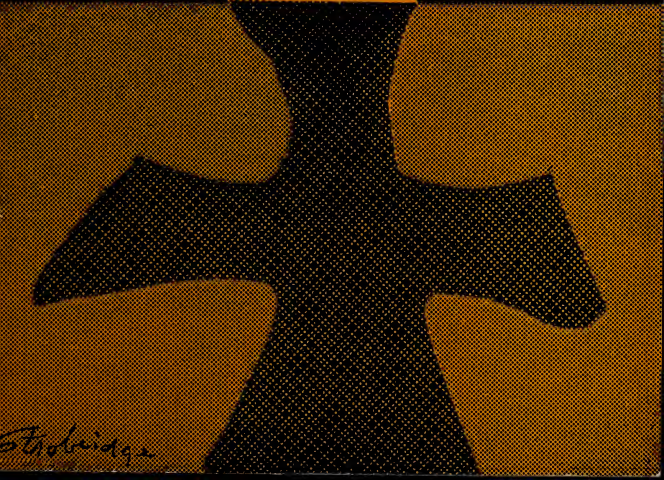


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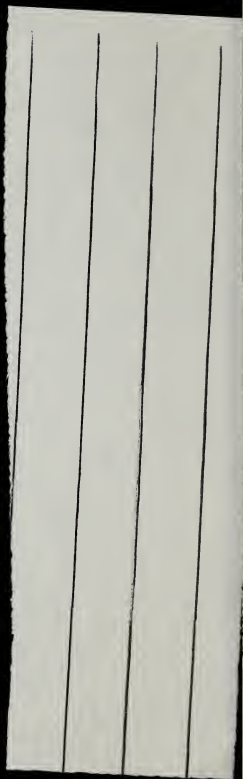
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The Sacrament of **HOLY ORDERS**

by Rev. Joseph Hoffman, C.S.C.



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Decidified



You see him on the street, or in a car, or in a restaurant. You meet him in hospitals, at home, at your parish school. You call him father, yet he belongs to no family. Or rather, the whole world is his family and all men are his children. For this man is an incarnation. He is a Christ.

No one doubts today that Christ was born in Bethlehem. For some, the fallacy is to think of that birth as only a historical event. The appearance of the God-Man was the beginning of a new epoch. His birth began a revolution that neither the hardened indifference of men nor their violent hate has been able to quell. Some souls still feel the impact of that event.

Not since the Greeks of antiquity have scholars looked upon the history of man as a cycle, as the recurrence of the same events, as a self-perpetuating revolution like the seasons of the year. Since the advent of Christian revelation, history is seen to have the elements of good drama: a definite beginning, middle and end. The beginning is a creation in time. The end is that glorification of Christ and of mankind redeemed in Christ which St. Paul spoke about: "And when that subjection is complete, then the Son Himself will become subject to the power which has made all things his subjects, so that God may be all in all" (I Cor. 15:28). Lastly, human history has a middle, a center, which is Christ.

Christ: The Center of History

To place Christ at the center of history is now a commonplace. Every man of faith makes such a judgment. It is implicit in his act of faith wherein he puts at stake his life, his fortune and misfortune. In that act man submits his personal ambitions to the goal laid out by God. For him "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). But Christ as the center of time has another broader meaning, one that is not divorced from but rather dependent upon the act of faith.

We can project onto the stage of human history the value Christ has in our own life. This is no meaningless play of imagination nor is it the fruit of wayward fancy. It is to find in Christ the answer not only to my own existence but also to the existence of all men in every age.

To do justice to those old Greeks there is much in human life to suggest a constant dying and rebirth. For each man in his own time must ask and answer to his own satisfaction the fundamental question what is death, or better, what is life. We put to ourselves

those same queries that a baffled people of God put to Moses when he led them out of the hand of Pharaoh. The response that Moses gave was sad, indeed. He spoke of disobedience, of loss, of despair. But the disobedience was not irreparable, the loss not definitive, the despair not final. Salvation was already at work in the world. God was with His people and the people knew it.

