



REFLECTIONS on PRIESTHOOD
by
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Talk about priesthood today is often controversial and, indeed, political. Media interest in the priesthood is mostly focussed on the “shortage” of priests and on problems of priests. That colours the way we all think and worry about priesthood. But it should not be allowed to dominate or control our perception of priesthood. In fact, for most Catholics, their view of priesthood is formed principally by their experience of their own priest. In the vast majority of cases, this is a positive experience and the shortage of priests has, if anything, made people all the more appreciative of them. I wish to reflect on priesthood in a way that is not controlled either by the media preoccupations or by the need to react against them. The *reality* of priesthood needs no defence. Nor should it be overly protected or romanticised. Priesthood is a gift that is received in faith within the Catholic Church. The gift is understood and celebrated both by those who exercise it and by all who believe in it. I would like to say something about the personal life of a priest, consider three aspects of priestly life and work, and finally look at some tensions within priestly life – creative tensions that are inherent in being a priest.

I want to begin by talking about freedom. I would suggest that being a priest involves a particular quality of freedom and involves engaging with people at the level of *their* deepest freedom. I say a particular quality of freedom since a priest’s life can be viewed and, indeed, can be experienced very much as a constraint. A priest is not paid a professional salary, he doesn’t choose where he works or what exactly he does, and he lives a celibate life. Few working conditions could go more against the grain particularly in those countries most affected by the shortage of priests. Every aspect of our life is affected by this particular lifestyle. Celibacy is, of course, the aspect of priesthood which receives most attention. It fascinates and is misunderstood. The newspapers speak of fidelity or infidelity to a priest’s “vows”. This always seems to me to be misleading language since it suggests promising to do something that is at odds with what you really want to do. That doesn’t really fit, even for those who find it very hard. One of the more useful things I have heard suggested about celibacy is that it is better seen as a process than as a state. It is a process of growing, maturing, befriending, of being free, of suffering and of struggle. It has its unique costs and its unique rewards. Sometimes people envy priests. Sometimes they pity them. Both sentiments suggest a superficial appreciation of what being a priest is actually like.

There are two aspects of priesthood that should constantly be borne in mind. One is to do with prayer. Students for the priesthood are frequently told by their seminary staff and retreat-givers that prayer must be the bedrock of their whole lives. This is simply and absolutely true. A priest must find his bearings in prayer. Prayer must be the place to which he will always return no matter what happens in his life and no matter how far he strays from it. I dislike the phrase “going off the rails” but if it means anything, it means stopping praying. Celibacy shapes and gives context to a priest’s prayer life, and it also shapes the pattern and dynamics of his friendships. The famous book on friendship by St Aelred of Rievaulx is really a reflection on the quality of friendships that is characteristic of celibate people. That may be why it reads somewhat oddly in the strongly sexualised culture in which we live. Indeed, one of the main issues surrounding celibacy is that of finding the appropriate support structures in which to live it peacefully. These take many forms: the presbyterate and the parish are the structural support networks. But there is also the need for groups

and for friendships that actively support and enthuse priests in their particular way of life.

So, celibacy creates the framework for a special kind of freedom. So, too, do the other “constraints” on priestly life. Being put in a situation which is not of one’s own choosing creates a challenge that one simply has to rise to. Certainly we are claiming and living a very particular kind of life that requires energy, resourcefulness, taking care of ourselves and letting others take care of us. But it also involves recognising the unique potential of our way of living and of relating to people. This is something people recognise and relate to. It is part of Catholics’ experience – part of the “chemistry” of Catholic culture.

In the light of that I want to consider three aspects of priestly life and work – activities which engage this freedom and are intimately bound up with it.

The first I simply call *Ministry*. A few years ago my attention was drawn to the great work on priesthood by St Gregory Nazianzen entitled *De Fuga*. It was written after Gregory had fled from the imminent prospect of ordination. Eventually he returned and was ordained and the book is an exposition of the awesome reality of priesthood from which Gregory initially fled. What he found so daunting about priesthood was the very profound level at which the priest engages with people. He is concerned with their souls. His job is the “cura animarum”. This expression has come to focus the specificity of priesthood. In modern parlance, we might say it means care and responsibility for people at the deepest level of their being. To put in the language I have already used, the ministry of the priest engages people at the level of *their* deepest freedom. Gregory presents this as the freedom to choose between the lower nature and the higher nature. The presupposition is that people are free: free to believe, free to choose good and reject evil. Gregory contrasts this engagement with the inner man with the work of doctors who are concerned with the well-being of the body. Although Gregory is speaking out of a culture very remote from our own, he identifies the reality that remains constitutive of priesthood in a very different religious and intellectual culture, namely the care of souls. And it is something specifically Christian. Gregory further explains Christian priesthood by saying that the priest is someone who makes the objective reality of Christ’s death and resurrection a personal reality to the lives of those to whom he ministers. He mediates the death and resurrection of Christ so that it is appropriated in a personal way by those to whom he ministers. This is a very profound way of understanding the priest’s sacramental ministry. It is something that happens in all the sacraments but it would be true to say that the Sacrament of Reconciliation focuses most sharply this whole understanding of priesthood. Certainly many who are not Catholics would see Confession as the thing that characterises it most specifically. Moreover – and very importantly - in all the sacraments the priest mediates what has been given to him. He is the minister of a grace which he himself has received and, in his own person, he is the source of grace for others. It is different from the ministry of a Protestant pastor since he would not consider ministry as involving and issuing from his own person in quite the way a Catholic priest does. And it is this that shapes the way a Catholic priest relates to his people and they to him. There is an intimacy and an immediacy created both by his position as a celibate and also by his being a channel of grace. His presence and availability are vital, especially in times of trouble and at key moments in people’s lives. Being present and available is both very costly and very life-giving for the priest himself. It is his identity – what he needs to do.

