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OTHER CHRISTS

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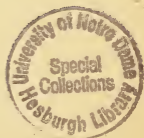


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by

RICHARD GINDER



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IT is hard to know whether to define the priesthood in terms of sacrifice and the altar, or to define the altar and sacrifice in terms of the priesthood. The ideas are so closely knit. Where you have a priesthood, there is bound to be sacrifice. The one calls for the other and so insistently that even our language will not hear of a non-sacrificing priesthood; the idea seems to be as self-contradicting as that of, say, hot ice.

The Jews had sacrifice from the beginning, but when their temple was overthrown and their nation dispersed, they had nowhere and no one to offer an accept-

able sacrifice, so to this day they have synagogues and schools in plenty but no altar; and they have rabbis by thousands, but no priests. Likewise when the innovators of the sixteenth century destroyed the altar and banished the Mass, they were logical enough to realize that their presiding elders were no longer priests. "Parsons" they called them, "Ministers of the Word," "Preachers," — anything but priests.

But we Catholics keep a fast grip on our ancient priesthood. Priests hid in hedges and closets, they disguised themselves, they worked in secret, and still they were ferreted out and put on the rack, yet not for an instant would they deny that they were priests. Preachers?—not a bit of it. These offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Twist the rack! kindle the torch! knot the rope! these were priests!

Jesus was a priest—the High Priest of

the New Testament. His whole life was a sacrifice laid at the feet of His Heavenly Father. What priest made the offering?—was it Caiphas?—Pilate—the soldier with the lance? They did not take Christ's life. Any power over Him was given them from on high. Calvary was not murder, much less suicide; Jesus laid down His life, a Priest, offering himself as the Victim of His Love.

“Having therefore a great High Priest who has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. . . . For Jesus, in the days of His earthly life, with a loud cry and tears, offered up prayers and supplications to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His reverent submission. And He, Son though He was, learned obedience from the things that He suffered, and when perfected, He became to all who obey Him the cause of eternal salvation, called by God a High

Priest according to the order of Melchisedech.”¹

Jesus, at His coming, absorbed the priesthood of the Old Law in Himself. He became, and is, the Archpriest, eminently pleasing to the Father; so perfect that until the end of time God will consider no priesthood, no sacrifice, no teaching other than that of Jesus.

“Other Christs”

But our Lord, before leaving the earth, made provision for the continuation of His powers. He would multiply Himself as often as necessary, entrusting His own priesthood to the agency of men, especially chosen for their zeal and piety; so that when Catholics speak of their priests as “Other Christs,” it is more than pious hyperbole.

Catholic priests share in the universal priesthood of Jesus. They have no power

1. Heb. V. Passim.

apart from Him. They forgive sins and consecrate the bread and wine at Mass, they anoint the sick and bless what is brought before them, but they are not using their own powers; they are acting for Christ. They are the executors of an inheritance, the administrators of a spiritual treasury.

Do priests offer the Mass? No: say rather that Jesus offers the sacrifice through them. He borrows their hands to raise Himself into the sight of His Father. He uses their lips in changing the bread to Himself; He acts through them, yet, still, it is Christ who acts.

There is one priesthood of the New Law, and one Priest. Everything goes from us to God through Jesus and everything comes to us from God through Him. There is no prayer that does not end "through Christ, Our Lord." Mortal priests are His vicars, His ambassadors, His min-

isters, His representatives; but, remember, it is Christ at work. It is He who ratifies the decisions made in His name.

The priesthood, then, implies a certain power. Jesus, as a priest, was different from other men. "And no man takes the honor to himself."² It is not for every Tom, Dick and Harry to appoint himself a priest. In fact, a self-appointed priest is no priest at all. The election must be made by God, and there must be a passing on of power.

Our Lord established St. Peter as the head of His Church. That apostle must have been able to pass on his powers. Suppose some trouble-makers had come clamoring to receive the powers of the priesthood, and suppose St. Peter had refused to grant them. That person could clamor for the rest of his natural days, but his anxiety would not make him a priest—no, not even if he stopped clamoring and

2. Heb. V. 4

lied and said he had been properly ordained, not by St. Peter, but by some other apostle. But suppose he did go off somewhere, and people believed his lie and accepted him as a bishop, and he went on and attempted to ordain priests and bishops in his new neighborhood. Would they have power? How could they? All the good faith in the world will not tie that man or his dupes in with the powers of Christ. Our Lord may be thought of as a rock, fastening the apostles to Himself, as so many great staples and they, in their turn, putting others in touch with the powers of Christ by joining them to themselves as links in a chain. Always, of course, there had to be that connection with Christ, coming through election and ordination by someone who already had that apostolic power.

