

## THE SACRED HEART AND THE PRIESTHOOD

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**I**N THE WORDS of the late Pius XII in his apostolic exhortation to the clergy, *Menti Nostrae*, "the priesthood is a great gift of the Divine Redeemer, Who, in order to perpetuate the work of redemption of the human race which He completed on the Cross, confided His powers to the Church which He wished to be a participator in His unique and everlasting Priesthood. The priest is like 'another Christ' because he is marked with an indelible character making him, as it were, a living image of our Saviour."<sup>1</sup> The Catholic Priesthood, then, is nothing else than a participation in the eternal priesthood of the Word made flesh. It is the translation into the present of the sacrificial priesthood of Christ upon the cross.

### THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST, A WORK OF LOVE

Above and before all, God made creatures in order to communicate Himself to them. Creation is not, however, the inevitably necessary result of the goodness of God communicating itself. The Trinity gives full satisfaction to the limitless longing for diffusion which springs from the possession of Infinite Goodness. The gift of God in communicating Himself is unnecessary, useless, from God's point of view. For it is not utility which motivates a loving heart in giving of Itself. So, given that God did create and that there is nothing in God to render creation necessary, we must look to the Divine Goodness and the Divine Love as the motivating force in creating. Thus, creation was a work of love, a work of the heart of God.

Man sinned. He did not return that love, but rather turned from God. He forfeited his right to heaven and by his sin was stripped of the privilege of sharing in the Divine life which in the beginning God had so graciously bestowed on him. True,

God permitted man to fall, but the heart of God was immediately moved at the sight of man's misery. It provoked mercy and Divine Mercy decreed the Incarnation. Again, not a necessary decree but a free one: Divine Liberty rooted in Divine Love. Thus, the Incarnation was a work of love, a work of the heart of God.

The chief purpose of Christ's coming was to redeem us, to repair for the infinite offense committed against God, to offer through sacrifice infinite satisfaction "which will make the dew of Divine Mercy descend upon sinful humanity."<sup>2</sup> He is, therefore, above all else priest. For is not the role of Redeemer and Saviour that of priest? As priest, Jesus forgave sins and instituted the sacraments. He taught us the mysteries of the Father. He poured out on us the waters of Divine consolation. He gave supreme expression to His priesthood when He ascended Calvary and from the cross offered up and immolated to His Father His body and blood, His life. It was a priesthood rooted in love, for the mystery of the Incarnation is primarily a mystery of love. It was priestly activity springing from love, for it was the work of redemption, the *raison d'être* of the Incarnation. It was the work of a loving heart, Christ's Sacred Heart.

To say that Christ's priestly activity finds its source in His Sacred Heart, is no more than saying that His priestly activity was motivated by His human as well as divine love. It is the human love of the Word made flesh, the sacred love with which He loved Mary and Joseph, the merciful love that converted the Magdalen and Peter, the love that poured itself out in pity upon all that suffer, the heroic love for mankind that knew no limit, the love of him who "having loved his own who were in the world, loves them unto the end."<sup>3</sup> Christ became Incarnate for the express purpose of showing us His love. It is by discovering this inspiration of love in the priestly ministration of the Divine Redeemer and by finding its vital influence in His every word and work that we truly come to an appreciation of the Sacred Heart and its relation to the Priesthood.

### CHRIST THE PREACHER

Christ preached the word of God. It is one of the essential duties of a priest. Christ, as priest par excellence, was, therefore, supreme preacher. The Son of God became man precisely to hold the office of preacher. "Let us go," said He, "into the neighboring villages and towns, that there also I may preach, for that is why I have come."<sup>4</sup> It might be well to look at Christ as preacher and

try to see that inspiration of love; to show that it mirrored a loving heart.

The late Pius XII in his beautiful allocution on "Preaching the Word of God" states that three things characterized the preaching of Christ. The first of these was its personal character, "His ability to put His very soul into His words, along with His wisdom and love, so that these words became a faithful mirror of His person." Christ's infinite knowledge in His intellect, and infinite love stored up in His heart was poured forth in this divine office of preaching. It was the whole Christ, the entire Christ—intellect and will, knowledge and love. His very soul was put into His words. The effect of such preaching, says our late Holy Father, was "an absolute certainty, clarity of mind, and fixed firmness in the will." Thus, when Christ spoke, He spoke "as one having authority."<sup>5</sup> When Christ spoke He adapted Himself to His listeners. With Nicodemus He was profound; with the priests He quotes the law; with the people He was simple, familiar. When Christ spoke He was guided by one love, the love of His listeners and by one desire, their union with His Father.