But a priest does not just relate to people as individuals, and that brings me to the second aspect of priesthood. The centre of a priest's life, the main locus for making the paschal mystery present in the lives of people, is the Eucharist. Prayer is the heart of a priest's life and the Mass is the fundamental prayer. Through this prayer he engages and explores his freedom and does this through the *gathering* of people for the Eucharist. The priest relates to his people both as individuals and as a gathered people. They are his community, his family. The decree on the priesthood of Vatican II says "...the Eucharistic Celebration is the centre of the assembly of the faithful over which the priest presides" and "...no Christian community is built up which does not gain from the liturgy on the Eucharist."

Without the priesthood there is no Eucharist, and the Eucharist is the centre of the life of the Church. Add to this the other affirmation of Vatican II that the Church is "...a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men" (LG,1), and it is clear that communion among people is brought about through Eucharist and through priesthood. The bonding of God with his people is effected through the Eucharist and this is the source and basis of true community. And this happens because, in the Eucharist, the death of Jesus is made present: his sacrifice is present reality: the people offer it with the priest and so become a living sacrifice to God. This Eucharistic community is community as God intends it should be. People hear the Word of God together, they exchange the peace, they participate together in the Body and Blood of the Lord and they are sent out to love and serve the Lord.

A vital and integral part of the Mass is the homily, and preaching is the third aspect of this life on which I would focus. Again, preaching is about the death and resurrection of Christ. That is our message; that is our Good News. And preaching is a very special art; a unique way of addressing people that is specific to the liturgy and specific to the context of Faith. It has a two-fold dynamism in that we communicate what we have received. St Thomas defined preaching as "*contemplare et contemplata aliis dare*" to contemplate and give to others that which has been contemplated. Our best sermons are those that we preach to ourselves; when we speak from our own hearing of the Word of God; when we share that or mediate it to others. And yet, although we are imparting what we have received, a good sermon will always be original; it will originate in our freedom, our vision, our imagination, in our suffering, hope and longing. But it will also grow out of the situation of the people entrusted to our care. It will be for them and about them. For this we need to know, love and care about our people. Each of us has a voice and the word we speak must not be something borrowed or alien, but issuing from our own prayer and our relationship with our people

Leading on from that I would finally suggest there is then a kind of tension within the experience of priesthood which operates at several different levels. The scriptural texts that the Church frequently draws on to explore the meaning of vocation articulate this tension very powerfully. A recurring pattern is the contrast between the reality of being called and the inner resistance of the one being called, and the resistance can take a number of forms. Isaiah protests he is a man of unclean lips and dwells with a people who are unclean. He feels unworthy. Jeremiah insists that he is a child: he does not know how to speak. He feels inadequate. Mary wonders how this can be. She does not understand.

I suggest that this pattern tells us something profound about the mystery of priesthood. We can be secure in our calling to the priesthood, but it is a security that is grounded in Faith, not in any kind of scientific certainty. But because of the nature of Faith, it is entirely compatible with vocation that we should experience inadequacy and doubt. Jesus said to his apostles: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Responding to a vocation can be experienced as a response to the unseen and unknown so that confidence about vocation needs to issue constantly from Faith and prayer. Without these things, it loses its context and its power. But there is tension, too, precisely within confidence in one's own vocation. A priest can and should find strength in those passages of Scripture where God's chosen ones are strongly confirmed in their calling. We can think of key moments in the stories of Abraham and King David as well as in the lives of the prophets where the Lord affirms their place in God's purposes. Conviction about one's own calling and anointing is a great grace and a great source of spiritual power. It is also profoundly freeing since it means that we are not dependent on the approval of other people. But precisely here lies a tension and this, too, has its danger. The Scriptures bear witness to the abuse of power by those whom God has called. We must have confidence in our own calling, but once again, we see that that confidence must continue to issue from Faith. Without that and without a habit of humility and receptivity, confidence in one's vocation can be a snare and a danger.

Discovering and living the mystery of vocation lies then within the framework of Faith. We are what it is given to us to be. We say what it is given to us to say. Most of all, we are to be to others what the Lord is to us. Jesus says to Peter three times: "Peter, do you love me?" One can't help but think of the three times that Peter denied that he knew Christ. It is as if the Lord seeks reassurance and makes him say three times: "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." And it is in response to his protestations of love for Jesus that the Lord says: "Feed my lambs; Feed my lambs; Feed my sheep." The Lord is entrusting his people to Peter: they are our treasure. That is what is given to us in priesthood. The vocation, the mystery, the power of priesthood are given to us as we respond with faith and love to the Lord. That is the source and origin of it all. God has created and called us to freedom: if we believe in God's call, if we allow the Lord to love us and engage our freedom in love of him, then we are free indeed: we have nothing to fear and we will be the source of unlimited power and grace to the world.