

CHRIST, PRIEST AND POET

By JOHN B. FOLEY

THE ROLES of priest and poet seem at first glance to be related only by accident. The intersection of Hopkins's Jesuit vocation with his poetic ability gave him at least seven years pause during which he wrote only occasional pieces.¹ Without trying to retrace Hopkins's steps in this journey, perhaps we still could ask here whether we find any common path for priesthood and poetry, or whether we must leave them to their different roads.

When Jesus looked upon the crowd he saw them as sheep without a shepherd, gone astray, each taking its own path (Isai 53,6). Jesus desired to lead and to unite them. Perhaps this joining together that he wanted for them, this convergence with their God and with each other, could be seen as a defining characteristic of Christian spirituality. Jesus prayed 'that they all be one, Father, as you are in me and I in you' (Jn 17,21). Could this prayer be the central desire of God for the world? At least, as the present article will argue, it represents the deepest bedrock of priesthood and of the poet. Let us look at poetic utterance and at priestly service, seeking in each that significant moment when the several conspire to become one. Our argument will proceed in five stages.

Poetic creation as an act of convergence

Some misconceptions have to be cleared away as we approach the subject of poetic activity.² For instance, a popular but unreflective view might hold that a work of art is meant to be an imitation of something in nature. In such an opinion the crafted work could be judged by the degree to which it simulates that which it depicts. A painting of a lake looks like a lake. But if this were true, cleverly made plastic flowers would qualify as great works of art.

It is not the poem itself or the painting that imitates nature, it is the action within the soul of the person making poetry or art or music, the process itself, that resembles certain key moments in nature. The poem issues from some sort of profound union, something too much alive to be a static manufacturing process. Art imitates nature in that there is a primordial moment in living creatures when two become one and bring forth a third: the action of conception and birth.

Here again, when people speak of birth and what leads up to it, they are imprecise just where they need precision. They tend to think of a man and woman who come together in sexual union, with the man as the actor and the woman as reactor, as a result of which a child is brought into being—like turning on a switch. But, a better and more exact way to say it would be this: 'part of the woman's reality (ovum) meets part of the man's reality (sperm) and the two unite as one'.

This uniting of two distinct realities is the real meaning of conception. The egg really is the woman, and the sperm really is the man, each transporting the essence of the person. The man/woman reality that results, what we call the fertilized egg, does not cause the child, it *is* the child. A new individual, like no other, is formed from the united, converged reality of the two.³

This description fits also the creation of a poem, or any other true work of art. The poet is conjoined to the world about him or her, is made fertile by it, is ravished by it. The reality of the world of experience becomes simultaneously the reality of the poetic soul, in a confluence that can truly be called 'conception'.⁴ Two kinds of experience enter in. There is the broader spectrum, the cumulative unfolding of life before poetic senses and intuition. And there are those privileged moments when a particular scene captivates, as when Hopkins 'caught this morning morning's minion', or grieved 'Felix Randal the farrier', or lay 'wrestling with (my God!) my God'. These happenings so tinge the inner soul of the poet that the soul conceives.

The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong
 Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
 Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,
 Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.⁵

Literally, a delight accompanies the impregnation of the 'mind' or spirit or soul, giving it care of a new life that is ready to gestate within.

Artistic types are especially prone to such influx. They have thin skin. Keats is said to have asserted that he was born 'without skin'. The poetic artist is almost too open for his or her own good, allowing experience all too great a sway. But in any case, the uniting, the coming together of artistic intelligence and 'external world' is the exact equivalent of physical conception.

Something new is brought into being at the moment of this convergence. The poem is importantly birthed, like the new baby in physical birth. This poem—or painting or composition or

dance—is no mere product. As we saw with a baby, the poem is not properly speaking the *result* of the uniting of experience with intuition at all, as if a switch were activated; it actually *is* that uniting. Even as the *zygote*⁶ is nothing more or less than the united reality of two parents under God, so the nascent poem is identical to the confluence of the external world and the poetic soul. This point will have great importance as our argument continues.

