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OTHER CHRISTS



IT IS ALWAYS a deeply moving experience to see a man ordained a priest. The rite of ordination is overpowering in its significance, and those who witness it are rapt in solemn wonder at the magnitude of what God has wrought before their eyes.

We see the bishop impose his hands upon the ordinand, and we are stunned by the presence of God's almighty hand reaching down from the heights of heaven to clothe this man with priestly dignity. We hear the invocation of the Holy Spirit, and we are electrified by the coming of the Paraclete to take possession of the soul He has chosen to invest with priestly power. We watch the anointing of the hands, and we are awed to think how these hands are hallowed as arteries of grace, "that whatsoever they bless may be blessed, and whatsoever they consecrate shall be consecrated and sanctified." We kneel through the concelebration of the Mass, and we reverently adore as the new priest consecrates Christ's Body and Blood for the first time. We are overwhelmed by the sense of nearness to divinity, and we come away convinced that what we have seen has been most holy.

Contemplating such unearthly splendor and majesty, we begin to reflect upon the substance and import of the ordination ceremony. We wonder what really happens to the soul of a man at the moment he becomes a priest.

Thomas Merton, in a meditative note written in his journal shortly before his own ordination to the priesthood, tried to analyze himself to discover what was happening to his soul as the sacred day approached. Bewildered by the mystery of the sacerdotal character, he confesses his inability to understand it or describe it, and cries in a transport of joy: "I cannot explain more at the moment, except that Christ the High Priest is awakening in the depths of my soul, in silence and majesty, like a giant who means to run his course."

No man can penetrate the plenitude of meaning latent in the mystery of priestly power, but we know, as Thomas Merton does, that our feeble efforts at explanation must be centered in Christ. The mystery of the priesthood is the mystery of Christ Himself, the Most High and Eternal Priest.

All of us have heard the priest called "Alter Christus," "Another Christ." We recognize at once that there is something Christlike in the priest. But the phrase is far more true and meaningful than might first appear; it is a very accurate description of the essential quality of the priesthood, union with Christ in sacramental operation. The priest is not called "Another Christ" simply because he reminds us of Christ or tries to imitate Christ or teaches us as Christ taught us. These concepts are external to the priesthood itself; they describe what we see in the priest, and in themselves they are an authentic and proper reflection of the role of the priest in his ministry to the faithful.

But to call a priest "Another Christ" means all this, and more. The priest is Christ. Christ the High Priest lives with him, and works through him. It is this real intimacy of the priest with Christ which constitutes the supreme dignity of the priestly office. It is this internal supernatural unity of the priest with Christ which is the root of the external qualities of Christlikeness which Christians recognize in their priests.

To understand the truth of Christ's working through the priest, it is necessary, first, to acknowledge the priestly character of Christ Himself. That our Blessed Lord in His redemptive mission to mankind exercises in His human nature the office of priest, there can be no doubt. St. Paul, in the divinely inspired words of his Epistle to the Hebrews, taught unmistakably the priesthood of Christ:

"We have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in the heavens, a minister of the Holies, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord has erected and not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; therefore it is necessary that this one also should have something to offer." (Hebr. 8: 1-3) "Having therefore a great high priest who has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." (Hebr. 4: 14)

The essence of the priestly office is mediation between two extremes. The priest is a mediator between God and men, as Lacordaire so capably expressed it: "To go from men to God and offer Him their

prayers; to return from God to men and bring pardon and hope." God and man, the Uncreated and the created, are infinitely separated, the more so because of sin which corrupts the whole human race. It is the function of the priest to intervene between them, to be a mediator, to bear sacred things from God to men and to offer God prayers and satisfaction for sin on behalf of men. He is a link, a bridge, a ladder between God and men; he is a citizen of two worlds, the ambassador from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven.

With an understanding of this basic concept of the nature of the priesthood, the fact of Christ's priesthood becomes at once evident. Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme mediator between God and men. His whole earthly life was lived for a single transcendent purpose: the reconciliation of God with men, the redemption of the captives bound in the chains of human sin. He accomplished this in the Holocaust of Calvary in which He was both priest and victim. And through Him the ineffable riches of God's grace come to men; for the man of Christ is the instrument of the Godhead, united in person to the Word of God. What priest could offer a greater sacrifice of reconciliation? What priest could bear greater gifts from God to men?

Further reflection reveals the unique quality of Christ's priesthood. He alone is the perfect mediator between God and men. No man of himself could possibly fulfill this sacerdotal office of mediation between heaven and earth. A mediator must have access to both sides, but he cannot belong to either. If two nations are at war, the dispute must be mediated by a third party, well disposed toward both, yet not allied with either. But what man is capable of mediating between God and man? What man, his nature corrupted by sin, can stand as pleasing to God? What man can span the infinite chasm between divinity and humanity?

