

**The
Parish
Priest:
Modern
Apostle
Of Love**

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"You then, are to go and make disciples of all the nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you and, remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the world" (Mt. 28:19, 20).

With these words the Apostles received their commission from Christ to continue the work of the Trinity. They became the instruments of the Godhead. "In the name of the Father," they accepted the role of leader, guide, and provider. "In the name of the Son," they became ministers of the Word and dispensers of God's graces. "In the name of the Holy Spirit," they were to enkindle throughout the Church that flame of love which first descended upon them at Pentecost. They were to be "Apostles of Love."

This threefold commission originally given to the Twelve lives on

today, preserved in the mission of the modern apostle of love, the parish priest. The ministry of the parish priest embodies those roles exercised by the Trinity itself. The priest, as Father, ministers to the needs of his children, assisting their spiritual formation and forging the bonds for a community of life. As Son, he is intermediary between God and man, providing the source of supernatural strength through his preaching and through the celebration of the sacred liturgy. Finally, the Spirit of love and truth emanating from the union of Father and Son pervades the entire ministry of the parish priest. It manifests itself in his love for the parishioners and their love for one another, resulting in Christian oneness. Though multiple in its functions, the ministry of this contemporary apostle has one basic purpose: the adoration and glorification of the Trinity.

Spiritual Paternity

The parish priest exercises a very real paternity toward the faithful. In his ministry he dispenses all the spiritual blessings to that special segment of the faithful entrusted to him, the parish. His paternity means more than showing himself to be kind, patient, and cordial to those who come to him in their needs, for as the father of the parish family he must also constantly regulate the future of his children. Just as the Son proceeds from the Father as the Principle of the divine order, so the parish in all its communal activities must have its beginning in the administrative order of its spiritual father.

The priest must first be a leader. He must reflect, foresee, organize, command, and coordinate. Yet, at the same time, he must not constantly exact recognition of his superior position, nor should he display an overwhelming forcefulness of authority.

As leader his predominant quality should be prudence, the virtue by which he uses the best means to attain a given goal. Within the course of a year many occasions demand the exercise of this quality. To alleviate the parish debt, for instance, fund raising campaigns must be undertaken. The prudent pastor must foresee any and all conflicting difficulties which may hamper the successful outcome of such a venture. He cannot run it alone; he must organize committees which are coordinated under his leadership. His directives should be clear, flexible and feasible; and as such, they guarantee the continuity and harmony of such common efforts.

The priest must feel the "pulsebeat" of his parish, understanding its peaks and troughs and knowing the reasons for them. This "pulse-

beat," composed of many different elements, are the individual persons within his community. Thus, the parish priest must understand the complex picture of the parishioners and see that each is given his proper place in parish activity and life. This demands that he arouse the interest of the people and develop in them a spirit of cooperation. By opening a larger field of initiative he will obtain ardor and sustain zeal within his flock instead of nourishing the passivity of some and the indifference of others. By uniting the efforts and harmonizing the activities of individuals the parish priest nourishes a more joyful, spontaneous, and effective spirit of love.

Therefore the priest, while injecting a "life-stream" into the parish, should consider his parishioners in their particular abilities and must be sensitive to their singular needs. Although the personal differences may not always be ascertained in a large urban parish, still this spirit of understanding and paternal concern must prevail. He will never force anyone's hand. Yet, in certain instances, he will tactfully suggest a course of action for a particular individual. He must, in other words, be knowledgeable of his people, show fatherly concern for them, and thus be the unifying instrument of their familial love.

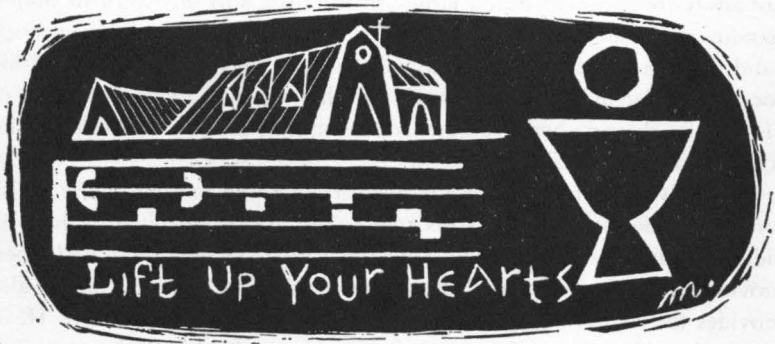
Closely allied to, yet basically distinct from, the concept of the parish priest as leader and unifier is his role as the "Good Shepherd," the provider and defender of his fold. God the Father, in sending a Redeemer, provided the source of eternal life for mankind. The priest, as father, also provides the means necessary for the sanctification of his children. He is constantly to be aware of his intimate attachment to his flock, concerned with their eternal salvation, attentive to their needs, and anxious to be of service to them both in the temporal and spiritual orders. His children are not only those already within his jurisdiction, but also, those not yet within the fold. Thus, he must also be tireless in his efforts to increase his flock, mindful that God sent the Redeemer for all men.