Both the newly formed life in the womb and the nascent work of art must be nurtured and protected and allowed to grow.

Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long
Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same:
The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim
Now known and hand at work now never wrong.⁷

The newly united reality must have time to be nurtured and protected while it grows from a simple union to a complete being that can stand on its own. The poet acts as mother's womb for the poem's gestation.

How integral and profound a vitality, then, is a work of art of any kind. Perhaps we can see by analogy to the process of birth that the artist/poet is indeed more a *procreator* than a creator of the poem, a parent labouring in response to a unique union.⁸ This is why words such as birth, gestation and conceive are commonly used in English to refer to either poetic or physical realities.

We have seen that there are three stages in each process: a prior state of two in separation; a significant one-ing; and the subsequent gestation of the oneness into child. These stages are equally true of the parent and the artist. And this is step one of our enquiry: now it remains to discover whether we can find an analogous conceiving and birth in any reality with which the priest is concerned. It would seem initially that such experiences as conception and birth are exactly what are denied the priest and the religious.

God and people at one

There is not room in an article such as the present one to treat the many aspects of priesthood, including duties of the ordained priest. We must be content to take a glancing approach to priesthood, speaking of it in the way it is commonly predicated of all believing, baptized Christians. 'Priesthood of the faithful' it is called.⁹ And to draw near to this goal, we must begin by approaching the reality of God and the Church.

Throughout time, as recorded in the bible and the history of the Church, the scriptures are more than explicit about God's union

with the world. The Old Testament God is passionately concerned with the life and love of his people.¹⁰ He hurls plagues of frogs, rains down manna, spreads a path to the promised land (Exod 7-8; 16; Deut 1 ff). The prophets speak of him washing the blood from the newly born Israel, spreading his cloak over her nakedness, raging like a deserted lover, and then swearing again at the last to be faithful (Ezek 16). This is no mere exhortation to moral ideals, it is a fiery love issuing from the very God of the universe.

Yet there is a second poignant theme throughout the Hebrew scripture: the distance the people feel from God. Both because of their sin and because of the calamities that increasingly befall them, the people begin to pose a question: 'If you love us, how can you be so far away?' God rejoins that he has not deserted them, it is they who have turned away. He is forced to plead with them, 'My people, what have I done to you, how have I been a burden to you? Answer me' (Mic 6,3). But the gulf between creature and creator finally seems too vast. The only response Job can discern in response to his suffering is: 'I am God and you are not'. The question is stanchied, not answered.

But then God enters the life of the people in the figure of Christ. If we can grasp the extent of this convergence we will be able to see why poets and priests are so close to each other. The mighty God enters the stream of human impermanence by being born a human baby, a tiny brook to begin the magnificent course. Jesus does not cling to his equality with God but learns over and over to empty himself and become like we are in all things (Phil 2, 6-7). He looks with great compassion upon the afflictions of the people and responds in two ways.

First, he begins to heal the sick and lame, encircling them with the same 'cords of passion and bonds of love' that were hinted in the old scriptures (Hos 11,4). Finally he sees it necessary not only to touch the people by healing them, but truly to be one with them, to allow within himself their very sins and their very death. This he does humbly, accepting even death on a cross (Phil 2,8). In one motion Jesus gathers the people together under God, a God who takes them and everything about them into his arms and embraces them.¹¹

In Christ, then, the gap between God and people is finally and completely closed. No longer is it the one-sided love of creator for creatures; it is a mutual pouring forth between true human and true God.

It would seem that, if poetic and biological conception show us important convergence in a world of diversity, then in the case of God's union with the people we find the most important instance

of convergence possible. This union is more important than conception, because it is a still more acute confluence, involving greater realities that have been played out over the whole span of sacred history. The Church has seen fit even to make marriage itself a sacramental symbol and reference to this love union of God with his people, thus establishing the priority of the latter. The same can be said of poetic conception. God's union with the people in Christ is more profound by far than either physical or poetic conception, but at the same time is in a direct continuum with them, since each is an act of momentous one-ing. We have completed the second stage of our investigation.

