



THIS IS MY BODY†

Priesthood of the Laity

**Timothy
McCarthy, O.P.**

See Christ as he is depicted in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, see him as a royal and prophetic high priest, see how the many aspects of his vocation converge and find their full meaning and value in his pass-over from death to life, see these things and one will not say, as so many have said, that Christ had three vocations—priest, king and prophet. Christ had one vocation, one mission, and that was the re-establishment of communion between God and man, between man and man, and between man and nature. As Bonhoeffer writes: “He is *the Mediator*, not only between God and man, but between man and man, between man and reality. . . . Since his coming man has no immediate relationships of his own any more, neither to God nor to the world.”¹

The actualization of this single work of reconciliation involved Christ in three ministries: one of enlightenment, one of authoritative guidance, and one of worship. Of these three that of worship was central. If Christ came to restore unity to creation, then the act which effected that unity becomes the decisive act of his life. That act was a sacrificial act and therefore, a sacerdotal act. Everything else which Christ did was either a preparation for or a consequence of his “hour.” Take away Christ’s sacrifice, take away his passion, death and resurrection, and what is left? A teacher beyond compare, but not the Savior.

But why have we been talking about Christ’s vocation when the subject of this article is the priesthood of all believers? Because when

Christ left this earth, he entrusted his followers to complete the work which he had begun. Because Christ's vocation has become the Church's vocation, without ever ceasing to be his. Because, in short, the Church has become incorporated into his royal and prophetic priesthood.

Regarding the Church's collaboration with Christ in his sacerdotal work, two things should be emphasized from the outset. The first is its communal character. The "royal priesthood" of which Peter speaks is a priesthood proper to the community as a whole. This is not to say that Christians do not have a personal participation in Christ's priestly work. It is only to insist that their personal participation cannot exist apart from the community. The second point, equally important, is that this priesthood, unlike the ministerial priesthood, is meant to be exercised primarily in behalf of those outside the Church. The ministerial priesthood is meant to mediate Christ's word and life to the *laos*, and they, in turn, are meant to mediate the same realities to the world at large. The minister is a *servant* of the Church; the layman is a *servant* of the world.

There can be no doubt that the priesthood of all believers is an authentic Christian teaching. It is scriptural and patristic, and as Fr. Dabin's exhaustive study has shown, it has never disappeared from the Church's common teaching. Summing up his investigation into the teaching of the Fathers, Doctors and theologians of the Church on this point, he writes:

Their unanimity manifests itself in all ages and in all places. Silence on the subject is rare. The immense majority speak of it explicitly. The quality of the witnesses adds to the weight of the testimony . . . All the literary genres which compose Christian writing make their contribution: exegesis, homilies, presentations of dogma and morals, liturgical and canonical treatises.²

To mention but a few of the earlier witnesses, St. Justin wrote that "we are the true high priestly race of God."³ John Chrysostom: "So also, you are yourself made a priest in the Laver (Baptism) . . . a priest in that you offer yourself to God."⁴ Augustine, commenting on the *Apocalypse* 1:6: "This is not said of bishops and ministers alone . . . but just as we are all called Christs because of the mystic chrism, so all are called priests because all are members of the one priest."⁵

It must be admitted that after the Reformation this teaching was not as vigorously proclaimed as it was, for example, in the fourth,

fifth and sixth centuries. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the Council of Trent clearly affirmed it:

Inasmuch as Sacred Scripture speaks of two kinds of priesthoods, one internal and one external, it will be necessary to form a distinct idea of each.

Regarding the internal priesthood, all the faithful are said to be priests once they have been washed by the saving waters of Baptism. Especially is this true of those who have the Spirit of God and who, by the help of divine grace, have been made living members of the great high priest, Jesus Christ; for enlightened by faith which is enflamed by charity, they offer up spiritual sacrifices to God on the altar of their hearts. Among such sacrifices must be reckoned every good and virtuous action done for the glory of God.⁶

What inspired the great Reformers of the sixteenth century to insist so strongly on this doctrine? It was a twofold conviction: the first, dogmatically true; the second (to Catholic eyes), dogmatically false, yet unfortunately, historically true in no small measure. Their first conviction, with which Catholics have no argument, is that every individual Christian has direct, free and personal access to Christ. Their insistence upon this is epitomized in the Anglican Hymn, *Nothing Between*:

Nothing between, Lord, nothing between;
 Let me Thy glory see,
 Draw my soul close to Thee,
 Then speak in love to me;
 Nothing between.