If the priest is a true shepherd to the parish faithful, then one of his fundamental duties is to be of service. The parish priest is dedicated to the sanctification of men; as such, he exists *for* men. The basic motivation of the parish priest, then, is to provide for and serve the needs of his flock, for this is his burden of love as father and shepherd. Thus, it is he imitates God, the loving Father and Shepherd of all mankind; and in so doing, he serves in love and furthers God's glory.

By administering to the needs of his parish the priest manifests his love for and identification with his flock. And all his labors are directed

to one goal—the eternal salvation and happiness of his children. The more of his charges he leads to heaven, the more does he glorify God.

In what ways does he serve? As stated above, the parish priest cares for the needs of his people both in the spiritual and temporal orders. In other words, he must be exemplary in the performance of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The manner of carrying out these works of mercy varies from parish to parish, but the principle is always the same—an overflow of love. In localities where there are hospitals, the parish priest is called upon to visit the sick, and to console the suffering while administering to their spiritual needs. All one needs to do is accompany a priest on his rounds in the hospital and observe the love that he radiates in his dealings with the patients and staff. Societies such as that of Saint Vin-



cent de Paul supply the necessities of life to needy families. In any event, the priest is always a willing counselor, available to all, both in his home and in theirs. Such a sacrificing father, pouring out his love upon his children, will ultimately find his love reflected in their lives.

The structure and foundation of the priest's apostolate necessitates that the shepherd increase his flock: "And I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must lead these also, and they will hear my voice. So there will be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn. 10:15). His love for all souls is reflected not only in the example of his daily ministry, but also in his willingness to open the parish and its facilities to all. To encourage this increase, the pastor provides instruction classes for those interested in the faith. He invites questions, gives answers and plants the seeds of faith in his hearers. "The apostle of love sows and waters, but it is God who gives the increase" (I Cor. 3:9).

Ministry of the Word

Pursuing further our analogy between the parish priest and the Trinity we would equate the Son's work, namely, the proclamation of the Word and the stewardship of the grace-channels, with the role which the priest exercises as another son of God. The priest, like Christ, has a clearly defined, visible mission. Christ in His Sonship is the teacher and preacher giving the words of salvation to all; He is the minister of grace offering Himself daily in the Mass and giving us supernatural life in the Sacraments.

Since this was the mission of Christ, to be a mediator between Him and man, He had to insure the continuity of this mission. Thus He, too, sent other sons in His name on this mission of love. The parish priest is the embodiment of the Son's work. He is the preacher and teacher of the Christian people, the custodian of the grace-channels the "pray-er" of and for the Church.

Together with divine worship, preaching is undoubtedly the chief, *priestly* activity. Through preaching the priest more closely resembles his master, Christ, for preaching was the chief means by which He diffused His love-message. Preaching is a duty, a solemn and sacred ministry making great demands. In the ordination ceremony the bishop bestows upon the ordinand the mission to preach by the words: "The priest must preach." The doctrine involved in preaching is not merely something abstract, but rather, the living word, the word of life—salvation. The words of Saint Paul: "I should be utterly miserable if I failed to preach the Gospel" (I Cor. 9:16) must constantly resound in the ears of the parish priest motivating his preaching Christ. In his preaching the priest's main concern is to teach his people how they may be other Christs.

The priest receives his power and commission to preach and teach from the Church. This he does primarily in theology and the spiritual life, his fields of competence. Yet to a certain degree he must direct men and make decisive judgments in other areas such as in political, social, and economic life. Because the priest knows man's final end, he must judge human values and earthly realities in the light of the supernatural. Such considerations must enter into the priest's preaching and he must, to the best of his ability, find solutions for the problems to which they give rise.

