

A PRIEST FOREVER

When saying Mass a few days ago I paused to reflect on a phrase from the psalms in the Communion Antiphon: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*¹ It reminded me of another psalm which was used in the rite of tonsure: *The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup.*² Christ Himself is placed in the hands of priests who thus become *the stewards of the mysteries* — of the wonders — *of God.*³

Next summer some fifty members of Opus Dei will receive Holy Orders. Since 1944 small groups of members of the Work have been ordained, each ordination giving witness to the working of God's grace and to service to the Church. And yet each year some people are surprised. How is it, they ask, that thirty, forty or fifty men whose lives are so rich in achievement and so full of promise, are ready to become priests? I should like today to dwell on this subject — though I run the risk of adding to people's bewilderment.

Why be a priest?

The sacrament of Holy Orders is going to be conferred on this group of members of the Work who have had very substantial experience, perhaps over many years, in medicine, law, engineering, architecture and many other professional activities. They are men whose work would allow them to aspire to more or less prominent positions in society.

They are being ordained to serve. They are not being ordained to give orders or to attract attention, but rather to give themselves to the service of all souls in a divine and continuous silence. When they become priests, they will not allow themselves to yield to the temptation to imitate the occupations of lay people — even though they are well able to do that work because they have been at it until now, and have acquired a lay outlook which they will never lose.

Their competence in the various branches of human knowledge such as history, natural sciences, psychology, law and sociology is a necessary feature of this lay outlook. But it will not lead them to put themselves forward as priest-psychologists, priest-biologists or priest-sociologists: they receive the sacrament of Holy Orders to become nothing other than *priest-priests*, priests through and through.

They probably know more about a wide range of secular, human matters than many lay people. But the moment they are ordained they cheerfully silence this competence and concentrate on fortifying themselves through continuous prayer so as to speak only of God, to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. If I can put it this way, I would say that this is their new professional work. To it they will devote their whole day and find that they still have not enough time to do all that has to be done. They have constantly to study theology; they must give spiritual guidance to very many souls, hear many confessions, preach tirelessly and pray a great deal; their heart must always be focused on the tabernacle, where He who has chosen us to be his own is really present. Their life is a wonderful self-surrender, full of joy, though like everyone they will meet up with difficulties.

¹ Ps 22:1 *Communion Antiphon*, Mass for Saturday in the Fourth Week of Lent

² Ps 15:5

³ 1 Cor 4:1

As I said, all this may serve to increase people's surprise. Perhaps some may still ask themselves: What is the point of this renunciation of so many good and noble things of the earth? These men could have had a successful professional career. Through their example they could have exerted a Christian influence on society, on cultural, educational, financial and many other aspects of civil life.

Others will remind you that in many places today the idea of the priesthood is very confused. They keep on saying that you must search for the *identity* of the priest and they question the value of giving oneself to God in the priesthood in present-day society. And then others will ask how it is that, at a time when vocations to the priesthood are in short supply, this very vocation should arise among Christians who, thanks to their own efforts, have already found their place in society.

Priests and lay people

I can understand this surprise, but it would be insincere of me to say that I share it. These men become priests of their own free will, because they want to, and this is a very supernatural reason. They know that they are not renouncing anything in the normal sense of the word. Through their vocation to Opus Dei they have been devoted to the service of the Church and of all souls. This full, divine vocation led them to sanctify their work to sanctify themselves in their work and to seek the sanctification of others in the context of their professional relationships.

The members of Opus Dei whether priests or lay people, are ordinary Christians, and like all Christians, they are addressed by Saint Peter in these words:⁴ *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.*

As Christian faithful, priests and lay people share one and the same condition, for God our Lord has called us to the fullness of charity which is holiness: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*⁵

There is no such thing as second-class holiness. Either we put up a constant fight to stay in the grace of God and imitate Christ, our Model, or we desert in that divine battle. God invites everyone; each person can become holy in his own state in life. In Opus Dei this passion for holiness, in spite of individual errors and failings, does not vary from priests to lay people; and besides, priests make up a very small part compared with the total number of members.