Such was the major premise of the Reformation. The minor premise was that the complicated (and corrupt) hierarchical and sacramental structures of the Roman Church hindered rather than helped immediate and personal access to God. It was this conviction which, as it were, "forced" the Reformers to break from Rome. It was this conviction which moved them to formulate a new theory regarding the relationship between the faithful and their ministers, as is evidenced by Luther's assertion that:

Everyone who has been baptized may claim that he has already been consecrated priest, bishop, or pope, even though it is not seemly for any particular person to exercise this office.⁷

One hundred fifty years later the Society of Friends would carry this theory to its ultimate conclusion in saying that no one is set apart

to minister to his fellows; rather, the responsibility for exhorting one another and building one another up in love is shared by all. Roman Catholics have always rejected any claim that ministerial power resides in the "congregatio fidelium" as a whole. As recently as 1947, Pius XII in *Mediator Dei* stated: "The priesthood does not originate in the Christian community, nor is it derived by delegation from the people." Ministerial power comes directly from Christ acting through the successors of the Apostles.

One of the great paradoxes in the history of theology is that the Reformers took over the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers without taking what are for the Roman Catholic its two constitutive elements, namely, sanctifying grace and sacramental character. Without wishing to reopen the controversy over the existence of "created grace," let it suffice to say that Catholics believe that the grace of Christ ontologically transforms them so that in the depths of their souls they are no longer sinners. By reason of this, they share in Christ's priesthood not only by vocation, by calling, but also ontologically, physically. As Fr. Kiesling writes:

By grace, Christians are members of Christ and share in his grace and in the qualities of his grace. But Christ is Priest and His grace is priestly. Therefore by grace the Christian people are a priestly people . . . under the influence of the same Spirit who inspired Christ's offering of Himself, Christians are moved to offer themselves in union with Christ and through Him to the Father. Christians, therefore, have a spiritual priesthood, sacrifice, and worship which are the very core of their Christian existence, an existence which is for the glory of the Father.⁸

One further point in this regard: an integral part of man's collaboration with Christ in re-creating the universe is his ability to *merit* grace for others. Not that the prayers and works which he undertakes in behalf of another in any way force God to bless that other. But that just as God made men brothers in the natural order, able to supply one another's natural needs, so similarly he has made men brothers in the supernatural order and given them the ability to contribute to each other's sanctification.

Christians participate in the one priesthood of Christ in two distinct yet related ways—through sanctifying grace and sacramental character. We have considered sanctifying grace; we will now consider the sacramental characters. Christ, our eternal high priest, has willed to exercise his heavenly priesthood through sign-actions, par-

ticularly but not exclusively, through the sacraments. These sign-actions are, as St. Augustine so forcefully insisted, the very actions of Christ. "When Peter baptizes, it is Jesus who is baptizing; when Paul baptizes, it is Jesus who is baptizing."⁹ Because these actions are actions of Christ, they cannot be performed except by those empowered to act as instruments of Christ. The sacramental characters of Baptism, Confirmation and Orders supply this power. They enable men to construct sign-actions which, when duly performed with the right intention, Christ will infallibly appropriate in order to offer grace to men.

For example, the sacramental character of Baptism enables the Christian to unite his worship with the worship which Christ offers the Father through the Eucharistic sacrifice. It empowers him to receive the sacraments of Penance, Confirmation, Orders, Matrimony, Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist. Were a "non-characterized" Christian to go through the ritual of Penance, or Matrimony, or any of the others, he would no more receive the sacraments than a stick or a stone exposed to the same rites.

The character conferred by Confirmation enables its recipients to give sacramental witness to their faith. Upon reception of the character, a man is officially commissioned by the Church to call his fellow men to Christ. Such a Christian is assured that Christ wills to work through him for the sanctification of other men. As Fr. Colman O'Neill puts it:

By reason of their objective status in the Church, the confirmed truly act in the power of Christ . . . And Christ uses the actions of the confirmed, as he uses the sacraments, but in a different way, for bringing grace into the world . . . The character of confirmation lends to such activity an efficacy deriving not simply from the individual's personal merits or ability, but above all from Christ.¹⁰

Together, these two sacraments of initiation, Baptism and Confirmation, endow the Christian with a participation in Christ's royal and prophetic priesthood. As a result, every action of theirs which in any way originates from their faith becomes at once a royal act, a prophetic act, a priestly act. Such actions are *royal* because they manifest and compound Christ's conquest over sin and death. They are royal because they contribute to the re-establishment of right order in reality. A man exercises his Christian royalty whenever he subjects

himself to God, serves his fellowman, or furthers the hominization of nature.

Such actions are *prophetic* because they give witness to both the transcendence and immanence of God: the transcendence, because they bespeak other-worldliness, detachment and a superior ethic; immanence, because they re-incarnate the "inner urge of God toward the world," because they sacramentalize Christ's personal concern for every man, and because they testify to the presence of the Kingdom of God.

Finally, such acts are sacrificial and therefore, sacerdotal, because they involve self-dispossession, self-surrender and self-donation. Basically, sacrifice consists in a transferral of some reality from one's own possession to the possession of God. Sacrifice, *sacrum facere* (to make holy), means much the same thing as *consecrare*, to sacralize. In order to have a genuine sacrifice two actions are necessary—one on the part of man and the other on the part of God: On the part of man, self-offering; on the part of God, acceptance of that offering. For Christians, there is only one true sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ, his total self-donation climaxed on Calvary and God's acceptance of it revealed through the resurrection.