The Old Testament World

The Old Testament gives divine testimony to the depths of moral degradation possible to man. Idolatry, murder and fornication are not enough. Man can be guilty of blasphemy, fratricide and sodomy. No human relationship is left unsullied. Apart from God man is a beast.

The sacred writers tell of a world not much different from our own. Their story is of men who deny God, of mercenary priests and venal kings who turn the people from the worship of God, of weak men who fear to ask a sign from God because they have no faith. Yet, while the mass of men was lying prostrate and unregenerate, there

was visible an upward thrust of man's hope in God's promise. There was a conscious effort on the part of a few to rise above the abyss, a stumbling effort but one that at times reached a height of dignity and goodness unknown to most men. The world owes much to these few who scaled the summit of holiness. They kept alive man's link with God and the hope of a Christ. And at the peak of this hope, in the fulness of time, when a segment of the human race seemed capable of appreciating spiritual values, Christ appeared.

The Coming of Christ

Whatever was good in the Old Testament is now incorporated in a new vision and a new life. The obscure and tortuous lines of human history are made clear. The Law and the Prophets are not destroyed but fulfilled, developed and enhanced. A new law of charity includes the Ten Commandments in its observance. A deep interior life becomes not only an ideal and a possibility but — in Christ — a concrete reality, tangible and attractive to men. The focal point of this new law and life,

the point of contact between man and his God, is the body of Christ.

As Moses had raised up a brazen serpent, so now God raises up His Son. What shocking symbol is this? The serpent, so often identified with sin and Satan, is a picture of Christ? Yet seen in the light of a crucified Saviour the mysterious sign reveals its meaning. "He Who knew no sin was made sin for us, so that in Him we might be made the justice of God" (II Cor. 5:21). Not a real serpent did Moses lift up, but the bronze image of one; so Christ came not as a real sinner but in the likeness of sinners, taking upon Himself the pain of sin, without the sin itself.

Through this body Christ's divine healing power is felt in miracles accomplished by a word, a touch. Forgiveness of sin, a prerogative of God, is given with the tender compassion of a heart that knows human loneliness. He is able to have compassion on the ignorant and erring because He Himself is beset with weakness. For those seeking a moral ideal, there walks in Galilee a Man Whose every word and action

is pleasing to God. To those yearning for the interior power that divinizes human activity, this same body of Christ is offered as food. And when that hour is come, the hour towards which God has directed the course of human history, the hour when the abyss between God and man is to be bridged, it is this same body stretched between heaven and earth in sacrifice that will accomplish the reunion.

The God-Man is not only the initial step and effective cause of the re-creation of man. He is also its final stage and ultimate development.

In the beginning, when God created man, He made him to His own image and likeness. In the new creation man is remade according to the image and likeness of Christ. The Christian is not only called to be a son of God. He is to be in truth a son, to live with the life of God and not under a legal fiction. Thus the task begun on Calvary will not be ended until all those called to this sublime vocation share in this supernatural identification with Christ.

Baptism and Confirmation are indeed sources of grace for the Christian.

These sacraments are likewise sources of a new deputation to take an active role in rendering worship to God, the kind of worship the Son gives His Father. Not everyone, however, is called to that perfect identification with Christ as High Priest. Many will take on a resemblance to the True Son in virtue of the grace and character of Baptism and Confirmation. Few will resemble the Son so perfectly that they can administer to others the grace of salvation.

Every Christian has the obligation to give to all men the love of Christ. Only the priest has the duty to give Christ Himself. Every Christian can share in the sacrifice of Christ. The priest alone can renew that sacrifice in the Mass.

The Priest: An Incarnation

Nothing in the whole of creation worked so intimately with God as the humanity of Christ. The union of man and God resulted in a single reality, Jesus of Nazareth. Nor will any other creature approximate that nearness to God. But if we should seek for some

comparison of the Incarnation, we should find it in the priest.

Only God can give man divine faith; but the priest gives Baptism, the sacrament of faith. Only God gives hope of eternal life and final perseverance; but the priest gives Extreme Unction, the sacrament of hope and final perseverance. Only God fills men's hearts with charity; but the priest gives the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament of charity. Only the God-Man said in sacrifice, "This is My Body." The priest uses no other words to renew that same sacrifice.