So if you look at things with the eyes of faith, there is no question of renunciation on entering the priesthood; nor does the priesthood imply a sort of summit of vocation to Opus Dei. Holiness does not depend on your state in life (married or single, widowed or ordained) but on the way you personally respond to the grace you receive. This grace teaches us to put away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light: which is serenity, peace and joyful service, full of sacrifice to all mankind.⁶

⁴ 1 Pet 2:9-10

⁵ Eph 1:3-4

⁶ cf Rom 13:12

The dignity of the priesthood

The priesthood leads one to serve God in a state which, in itself, is no better or worse than any other: it is simply different. But the priestly vocation is invested with a dignity and greatness which has no equal on earth. Saint Catherine of Siena put these words on Jesus' lips: *I do not wish the respect which priests should be given to be in any way diminished; for the reverence and respect which is shown them is not referred to them but to Me, by virtue of the Blood which I have given to them to administer. Were it not for this, you should render them the same reverence as lay people, and no more... You must not offend them; by offending them you offend Me and not them. Therefore I forbid it and I have laid it down that you shall not touch my Christs.*⁷

Some people keep searching for what they call the identity of the priest. How clearly Saint Catherine expresses it! What is the identity of the priest? That of Christ. All of us Christians can and should be not just other Christs, *alter Christus*, but Christ himself: *ipse Christus!* But in the priest this happens in a direct way, by virtue of the sacrament.

*To accomplish so great a work — the work of redemption — Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister, 'the same now offering through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the Cross, but especially under the eucharistic species.'*⁸ The sacrament of Orders, in effect, equips the priest to lend Our Lord his voice, his hands, his whole being. It is Jesus Christ who, in the Holy Mass, through the words of the consecration, changes the substance of the bread and wine into his Body, Soul, Blood and Divinity.

This is the source of the priest's incomparable dignity. It is a greatness which is on loan: it is completely compatible with my own littleness. I pray to God our Lord to give all of us priests the grace to perform holy things in a holy way, to reflect in every aspect of our lives the wonders of the greatness of God. *Those of us who celebrate the mysteries of the Passion of Our Lord must imitate what we perform. And then the host will take our place before God because we render ourselves hosts.*⁹

If you ever come across a priest who apparently does not seem to be following the teaching of the Gospel — do not judge him, let God judge him — bear in mind that if he celebrates Mass validly, with the intention of consecrating, Our Lord will still come down into his hands, however unworthy they are. Where could you find greater self-surrender and annihilation? Here it is greater than in Bethlehem or on Calvary. Why? Because Jesus' heart, filled with a desire to redeem, does not want anyone to be able to say that he has not been called. He goes out to meet those who do not seek Him.

That is Love! There is no other explanation for it. When it comes to speaking of Christ's Love, we are lost for words. He has so abased Himself that He accepts everything; He exposes Himself to everything — to sacrilege, to blasphemy and to the cold indifference of so many people — in order to offer even one man the chance of hearing the beating of his Heart in his wounded side.

⁷ St Catherine of Siena, *Dialogues*, ch 116; cf Ps 104:15

⁸ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7; cf Council of Trent, *Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass*, ch 2

⁹ St Gregory the Great, *Dialogue*, 4,59

Here we have the priest's identity: he is a direct and daily instrument of the saving grace which Christ has won for us. If you grasp this, if you meditate on it in the active silence of prayer, how could you ever think of the priesthood in terms of renunciation? It is a gain, an incalculable gain. Our mother Mary, the holiest of creatures — only God is holier — brought Jesus Christ into the world just once; priests bring him on earth, to our soul and body, every day: Christ comes to be our food, to give us life, to be, even now, a pledge of future life.