Men can offer true sacrifices only if they have already been sacrificed, that is, only if they have already been baptized (by water or desire). Once they have undergone this mystical death and resurrection with Christ, they have become priests in the Priest and victims in the Victim. Their self-offerings are henceforth acceptable to God because they are incorporated into Christ's unique self-offering on Calvary. Thus, it remains true that in Christianity there are not many priesthoods, but only one. As Cardinal Suhard expressed it: "He is not a priest among priests, greater than them or more holy. He is the unique priest. . . . He includes all priesthood in himself."¹¹

Before closing the doctrinal section of this article, it is worthwhile noting that a Christian's *personal* participation in the priesthood of Christ is measured by his participation in the victimhood of Christ. And similarly, one reigns with Christ only to the extent that one is subject to Him. In Christianity, *servire est regnare*.

Such, in brief, is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on the priesthood of all believers. Why is it that this doctrine is so little known and appreciated? I suggest three reasons: First of all, and most basically, it is because the true nature of the Church itself is

little known and appreciated. Especially, it is because relatively few Christians realize that the Church exists for the world. "The Church," writes Bonhoeffer, "is her true self only when she exists for humanity."¹² So long as Church activity is popularly identified with the Church's own institutional plant, the Church will continue to be a "side issue" for the laity. The *New Reformation* urged by Bishop Robinson consists in the Church's ceasing to serve her own structures and beginning to serve the structures of the world.

The second theological reason why more laymen do not take their ecclesial vocation seriously is that the relationship between clergy and laity is widely misunderstood. It appears to me that Christ intended a very clear division of labor within his Church. The ministry, as was said above, exists for the sake of the community of the faithful, and the community of the faithful exists for the sake of the world. Presently, there are too many ministers doing the work of the laity (and doing it poorly), and too many laymen doing simply nothing because they identify the work of the Church with the work of the ministry. The nobility and importance of the layman's work needs to be highlighted. The Constitution *De Ecclesia* of Vatican II states: "Now the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where *only through them* can it become the salt of the earth." That phrase "only through them" is crucial, for it means that insofar as the laity fails in its task, the Church itself fails. As Fr. K. Rahner, S.J., points out:

It seems to me that everything depends on the layman's understanding that he is, as an individual, *irreplaceable*, with a specifically Christian and moral task to be performed within groups not directly subject to the Church's official control (his community, his business, his club), a task of which he will have to give an account before the judgment seat of God.¹³

The third and final theological corrective necessary if the layman is to rediscover the greatness of his calling is the all-out uprooting of the idea that engagement in the world causes disengagement from God. To overcome this deep-seated prejudice, encyclicals and pronouncements will never be enough. Here, men need to see in order to believe. Here, they need to see laymen (and already they are beginning to see them) who are *fully* and *successfully* engaged in the world and are, at the same time, totally committed, charismatic Christians.

NOTES

- ¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), pp. 106f.
- ² P. Dabin, S.J., *Le Sacerdoce Royal des Fidèles* (Paris: Desclée, 1950), p. 34.
- ³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Typho*, P.G. 6, 745.
- ⁴ John Chrysostom, *On the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 3; P.G. 61, 417-418.
- ⁵ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 20; CSEL 40, 455.
- ⁶ *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, II, 7, q. 23.
- ⁷ Martin Luther, *Reformation Writings* (ed. by Lee Woolf), I, 116.
- ⁸ C. Kiesling, O.P., "Sacramental Character and the Liturgy," *Thomist* XXVII (1963), 389f. Cf. also Yves M.-J. Congar, O.P., *Lay People in the Church* (London: Newman, 1956), p. 131.
- ⁹ Augustine, *Tract. VI in Joann.*
- ¹⁰ Colman O'Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments* (Staten Island, N. Y.: Alba House, 1963), pp. 177f, 180.
- ¹¹ Emmanuel Cardinal Suhard, *The Church Today* (Chicago: Fides, 1953), p. 229.
- ¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner For God* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952).
- ¹³ Karl Rahner, S.J., *The Christian Commitment* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 66.

LOOKING FOR A PUBLISHER?

We publish books for the religious and academic fields that meet the exacting demands of scholarship. Our special imprint, **Testament Books** is reserved for deserving works of scholarship in the religious field.

Years of experience with fiction and non-fiction (fields of general interest and religion), texts, Americana, biographies, scholarly works, poetry and essays, enable us to publish books that are expertly edited, designed and promoted.

Your inquiries and manuscripts are invited. An editorial report furnished without obligation.

FREE: Two fact-filled, illustrated brochures explain the behind-the-scenes story of publishing, describe our first edition plan, and present a breakdown of contract terms and typical costs.

Please write to Dept. 223F

EXPOSITION PRESS

386 Park Ave., S. • New York 16, N. Y.