An understanding, therefore, of the sacrament of Holy Orders will follow upon our grasp of the role of Christ's body in the plan of redemption. For in Holy Orders a man is entrusted with power over the real body and over the Mystical Body of Christ. In this two-fold power lies the sublime nobility of the priest.

Power Over Christ's Body

During His earthly life Jesus gave three groups of people power over His body. They were His mother and foster-

father, His Apostles and His executioners.

Of all these the ones most worthy to receive Him were Mary and Joseph. In Mary, Jesus sank His roots in human nature, drawing flesh of her flesh and blood of her blood. In Joseph, He gained a position in the society of men; He is the Son of a carpenter of the family of David. Moreover, these holy persons belong to His introduction to this world rather than to His ultimate mission. And before He strikes out on His mission, He shall have left them both.

The demarcation in the life of Christ is drawn most sharply by the parallelism of John's account of the marriage feast at Cana and the words of a dying Jesus to His mother. Mary is mentioned only twice by John and in both instances Jesus addresses her as "Woman," a term of respect but not endearment. Nor is it the word to express mother-son relationships among the ancient Jews. No, Jesus is calling attention to the supernatural bond that links Him to the Father, and to the supernatural bond that will unite His mother to Himself when His hour (the

Crucifixion) occurs. Mary and Joseph have no part in His public ministry. Later a role will be given to Mary, not now. For in the fulfillment of a God-given destiny even the good things of this life must at times be sacrificed. Natural ties are feeble in the face of God's demands.

There could not but be sadness in the heart of Mary as she watched her Son set out alone on the road from Nazareth. It is the kind of sorrow known by every mother who watches her son, suitcase in hand, descend the porch steps and turn toward the seminary. He is lost to her. Or rather, her task is over.

From now on other men and women shall have a claim on him. In his work she can take no active role. The natural bond of blood is impotent in the supernatural work for souls. Like Mary, though, the mother of the priest will share in his work when she offers her prayers and sufferings for the good of the souls in his care.

With what tender and trembling love did Jesus hand Himself over to His Apostles? Only He at that moment

recognized the value of His gift and the consequences of His act. Until that hour He had been all His own, the master of His own fate. He could go out in search of the lost, show mercy to the penitent and even hide Himself from His enemies. His last will, however, is likewise a New Testament. Henceforward, He is someone else's to give or withhold. Someone else will search for sinners; someone else will speak His words of forgiveness. A body has been fitted to Him for the accomplishment of a mission. As the mission changed hands, so now the body would be under the control of His most cherished friends.

In its deepest meaning the Church is faith and the sacraments of faith. The Church, in its life, illustrates the transmission of divine life. It is because the Church has been entrusted with the real Body of Christ that she can exercise control over the Mystical Body. The Apostles, then, prepare men to receive the Body of Christ by bringing them faith, as they too, received Him first in faith and then in the flesh. In this they imitate their Master and complete the mission of Him Who saved

till the end His last, best gift, His own Body.

Christ in Our Hands

Lastly Jesus gave His body into the hands of His executioners, the temple guard and the Roman soldiers. They beat Him, spat on Him and nailed Him to a cross. Sin has made culprits of us all in this crime. At some time in our lives we all belong to this class of people. The saddest plight, however, is that of the culprit who belongs to both the second and third classes of people to whom Christ gave power over His body. Of all sinners the most tragic is the unfaithful priest. As long as God wills to put Himself in the hands of potential sinners, a Judas will always be possible. We cannot judge him. We can only pity him and pray for him. Such a one bears his own condemnation and pronounces his own curse.

Nevertheless, the true priest is kept humble by the realization that he can abuse the great power given him. Unless he keeps in mind his humble origins, he may be overwhelmed by his dignity. He can think that the Body

he handles and cares for makes it impossible for him to sin and leaves him untouched by the temptations that harass other men. And his error will occasion his fall.

The apostolic priest avoids this pitfall by approaching the altar in the spirit of the Mother of Jesus, "He that is mighty has done great things for me. . . ."

Who Will Be the Victim?