That is only common sense. "Do not lay hands hastily upon anyone."³ Why not?

3. I Tim. V, 22

Because an irresponsible person in the community with power to forgive sins could do harm rather than good. And his power to convert bread into the body of the Lord might be the occasion of sacrilege. But notice that there must be a laying on of hands by someone in good standing.

A Self-Sacrificing Priesthood

Catholic priests do not take their divine commission lightly. They keep the ideal of sacrifice constantly before their eyes, and before a man may even touch the body of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, the Church calls on him to make the great personal sacrifice of family life in perpetuity. He is to keep a spotless purity. He is to renounce pleasures of the flesh, however legitimate, and the consolations of married life. He is to vow an everlasting devotion to his ministry. He is to live henceforth for Christ. The altar is to occupy the center of his life, the Church is to be his home.

“Whosoever offers the sacrifice, must become a sharer in that sacrifice,” says St. Thomas Aquinas, “because the external sacrifice which is offered, is the sign of an interior sacrifice by which one offers himself to God.”

Priests are men of gravity. They dress in black. The Church allows them just enough salary to keep them in the simple dignity which becomes their state. Like their Master, they sanctify themselves that their people also may be sanctified in truth.⁴ Seated in the confessional, they are living arguments on behalf of virtue, for no one can sincerely protest the impossibility of continence and sobriety to a priest.

There is a great difference between the attitude of the Catholic to his priest and the non-Catholic to his minister. The non-Catholic has ordinarily a much more personalized relationship with the preacher.

⁴. Jn. XVII, 19

He tries to know the man personally and his family. He advises and offers suggestions and criticisms on sermons and the conduct of the parish. Ask him what church he goes to and he will probably answer, "To the Rev. Mr. So-and-so's church." He may have had a voice in the choosing of his present pastor and the dismissal of the previous incumbent.

A Catholic sees the priest first and the man afterward. To him it does not much matter whether his pastor or the curate be a good speaker, or whether he choose to talk on the Creed or the Commandments. The important thing is: "Here is a priest of God, with the Christ-like power of offering the Mass and forgiving sins. That is what matters essentially. This man has devoted his life to the priesthood. He has been called by the Lord and has made personal sacrifices which I, perhaps, would find most difficult. He has been endued

with other-worldly power and placed in charge of this congregation by our bishop. He is a priest. I raise my hat to him.”

As a man, the priest may not have a powerful personality; he may not be much of an administrator. But those things enter in only casually.

Ruling the Church of God

Can we not summarize this difference in viewpoints by saying that a priest—and the whole Catholic Church, for all that matters—governs with authority?

The Catholic conceives of priestly power as coming from the top downward. He believes heart and soul in what he affectionately calls his Holy Mother, the Church. In that name, he recognizes her love for him and her deep-rooted concern in his well being. He concedes that she gave him spiritual birth and that she will, in the ordinary course of events, usher him into eternity. But a mother rules her house-

hold. She must, if she is to educate and develop the best in her children. We know, though, that a mother's directions are not despotic. She is not harsh. She does not expect the impossible, and she gives far more than she asks.

Catholics love their priests, not so much this priest or that one, but all priests. They are proud of them. The priest is their wise and devoted friend: wise because the Church sent him through four years of college and then spent four more years grounding him in the only true wisdom, teaching him to evaluate everything in the light of eternity, giving him facility in habits of self-sacrifice; devoted—well, the Catholic thinks of century after century during which the priests stayed with their people, fighting for their rights, guarding their homes and families, resisting every aggression. The Catholic thinks of the catacombs, of the hedge-priests in seven-

teenth-century Ireland, of the priests in disguise, working among their people in revolutionary Spain and anti-clerical Mexico. The priest fears no one but God. He is not over awed by wealth or prestige. His speech will be sincere to the face of a dictator or grave-digger. And best of all, the Catholic remembers how, time after time, he has fallen; and how some priest has raised him up again and dried his tears, and dusted his clothes, and given him fresh hope and strength in the sacrament of forgiveness.

Naturally, a priest with such ideals and such exalted powers, needs heavenly help. He could not hope to lead his congregation in holiness if he had not the special assistance of our Lord—a help which is given and pledged forever in the sacrament of holy orders. In the laying on of hands by a bishop, the aspirant is anchored fast to Christ. He becomes a link in that

chain stretching from the apostles across the ages to our own day. "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you."⁵

He has received his commission; he is afire with the Gospel of Christ; he is mighty with the powers of Christ; now he is able to consecrate and watch over the body of his Lord, and to fashion and shape his charges after the pattern of the great Priest, Jesus Christ.

5. Jn. XX, 22



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