest. The power which is his character enables him to sacrifice Christ and administer the sacraments. It does not guarantee that he will always perform these exalted functions for the right purpose, or that he will always be in a worthy condition to execute them fittingly. The mere fact that he is a priest will not assure his eternal salvation. Whether or not a priest perseveres in the state of grace is a contingency of his own free will, independent of his character.

The ordained participate in the Priesthood of Christ. They do not necessarily participate in the sanctity of that Priesthood. But because the powers given with the Character are of so much consequence in relation to eternal life both of the priest and especially of those to whom he is ministering, there is a special sacramental grace given at ordination which aids the priest in performing his sacred duties in a holy manner and helps keep him on the road

to personal holiness. God never confers a power on anyone without at the same time giving him all the assistance necessary for its worthy exercise.

THE EVERLASTING CHARACTER

“Thou art a priest forever,” runs the psalm which the Church applies to her ordained ministers. Forever passes into eternity where a priest will be always recognizable by the distinguishing mark of his character, an intimate and permanent possession of his soul. As is the case with the characters imprinted by Baptism and Confirmation, that of the priesthood can never be lost, since it is on the imperishable soul and not the corruptible body. The soul with all its faculties and attributes will remain after death as it is now, whether in heaven or in hell, and the sacerdotal personality will stand out for greater glory or degradation because of the indelible mark once therein imprinted.

Although this character, being spiritual, is imperceptible to ordinary vision and “seen” only through the eyes of faith, God sometimes allows miraculous manifestations of it. Such an incident is related in the life of St. Philip Neri, who once pointed out a certain young man in the clothing of a layman, indicating that the man had been secretly ordained a priest. The saint had seen “a great splendor” on the forehead of this young man, “which could be only the sacerdotal character imprinted on his soul.”

This person now saying Mass in the church, now forgiving sins in the confessional, now baptizing an infant into Christian life, now anointing a dying person, is physically the same man as the hundreds of others he passes on the street. Examine him microscopically and you won't find anything different, at least different enough to cause such significant powers as he now possesses. But interiorly, on his soul, there is a mark, a mark known as priestly character, a mark which joins him to Jesus Christ, which give him power to perform Christ's actions of worship and sacrifice. The God of heaven acts through this mark, God has established this priest as a connecting link between heaven and earth, God comes to men through this priest. What then could be more natural than for men to go to God through this priest?

Just as the entire life of our Savior was directed to the sacrifice of Himself, so also the life of the priest, who must reflect the likeness of Christ in himself, must become with Him, in Him and through Him a Sacrifice pleasing unto God.

Menti nostrae, PIUS XII