The priest in charge of the real Body cannot long remain unaffected by the consuming love of Jesus. He longs for still greater union, a yet closer identification with Christ. He desires to be not merely a priest, but a priest-victim, as was his Master. This objective is not nearly so accessible as reaching the altar itself. Here he is often outstripped by holy laymen whom he is expected to surpass in holiness.

In this connection I think of Father Patrick Peyton, C.S.C., the zealous apostle of the Family Rosary. Apparently frustrated in his advance to the priesthood by an attack of tubercu-

losis, he asked and got from Our Lady the grace of being cured. But his cure did not go unpaid for. Two days before the doctors permitted him to leave his bed, his mother had died. A short time later came a letter that read: "Her prayer was that all your sufferings might come upon her so that you might go on and become a priest. Your mother got her wish." She was the victim; her son the priest.

There is a mysterious saying of St. Paul which Scripture scholars treat with caution. Paul in prison says he makes up for what is lacking of the sufferings of Christ. Far from being derogatory of the immeasurable value of Christ's Redemption, it emphasizes the identity with Christ of the apostolic endeavor. As eternal life was not purchased but by the shedding of blood, so the salvation of souls will not be effected but by the suffering of apostles bringing Christ to men.

The plan of God calls for a continuation of the redemptive effort of Christ in those called to work for man's salvation. Therefore, Paul and every minister of the gospel bears in his own body

the suffering of Jesus so that the life of Jesus be made manifest (II Cor. 4:10). Since Christ can suffer no more, His ministers above all must bear what Christ would, if He were able. If there be a lack, it is in our flesh, not that of Christ.

To begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. This is a hard saying and one difficult for the priest to comprehend as he ascends the steps of the altar one by one. To go up to the altar, to be intimately united with the tabernacle, to hold the Body and Blood of Our Lord in one's hands and to pronounce in trepidation and awe the holy words of consecration . . . nothing could be more joyous, more alien to pain.

It is when the priest comes down from the altar and walks among men, carrying in his hands and heart the Christ he loves, that his agony begins. It is there among men that he encounters his Calvary and relives in himself the suffering inflicted by a spiteful Sanhedrin, the unjust judgment of a pagan world and the violent rejection by those he has come to save. To the priest is committed the real Body

of Jesus. To the priest is given a Man crucified.

Power Over the Mystical Body

The second power in Holy Orders is power over the Mystical Body of Jesus. In virtue of this power the priest preaches the word of God and, more importantly, forgives sin. Within a few days anyone can learn the rubrics of saying Mass and in less than a minute he can be validly ordained. Yet to exercise the power over the Mystical Body a lifetime of priestly study scarcely suffices. For it is here that the talent, education and virtue of the priest is tried most severely.

“Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain they are retained.” By these words Jesus gave His priests power to open to men or to withhold from them the infinite treasures of God’s mercy. The priest and no other is to judge who is worthy of absolution. And the judgment he makes stands in heaven. How many years of study will prepare a priest to read the heart of man? What books will lay bare the malice or the

love, the hypocrisy or the sorrow, the guilt or innocence of a soul? Who are the authors who can describe the gravity of one mortal sin?

In the place of Christ the priest authoritatively grants or refuses absolution. To exercise this function reasonably he must make two essential judgments: namely, whether there is sufficient matter for absolution, and whether the sinner is properly disposed. We call these judgments essential because an error in either of them can affect the validity of the absolution.

Nowhere more than in the confessional must the priest be all to all. There is the penitent who comes unprepared, not from ill will, but simply not ready to make a confession. There is the child whose little faults need more practiced attention than the great sins of an adult. Indeed, the confessions of children are among the most difficult. There is the long series of "ordinary confessions" that vary so little. There are penitents who speak so softly as to be inaudible except to God. There is the penitent who loses himself in useless detail or is too generic in his accusa-

tions. There is the penitent who wants to argue. There are habitual sinners and backsliders and the most unfortunate ones of all, the impenitent. These latter the priest must try to bring to sorrow, or, failing in this, leave them with their burden of sin and weight of decision. His refusal must be decisive but never blunt. Tact, prudence and courtesy at all times, these are the virtues of the priest who carries in his heart the solicitude of Christ for all sinners.