The common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood

A priest is no more a man or a Christian than any ordinary lay person. That is why it is so important for a priest to be deeply humble. He must understand that these words of Saint Paul also apply to him in a special way: *What have you that you did not receive?*¹⁰ What he has received... is God! He has received the power to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the Holy Mass (the principal purpose of priestly ordination), to forgive sins, to administer the other sacraments and to preach with authority the Word of God, governing the rest of the faithful in those matters which refer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

*While it indeed presupposes the sacraments of Christian initiation, the priesthood of priests is nevertheless conferred by its own special sacrament. Through that sacrament priests, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are marked with a special character and are so configured to Christ the Priest that they can act in the person of Christ the Head.*¹¹ That is the way the Church is. It does not depend on man's whim but on the express will of Jesus Christ its founder. *Sacrifice and priesthood are so united by God's ordination, that in both laws — the old and the new covenant — both have existed. Since therefore the Catholic Church in the New Testament has received, through the Lord's institution, the visible sacrifice of the Eucharist, we must also hold that she has a new priesthood, visible and external, which has taken the place of the old priesthood.*¹²

In those who have been ordained, the ministerial priesthood is added to the common priesthood of all of the faithful. Therefore, although it would be a serious error to argue that a priest is more a member of the faithful than an unordained Christian is, it can, on the other hand, be said that he is more a priest: like all Christians he belongs to the priestly people redeemed by Christ, and in addition to this he is marked with a character of the priestly ministry which differentiates him *essentially and not only in degree*¹³ from the common priesthood of the faithful.

I cannot understand why some priests are so eager to be indistinguishable from other Christians, forgetting or neglecting their specific mission in the Church, that for which they have been ordained. They seem to think that Christians want to see the priest as just another man. That is not so. They want to find in the priest those virtues proper to every Christian and, indeed, every honourable man: understanding, justice, a life of work — priestly work, in this instance — and good manners.

But the faithful also want to be able to recognise clearly the priestly character: they expect the priest to pray, not to refuse to administer the sacraments; they expect him to be open to everyone and not set himself up to take charge of people or become an aggressive leader of

¹⁰ 1 Cor 4:7

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, Decree, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 2

¹² Council of Trent, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Order*, ch 1, Dz-Sch 1764 (957)

¹³ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 10

human factions, of whatever shade.¹⁴ They expect him to bring love and devotion to the celebration of the Holy Mass, to sit in the confessional, to console the sick and the troubled; to teach sound doctrine to children and adults, to preach the Word of God and no mere human science which — no matter how well he may know it — is not the knowledge that saves and brings eternal life; they expect him to give counsel and be charitable to those in need.

In a word: they ask the priest to learn how not to hamper the presence of Christ in him, especially in those moments when he is offering the Sacrifice of the Body and Blood and when, in God's name, he forgives sins in secret, private sacramental confession. The administration of these two sacraments has so important a part in the priest's mission that everything should hinge on it. Other priestly tasks, such as preaching and giving instruction in the faith, would lack solid foundation if they were not aimed at teaching people to relate to Christ, to meet Him in the loving tribunal of penance and in the unbloody renewal of the Sacrifice of Calvary, the Mass.

Let me dwell just a little longer on the Holy Sacrifice: for if the Mass is, for us, the centre and root of our lives as Christians, it must be so in a special way in the priest's life. A priest who, for no good reason, does not celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the altar every day,¹⁵ would show little love of God. It would be as though he wanted to reproach Christ by stating that he did not share Christ's desire for redemption, that he did not understand his impatience to give Himself, defenceless, as food for the soul.