The priest's manner of instruction is not limited in its forms. In his teaching what is essential is that Christ is preached and the Trinity glorified. This the priest does in many ways: in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, in Sunday School, in the Cana Conferences, and in convert in-

struction. The priest in his role as teacher is aware of the potentiality of the layman too. Thus he shares his teaching function with sisters, brothers, and laymen, for instance, by establishing schools for instructing children, regulating teenage activities, and strengthening the adult in living a life of faith.

Finally, as preacher and teacher, the priest knows that his work of instruction is a personal thing and, as such, is manifested in word and deed. Thus, the priest's life speaks, more effectively for Christ: his example is clearer and his explanations more compelling for by his actions he preaches Christ at all times. The priest as teacher, as Christ, is "the way, the truth, and the life."

The parish priest with Christ is a *savior*. He is sent like Christ "so that any man who believes in Him may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:15). By His words, "do this in commemoration of Me," Christ showed that He wanted the priest to accept the responsibility of perpetuating the christian sacrifice of thanksgiving. Christ's supreme act of love was offering Himself on Calvary for all men. He wished all men to partake of and enter into His sacrifice. This too, the priest must intend for his parishioners—a full commitment and participation in the Mass. Thus, today's parish priest invites a fuller participation of the laity in the primary act of his priesthood so that they may receive more abundantly the graces from the Mass and give complete adoration to the triune God. The Mass is not merely a sacrifice offered by the priest at a distant altar before an unconcerned and unknowing congregation. Rather, it is the community sacrifice offered by the priest and faithful together. The priest serves as the spokesman of the community, the representative of God, and the celebrant of a sacrifice belonging to the entire community. The concern of the Vatican Council for liturgical renewal brings out this point most clearly. In so doing it has made the priest more aware of his role as sacrificer. The priest offers in the name of the Church. The Church is Christ, transmitting to men the divine life through the priest. He brings the charity of Christ into our hearts through these intermediaries, the sacraments.

The parish priest is entrusted with man's sanctification. By religiously administering the sacraments and carrying out liturgical functions, the priest causes the faithful to grow in holiness and edifies non-believers. The sacraments are the means of contact between God and man. These contacts are through material symbols of spiritual realities—visible signs of invisible grace. The parish must be interested in this visible, ritual framework of the Church as he ensures its proper performance. From Bap-

tism through the anointing of the sick, in all the truly significant occasions of human life, the priest brings the life of Christ to his parishioners.

The *prayer* of the priest in the name of the faithful is the sacrifice of praise just as the Mass is the sacrifice of propitiation. It is the Mass relived throughout the day. The parish priest, in praying the Divine Office, the official supplication of the Church, offers to God the praise, adoration, and thanksgiving of his people. As their representative he offers to God their love, and his, through this prayer which fuses the sentiments of the Church and which expresses their most varied states of soul.

Thus, in full imitation of the Son the parish priest will always be the supreme image of the Son—the preacher, the healer, the suppliant of his people.

The Spirit of Life

In the mystery of the Trinity, Father and Son are united with one another by a common and mutual love. The Father is absolute perfection and beauty; the Son is a perfect image of His Father, and so each gives Himself to the other. This mutual love, emanating from the Father and Son as from one source is, in God, a subsisting, personal love. It is the Holy Spirit, a person distinct from the other two, yet equally divine.

Because the Holy Spirit is the ultimate expression of the Divine Life, every work of love, union, and holiness is attributed to Him. Consequently these perfections must be fully realized in the priest if he is to enflame the children of God with the spirit of mutual love, unity and sanctity. His mission is to be the "impulse," the force vivifying the faithful in their Christian life. As an Apostle of love he must be the spirit fostering these qualities in each individual.

If the priest wishes a complete and perfect transformation of his life into that of the Trinity his love of God must shine forth upon all mankind, and particularly upon the children entrusted to his care in the parish. The priest, as representative of the Christian community, must make his own life one of unlimited charity before he can expect others to do so. It is impossible for a person to be perfect in the love of his neighbor without possessing the love of God. "Perfect charity towards the neighbor," said our eternal Father to St. Catherine of Siena, "essentially depends on the perfect charity a soul has for Me. The soul has the same measure of perfection or imperfection in its love for the creature as is found in its love for Me."

Love of God is our primary Christian obligation and secondarily love of neighbor insofar as creatures share and mirror His goodness. Charity has one supernatural motive—God's infinite perfection. Consequently how could man not love God, the absolute goodness?