The real test of a devoted confessor comes only after the novelty has worn off. The enthusiasm of the early years is gone. Will it be replaced with devoted care or will the hours of confession become monotonous? The time for hearing confessions rolls round with regularity; it interrupts other works. Long lines of penitents are tiring; long intervals between confessions are vexing. And since we are dealing with a human being, let us remember that pennant drives and World Series are not postponed for confession periods. You parishioners who can set your watches by the entrance of the pastor into the

confessional, know that you have an apostle in your midst. Know that here is a priest dedicated to your souls.

Without study a priest could never defend the rights of God and render just judgment. Barring an act of God, the priest has no other way to hone his conscience to that fine edge which cuts through vain excuses, specious reasonings and pretended ignorance, and lays open the root of sin to the healing grace of the sacrament of Penance.

“Go, show yourselves to the priest,” said Christ to the 10 lepers whom He made clean. While divine grace is not limited to sacramental channels, yet it was clearly the will of Jesus that sinners come before the tribunal of Penance when He gave His Church the power of the keys. Penitents return to God only when they have the desire at least of submitting their sins to that sacerdotal power.

The Priest As Judge

In his role as judge, the priest needs more than the sacrament of Holy Orders. The Bishop must extend to him

authority over the members of his diocese. As in civil courts a judge may not be competent to render a decision, so in the tribunal of Penance the priest-judge is not competent to forgive sin until he receives jurisdiction from his Bishop. A priest validly absolves only those subject to him.

Speaking of civil courts, we priests have good reason to envy those judges their spacious benches. The narrow confines of the confessional are more conducive to mortifying the priest than helping him in his task. It is certain that modern confessionals did not originate with the Apostles. Peter was a fisherman; Paul a tentmaker . . . a good combination for a camping trip. At any rate they both loved the open spaces too much to be cooped up in a box without leg room.

St. Teresa of Avila once had a vision of herself in hell. She felt as though she were locked in a very small room—so small, in fact, that she felt she would be suffocated if she were not released soon. Some priests get similar “visions” every Saturday night.

Perhaps you have seen the priest leave the confessional although there is a line on either side. You and the others have been waiting more than a half hour, even an hour, to get in. You are tired of standing. People are shifting from one foot to the other. The Church is overheated and stuffy. You are about to enter the box. And without warning the priest calls a halt to the moving line by his departure. Let me say that there comes a moment when sacramental power and grace must give way to the frailty of human nature. At that time the priest, grown tense and fatigued by lengthy periods in the confessional, had best get out, stretch his legs and perhaps smoke a cigarette. Refreshed and calm, he can return to his task with the vigor and gentleness his penitents expect of him. Only then, for example, can he be indulgent to the sinner with alcohol on his breath. Neither disrespect nor incapacity is *necessarily* involved. The penitent may have taken a "bracer" just to get courage to come to confession. The tired priest might get uselessly annoyed by this.

The Priest As Physician

Besides being a judge, the priest in the confessional is also a physician. He is trained to give advice that is direct and practical. He asks questions not only to determine the degree of guilt but also to find out the situation of the penitent's soul. He tries to cure bad habits, to prevent the formation of such habits and to help in the acquiring of good habits. This supposes that he be grounded in sound asceticism and is abreast of solid progressive psychology.

If penitents, on the other hand, were more aware of this priestly function, they would see the value of a regular confessor, one to whom they would go as they do to the family physician. Such a confessor can give the particular advice this soul needs, can shift approaches that prove ineffectual, be more lenient when leniency is desirable and inspire a soul to higher sanctity with the dogmatic truths he knows to be most stimulating and encouraging to this soul. In the act of contrition we promise amendment. Anyone serious about that promise wants to know what he must do here and now to bring about

greater union of his soul with God. It is rare in our day to get skilled advice without charge.

The Priest As Father

Lastly, in the confessional the priest earns his title as father. At the door of God's treasure house he stands with open arms. As judge he must stand above and apart from the sinner. As father he embraces the sinner and pulls him to his heart. The priest sees that this penitent is weak. Perhaps he has stayed too long away from the sacraments. He lives in a situation in which his faith is tried severely. The priest-judge must mete out a just sentence. The priest-father tempers the penance and takes upon himself the duty of satisfying all that divine justice demands.