The second of these aspects of Christ's, the one that might be termed most characteristically "loving," was "His dedication to the service of souls." "This love had been His life, His *raison d'être*," says Mother Louise de la Touche. "It had been the continual aspiration of His Soul, the beating of His Heart, the principle of His actions, of His words, of all His thoughts. He was born for souls, He died for them, and in the thirty-three years which He passed on earth from the crib to the sepulchre, like a devouring fire, this love had never, for a single moment, ceased to consume His soul."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most revealing of Christ's sermons in this regard was when He compared Himself to the Good Shepherd. In this beautiful comparison Christ humbly reveals the essence of His heart. He is the Good Shepherd who cares for His flock, even to the point of giving His life, the supreme expression of love.

No one in history was received with such an enigmatic reception as was Christ. Scores praised Him, scores reviled Him. Yet there is no one in history who, throughout it all, presents such a picture of equanimity. Criticized, He was not cast down; praised, He was not carried away. This, simply because He never had His own glory in view nor did He measure His preaching by mere human success. His preaching, motivated by His love, transcended all human consideration. Thus, says Pius XII, "He re-

mained calm in judgment and totally independent of the pleasure or resentment, approval or disapproval aroused in men by His words."<sup>7</sup>

Christ's preaching is one solid example of priestly ministration motivated by love. Out of the abundance of His Sacred Heart His Sacred Lips spoke. They conveyed a message of selfless love. Christ "knew all the hidden depths of the heart and exerted over it an influence which only those can wield who know the height and depth, the length and breadth of love."<sup>8</sup> Nothing else could have given such insight into the souls of men. His whole life is one long sermon of love. As priest, He was to show that love in an even greater way, and this, through the gift of Himself.

#### PRIEST AND VICTIM

"It is impossible to contemplate Jesus Christ on the cross without being persuaded of His infinite love for souls."<sup>9</sup> Only a motive such as love could explain it. It is here that the heart of Christ is truly made manifest. "What else is the cause of the Lord's coming than to show us His love," says St. Augustine.<sup>10</sup> "Greater love than this no man has that he lay down his life for his friends."<sup>11</sup>

It can be said with absolute certainty that God was in no way bound to redeem mankind. Yet He did. He sent His only begotten Son whose primary and essential task was to reconcile man to God. "Behold the Lamb of God." Christ lovingly responded to the needs of mankind. Thus, He became a Victim, a Holy Victim, whose immolation would efface the sins of mankind. So holy was this Victim, of such infinite dignity that He, alone, could offer Himself. Christ was the Priest of His own sacrifice.

The sacrifice of Christ was the only, one, true sacrifice, the most acceptable of all times. Why? Because it, of all sacrifices, faithfully and uniquely manifests exteriorly all the loving submission of Christ's soul to God's eternal designs. "The very act by which Christ voluntarily underwent His Passion was sovereignly pleasing to God because it was animated by charity."<sup>12</sup> It, alone, manifests a love which was at once filial and supernatural. It was the filial love of Christ as new Head of humanity. It was the supernatural love of the God-man offering Himself lovingly and obediently to satisfy for man's outrage.

The cross can only be explained in terms of love. It marks the perfection of love, "for there was no better way that Christ could show the extreme to which His love both for the Father

and for mankind was prepared to go."<sup>13</sup> Herein lies the full measure of the love of the Sacred Heart.

### CONCLUSION

"The priest is another Christ . . . a living image of our Saviour."<sup>14</sup> He has been called to this by Christ since it was Christ who chose him to be His representative. He is, therefore, called to live in constant union with Him. He is called to lead the life of the eternal Priest.

The priestly life of Christ is a fertile example of the life a priest should live. It, as has been shown in some small way, was a life of unending love. The priest, therefore, if he is to live in intimate union with the eternal Priest, must strive to reproduce that life in himself. He should, then, take the example of Christ's priestly activity and use it as his model. In preaching the word of God, Christ provides the way. The truth he will preach will not be barren and stale but will be truth transformed by love. He will never seek his own glory. He will be fixed with the desire for souls and of their union with His Father. After the example of his Divine Model, the priest will become a victim, willingly, lovingly uniting himself to the offering of Jesus—spending himself for the love of souls. Truly his priesthood will be a translation of the sacrificial priesthood of Christ into the present. Thus, "if his priestly soul, reproduces the Soul of Jesus Christ; if his priestly heart is conformed to the Heart of Jesus Christ, it is no longer his own action, but the action of Jesus Christ, the Divine Priest."<sup>15</sup>

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Menti Nostrae*, No. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Heris, O.P., *The Mystery of Christ*, translated by Denis Fahey, C.S.Sp., Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1950. p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> John, 13:1.

<sup>4</sup> Mark, 1:38.

<sup>5</sup> *Preaching the Word of God*, The Pope Speaks, Spring, 1957. p. 381.

<sup>6</sup> de la Touche, *The Sacred Heart and the Priesthood*, Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1948. p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Tanquerey, *Doctrine and Devotion*, translated by Rev. Louis A. Arand, S.S., Desclee & Co., 1933.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> St. Augustine, *De Catech. Rudib.* iv.

<sup>11</sup> John, 1:29.

<sup>12</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 111, q. 47, a. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*