It is therefore out of this spirit of love that the parish priest will direct men in their activities, guiding them in time of difficulty and consoling them in sorrow. It is only through this living "impulse" of love that he will fulfill his apostolate.

The basic quality of love is that of oneness—the union of the lover with the beloved. As this loving union is exemplified in the Mystical Body of Christ, so it is also manifest in that smaller reflection of the Mystical Body, the parish. The parish priest as its visible head is the spirit of unity within this body, just as God, the Holy Spirit, is the invisible love-force of the entire Church.

Today's parish priest must be ever conscious of his role as unifier, mindful that all the faithful are one through the Spirit. "For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body . . ." (I Cor. 12; 13). The pastor must strive to preserve that unity which the Spirit produces in souls, so that their wills may be united in peace. Both priest and faithful must be aware that the Church is a single living body composed of active members. No longer must the parish be divided into an "active" Church composed of the clergy and "passive" Church made up of the laity, for such is not unity. Mutual love fosters a vibrant union of priest and laity whereby they live, act, and pray together. This unity of the Mystical Body is especially realized by common participation in the sacrificial meal.

The spirit of oneness into which the parish priest must incorporate himself is the very essence of the community. An active laity can prepare the soil of the parish. They can also arouse some interest. But only with the priest will a christian community be formed. The same is true of different organizations and societies within the parish. Whether it be the Christian family movement, the C.Y.O., or the Holy Name Society, a sense of unity is lacking if the priest does not confer solidarity through a spirit of love and unity. The intensity of this spirit will only be apparent through the priest's showing them that they are one in Christ.

Finally, the third uniting bond in the work of the Spirit, that of sanctity, necessarily follows from the notions of love and unity. Sanctity consists in harmonizing one's life with God, in loving nothing more than Him.

The Spirit is especially called *holy* because He proceeds from the

other two persons through boundless love. Since love is the action by which the will is united to its end, it signifies the most profound act of adhesion to God, which is holiness. Therefore the Spirit, proceeding through love, bears pre-eminently the name "Holy." But as "Holy" the Spirit does not remain passive or inactive. Spirit connotes a "breathing forth," a vital and living action. By sanctifying grace He elevates the faculties of our soul to a divine level. The parish priest too, must be an active principle of holiness. By his example and leadership he strives to build up our goodness. Through the Mass and Sacraments he acts as a minister of grace, affording us the opportunity of growing in sanctity. By reason of his special mission manifesting the Trinity he must necessarily be holy himself and exemplify sanctity to his spiritual family. This continual striving for perfection must be the foundation of the priest's work. It must be the soul of his apostolate; without it he will bear no fruit.

The life of the Trinity is based upon divine love, unity, and sanctity. Every action of the three persons in God—creation, redemption, and sanctification exemplifies this. The Holy Spirit as expressing the result of this love also signifies this impulse of Trinitarian life. In much the same way the modern apostle of love is the heart of the parish. As the human impulse unifying the Christian community in love, he also assists its advance in sanctity. Whatever importance the parish assumes in the community will depend upon the *spirit of life* which he injects.

Conclusion

"Apostle" etymologically designates a *messenger* or one endowed with a special mission, an envoy. But since the vocation of all Christians is that of love, how does the apostolate of the parish priest differ? Because of his particular calling he has been granted a special grace in accomplishing his work. The Sacrament of Orders confers upon him an extraordinary power to execute his mission as another Christ. Not only is he commissioned with an ecclesiastical authority, but he is a divine minister, endowed with the obligation of perfecting all in love of God.

By this total response to the Master's calling he has become an apostle in the mold of the Twelve. As the work of redemption and divine praise was entrusted by Christ to the universal Church in the person of those first apostles, it is similarly conferred upon today's apostle. But it must be remembered that just as the action of the apostles was conditioned by the necessities and opportunities of their historical moment, the work of today's apostles must likewise be adapted to the present needs. Neverthe-

less the spirit underlying the apostolate must always remain fundamentally the same.

The present age of transformation seeks to coordinate the needs of Christians with modern society. Concomitant with this renewal in the Church is the notion that we must return to the simple spirit of life which animated the early Christians. This is the emphasis of the Church today—a union of all sharing in the life and action of Christ—the life of love. The modern apostle then, the parish priest, must ignite the christian community with this spirit of love. He must respond to his mission with that love which descends from the Father, and which, through the Word, is inflamed in the heart by the Holy Spirit.