A priest to say Mass

We must remember that all of us priests, saints or sinners, are not ourselves when we celebrate Holy Mass. We are Christ, who renews on the altar his divine sacrifice of Calvary. *In the mystery of the eucharistic sacrifice, in which priests fulfil their principal function, the work of our redemption is continually carried out. For this reason its daily celebration is earnestly recommended. This celebration is an act of Christ and the Church even if it is impossible for the faithful to be present.*¹⁶

The Council of Trent teaches that *in the Mass is performed, contained and sacrificed, in an unbloody manner, that same Christ who once and for all offered Himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the Cross... thus the Victim is one and the same; and He who is now offered through the ministry of priests is the same as He who offered Himself on the Cross; only the manner of offering is different.*¹⁷

The fact that the faithful attend or do not attend Holy Mass in no way changes this truth of faith. When I celebrate Mass surrounded by people I am very happy; I don't need to think of myself as president of any kind of assembly. I am, on the one hand, a member of the faithful like the others; but, above all, I am Christ at the Altar! I am renewing in an unbloody manner the divine Sacrifice of Calvary and I am consecrating, *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. I really represent Jesus Christ, for I am lending him my body, my voice, my hands and my poor heart, so often stained, which I want Him to purify.

When I celebrate Mass with just one person to serve it, the people are present also. I feel that there, with me, are all Catholics, all believers, and also all those who do not believe. All God's

¹⁴ cf Second Vatican Council, Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 6

¹⁵ cf *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 13

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Council of Trent, *Doctrine on the most holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, Dz-Sch 1743 (940)

creatures are there — the earth and the sea and the sky, and the animals and plants — the whole of creation giving glory to the Lord.

And especially I will say, using the words of the Second Vatican Council, that *we are most closely united to the worshipping church in heaven as we join with and venerate first of all the memory of the glorious ever Virgin Mary, of Saint Joseph and the blessed apostles and martyrs, and of all the saints.*¹⁸

I ask all Christians to pray earnestly for us priests that we learn to perform the Holy Sacrifice in a holy way. I ask you to show a deep love for the Holy Mass and in this way to encourage us priests to celebrate it respectfully, with divine and human dignity: looking after the cleanliness of the vestments and other things used for worship, devoutly, without rushing.

Why the hurry? Do people in love hurry when they are saying goodbye? They seem to be going and then they don't go; they turn back once and again; they repeat quite ordinary words as if they had just discovered their meaning... please don't take exception to my applying to the things of God the example of noble and fine human love. If we love God with our heart of flesh — and we have no other — we will not be in a hurry to finish this meeting, this loving appointment with Him.

Some priests take it all very coolly. They don't mind stringing out the readings, announcements and notices until we are tired of them. But when the main part of the Mass arrives, the Sacrifice proper, they actually rush. This means that the rest of the faithful do not devoutly adore Christ, Priest and Victim; nor do they learn to thank Him, calmly and respectfully, after Mass for his having come among us once again.

In the Holy Mass, all the affections and needs of a Christian's heart find their best channel: through Christ the Mass leads to the Father in the Holy Spirit. The priest should make a special effort to ensure that people know this and put it into practice. No other activity should, normally, take precedence over this task of teaching people to love and venerate the Holy Eucharist.

*The priest carries out two acts: the principal one is an action on the true Body of Christ; the secondary one affects the Mystical Body of Christ. The second act or ministry depends on the first, but the reverse is not the case.*¹⁹

Therefore the most important part of the priestly ministry consists in trying to get Catholics to approach the Holy Sacrifice with growing purity, humility and devotion. If a priest strives to do this, he will not be cheated, nor will he defraud the consciences of his fellow Christians.

In the Holy Mass what we do is adore: we fulfil lovingly the first duty of a creature to his Creator: *You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.*²⁰ Not the cold, external adoration of a servant, but an intimate esteem and attachment that befits the tender love of a son.

In the Holy Mass we find the perfect opportunity to atone for our sins and the sins of all men, so as to be able to say with Saint Paul that we are completing in our flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.²¹ No one is an isolated individual in this world; no one can consider

¹⁸ *Lumen gentium*, 50

¹⁹ St Thomas, *S. Th. Supl* q.36 a2 ad1

²⁰ Deut 6:13; Matt 4:10

²¹ cf Col 1:24

himself completely free from blame for the evil that is done on earth, which is the result of original sin and the sum total of many Personal sins. Let us love sacrifice; let us seek atonement. How? By uniting ourselves in the Mass to Christ, who is Priest and Victim. He is always the one who bears the tremendous weight of the infidelities of men — your infidelities and mine.