The priest cannot die to satisfy for sin; but in the likeness of Christ he can suffer vicariously for the sinner he loves.

The Priest in the Pulpit

Outside the confessional the priest also exercises his power over the Mystical Body of Christ. He preaches the

word of God. An old pastor once said that when God gave His Apostles the power to preach He came as a mighty wind rushing . . . and that some sermons have never been any more than that. Most priests desperately want to preach well. I do not mean that their sermons will flow with cadences and periods, with action verbs and picture adjectives. I mean sermons that explain the Faith with a warmth of spirit that enlightens the mind and quickens the heart.

In the pulpit the priest faces many challenges. He has to sell the gospel; that is, he has to make the doctrine of Christ just as vital, just as relevant as it was centuries ago to the people of Palestine. He must avoid hackneyed catch words and phrases, translate the scientific idiom of theology into the current parlance of knowledgeable Americans. And he must do this in 10, perhaps 15 minutes. He makes a one-shot appearance; yet he must overcome the combined influence of newspapers, magazines and television. Critics are wont to point to television as the force in shaping Americans into a sedentary

and passive audience. Let me say that such influence is not readily apparent in Church. The priest still prays, "Lord, help them to sit still."

Or perhaps the ineffectiveness of preaching is attributable not to the hardness of the pews but to a hardness of heart. Have the people of God grown gross and dull of hearing?

Who Becomes a Priest?

I have heard it said of my co-laborers, "I respect him as a priest, but not as a man." Such comment seems to have a valid foundation, for we have often heard the argument that the unworthiness of priest or Bishop or even Pope does not impair the basic sanctity of the Church; nor has the whole Church been thereby led into error.

While it is true to say that sin belongs in no way to the Church, the axiom does have its limits. This man was chosen for the priesthood. He did not seek it on his own. That complex of qualities we call personality was very much an object of divine selection. Try as he might, no priest can reflect all the attractiveness of Christ. Nor was

Christ without both His admirers and His critics. He had to redirect the misguided praise of the pious woman who shouted "Blessed is the womb that bore Thee." He had to discourage the ambitions of those who sought only glory in His Kingdom: "Can you drink of My chalice?" He had to ignore the fame-seekers who urged Him to preach in Jerusalem and not in the hinterland of Galilee. There will always be some who want to remake Christ to their own image. Is it so hard to accept Him as He is?

There was a time when spiritual writers insisted that a strong interior attraction was a certain sign of a divine call, that without such a sensible longing, there could not be any real vocation. Such teaching is not entirely accurate.

Oftentimes there is no such longing present . . . and even when such a longing exists it is not the final criterion of a vocation. There are three external signs of a vocation which the candidate must possess: sufficient health, intelligence and virtue. Added to this must be the intention of giving oneself to

God's service in the priesthood. This intention and the three external signs are far more important than the absence or presence within the candidate of any sensible longing. And the final mark of a vocation comes at the moment of ordination when the Bishop accepts the candidate in the name of the Church.

In the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, we read the dramatic story of the divine calling of Peter, Paul and the other Apostles down to Matthias. Today, that same vocation — to come and follow Christ, to continue the work of Christ — is still given to men, but in a less spectacular manner.

But if this pamphlet has been successful, the point has been made that the priest and Bishop are an incarnation, are Christ, and that the vocation to embrace this state is divine. Christ is still the center of history; the priest — as Christ in our midst — is the center of *our* history.

The sacrament of Holy Orders is given through an imposition of the hands. Yet another moment in the ceremony is equally impressive. The priest

kneels before the Bishop and holds out his hands, palms upward. It is an attitude of offering and receiving. The Bishop rubs on those upturned palms the sacred oil. The priest retires, clasping his hands tightly and holding them sideways so that the oil cannot seep out.

In this rite the Church teaches us visibly that the priest is an anointed one, a Christ. Henceforth he belongs to God. And if he never offers the sacrifice of the Mass, if he never forgives a single sin, yet God has visited His people. And the promise is fulfilled, "I am with you all days."

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