Only the God-man, Christ. This power of mediation, the essential note of priesthood, can belong to no one but Christ; He alone can draw together the finite and temporal, and the infinite and eternal. The man Christ is the perfect mediator uniting God and men because only He is distant from each of the extremes, yet has something in common with them. Christ as man is distant from God in nature, and distant from man in the dignity of His grace and glory; yet He has beatitude in common with God, and mortality in common with men. He performs His priestly office by bringing to men the precepts and gifts of God, and by offering to God satisfaction and prayers for men.

Christ our Saviour is, then, the unique and perfect mediator, the unique and perfect priest. But if there is but one priest, Christ, how are other men said to be priests? If Christ alone is the perfect high

priest and mediator, are other men priests in any true sense at all?

St. Thomas Aquinas answers in the affirmative by tracing out a twofold aspect in the function of priest and mediator between God and men.

Nothing hinders certain others from being called mediators, in some respect, between God and man, forasmuch as they cooperate in uniting men to God, dispositively or ministerially. . . . As to the priests of the New Law, they may be called mediators of God and men, inasmuch as they are the ministers of the true Mediator by administering, in His stead, the saving sacraments to men." (III, q. 26, a. 1)

There is the answer. Christ alone is the one great Mediator between God and men, the one great High Priest, "who by one offering has perfected forever those who are sanctified." (Hebr. 10: 14) But in a secondary sense, other men are truly priests since they cooperate with Christ in the sanctification of souls through the administration of the sacraments.

The intimate association of the priest with Christ becomes most clear with an understanding of the causal procedure of the sacraments. In the production of any sacrament, human agency is restricted to a secondary mode of causality, after the fashion of an instrument used in conjunction with a principal cause. St. Thomas lucidly teaches this basic tenet of sacramental theology in the *Summa*:

"The interior sacramental effect can be the work of man, in so far as he works as minister. For a minister is of the nature of an instrument, since the action of both is applied to something extrinsic, while the interior effect is produced through the power of the principal agent, which is God." (III, q. 64, a. 1)

The divinely instituted sacramental scheme of sanctification involves three causal elements, each subordinated to the other: God, the author of grace; Christ in His human nature, the High Priest and principal minister; and the purely human minister who effects the sacrament by performing the external sign. The infusion of grace into the soul, which is the primary effect of all the sacraments, can be the work of no one but God: grace is from God alone, and only He is able to enter the soul to implant it. But Christ as man produces interior sacramental effects instrumentally: He uses His human nature as an instrument in the transmission of grace. And since His human nature is an instrument united to the Godhead in unity of person, it has a

certain headship and efficiency in regard to exterior instruments, which are the ministers of the Church and the sacraments themselves. So Christ as God has the power of authority over the sacraments, and as man He has the power of principal ministry called the power of excellence. All purely human ministers derive their power from Him, and act in His name. "The ministers of the Church do not by their own power cleanse from sin those who approach the sacraments, nor do they confer grace on them: it is Christ who does this by His own power while He employs them as His ministers." (III, q. 64, a. 6)

Of themselves, then, our priests are powerless. With Christ working in them, they are the all-powerful instruments whereby grace is poured into men's souls through the sacramental system. This superlative intimacy of operation warrants the fullness of meaning which we have attached to the phrase "Another Christ." Christ the eternal High Priest effects the salvation of mankind through our priests. When a man is ordained a priest, Christ the Priest takes up His abode in His soul to use him as His channel of grace. When the priest acts, it is as though Christ Himself acts. Christ has entered his soul and has taken possession of it so that the priest can speak in the person of Christ: "*I baptize you.*" "*I absolve you.*" This is *my* body. The man who can say these things is truly "Another Christ." His actions are the actions of Christ, and in a very special sense, the priest can repeat St. Paul's ecstatic cry: "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me." Christ's beginning to live in a man—here is the heart of the mystery of ordination to the priesthood, the mystery of Christ Himself.

With a full heart, *Dominicana* congratulates our newly ordained Dominicans. We rejoice with them in the newness of their priesthood, and we wish them length of years, abundance of fruit, and plenitude of grace in their priestly ministry. And as Christ the High Priest awakens in the depths of their souls, we pray for them in these words from the Votive Mass of Christ, the Most High and Eternal Priest:

O God, who unto the glory of Thy majesty and the salvation of the human race hast ordained Thy only begotten Son a Priest Most High and Eternal: grant that those ministers and dispensers of His mysteries whom He hath chosen may be found faithful in fulfilling the ministry which they have accepted. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.