The Sacrifice of Calvary is an infinite expression of Christ's generosity. It is true that each of us is very much out for himself; but God our Lord does not mind if we lay all our needs before Him at Mass. Who doesn't have things to ask for? Lord, this illness... Lord, this sorrow... Lord, that humiliation which I don't seem to be able to bear out of love for You... We desire the welfare, joy and happiness of the people in our own home; we are saddened by the condition of those who hunger and thirst for bread and for justice, of those who experience the bitterness of loneliness and of those who end their days without an affectionate smile or a helping hand.

But what really makes us suffer, the greatest human failure we want to remedy, is sin, separation from God, the danger that souls may be lost for all eternity. Our overriding desire when we celebrate Mass is the same as Christ's when he offered Himself on Calvary: to bring men to eternal glory in the Love of God.

Let us get used to speaking sincerely to our Lord when he comes down to the altar, an innocent Victim in the hands of the priest. Confidence in the help of God will give us a sensitivity of soul which is expressed in good works: charity, understanding, tender sympathy for those who suffer and for those who pretend to be happy enjoying false and empty joys, which soon turn to sadness.

Finally, we give thanks to God our Lord for the wonderful way He has given Himself up for us. Imagine, the Word made flesh has come to us as our food!... Inside us, inside our littleness, lies the Creator of heaven and earth!... The Virgin Mary was conceived without sin to prepare her to receive Christ in her womb. If our thanksgiving were in proportion to the difference between the gift and our desserts, should we not turn the whole day into a continuous Eucharist, a continuous thanksgiving? Do not leave the church almost immediately after receiving the Sacrament. Surely you have nothing so important on that you cannot give Our Lord ten minutes to say *thanks*. Let's not be mean. Love is repaid with love.

A Priest forever

A priest who says the Mass in this way — adoring, atoning, pleading, giving thanks, identifying himself with Christ and who teaches others to make the Sacrifice of the altar the centre and root of the Christian life really will show the incomparable value of his vocation, the value of that character with which he has been stamped and which he will never lose.

I know that you will understand what I mean when I say that, compared with a priest like that, those who behave as if they wanted to apologise for being ministers of God are nothing less than a failure — a human and Christian failure. It is most unfortunate because it leads them to give up the ministry, to ape lay people and to look for a second job which gradually takes over from the task which is proper to their vocation and their mission. Often when they flee from giving spiritual attention to souls, they tend to replace this with another occupation (moving into those areas which belong to lay people — social action and politics) and we get the phenomenon of *clericalism*, the true priestly mission gone wrong.

I do not wish to conclude on a sombre note which might sound pessimistic. The genuine Christian priesthood has not disappeared from God's Church. The teaching which we have

received from the divine lips of Jesus has not changed. There are many thousands of priests throughout the world who really do respond to their vocation, quietly, undramatically. They have not fallen into the temptation to throw overboard a treasure of holiness and grace which has existed in the Church from the very beginning.

It warms my heart to think of the quiet human and supernatural dignity of those brothers of mine, scattered throughout the world. It is only right that they should now feel themselves surrounded by the friendship, help and affection of many Christians. And when the moment comes for them to enter God's presence, Jesus will go out to meet them. He will glorify forever those who have acted on earth in his Person and in his name. He will shower them with that grace of which they have been ministers.

Let us return again to those members of Opus Dei who are being ordained next summer. Do please pray for them, so that they will always be faithful, devout, learned, committed and happy priests. Commend them especially to our Lady. Ask her to take special care of those who will spend their lives serving her Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Priest.