Another way to put all this is to say that Christ is the primary priest, from whom all priesthood is derived. Such a statement needs explanation, which the above description now has made possible.

Even the primitive notion of priest had at its essence the same need to narrow the gap between human and superhuman reality, to connect the holiness of the various gods with worshippers who were not holy. Ritual killing of lambs, pigeons, doves, and even of human beings, had this objective in one form or another. Whether a sacrifice was meant to curry favour, dispel anger, expiate crimes, offer thanks, or simply tender a gift, its objective was to bring two colossally dissimilar worlds into some kind of unity, for the praise of the greater, and benefit of the lesser.¹²

Sacrifice meant that something from the human sphere was set aside, taken out of profane use, to be placed within the sphere of the sacred. It was killed or destroyed in order to remove it from this world to take it to the realm of the holy invisible. By partaking of both worlds as an emissary from one to the other, the sacrifice served as a bridge, since it contains something of each. The word 'atonement' contains a similar uniting of worlds: it entered the English language as a shortened form of 'to make at one'. 'At one' became 'atone'. In other words the theory of atonement is based on a word whose root meaning is precisely the convergence of dissimilars.¹³

The new sacrifice and the new priesthood

Already in the late Hebrew scriptures God seemed to be wearying of sacrifice, at least as it was practised. In Micah, when the worshipper suggests holocausts and libations as atonement, and even the sacrifice of his first-born child, the prophet replies, 'this is what the Lord asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic 6,8).

The older, more harsh forms of sacrifice were giving rise to more nuanced motivations, and in the fullness of time these made place

for Christ. The taking of life for appeasement of the gods held within itself the possibility that a victim might one day actually want to surrender his or her life, for reasons of love, on behalf of the people. The primitive use of a sacrificial lamb, a beast that was punished for the transferred, projected sins of the community—surely not a completely wholesome practice—held within itself the possibility that someone might one day become willing out of love to receive the consequences of guilty actions of others. These emerging meanings found sophisticated expression in the four ‘songs of the servant of God’,¹⁴ and finally in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. ‘You can have no greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends’ (Jn 15,13), he said. Christ’s body was set aside from profane interests and ushered into the invisible world, in the manner of the ancient sacrifices, but with a new meaning hardly dreamt of before.

Thus the old notion of sacrifice held within it the seeds of the new. In the same way the old idea of priest prepared the way for the new realization in Jesus. As mediators, priests were able to go before the divine on behalf of the people, offering sacrifice on their behalf. What would happen if the mediator was not just a go-between, but was fully welcome in both worlds as belonging totally to each? We have seen, in the mutual pouring forth of love between God and Christ, that the gap between realms was truly closed. The full purpose of the priests of old therefore was realized in Christ, who is the ideal mediator. For this reason he is called the supreme high priest (Heb 4,14). With the naming of Christ as high priest and sacrifice we reach the end of our third step of inquiry.

Before proceeding we might ask briefly about priesthood today. If the sacred and the profane are now inextricably gathered as one, then all work done by the old priesthood and sacrifices is completed with such thorough success that they are no longer needed or credible. Any new priesthood will have to be very different from what went before. And so it is. Priesthood becomes a humble sharing in the perfect priesthood of Christ. Since every Christian is meant to become ‘another Christ’, all Christians take part in whatever obtains to Christ. They eat his body, like the old offerers and priest who ate the sacrificial victims, and they are made one with him. In the new and marvellously deepened notion of priest and sacrifice, believers are close to God and to the world—both of these in Christ. It is the priesthood of the faithful. The ordained priesthood in the Church is meant to act on behalf of this successful union of God and people in Christ. We might say that the priest today is a midwife to the process of one-ing that is God/Christ with the people.

With our new understandings let us now look back at some of the questions raised at the beginning of this article. We had asked whether there was any sense in mingling priesthood with poetry, or whether they ought to remain forever at odds. But we have traced a pattern of unification, of closing the gap, throughout this paper. We saw Christ as the primordial priest, because once and for all he stitched shut the void separating people from God. We saw the act of poeting itself as a one-ing too, a converging of separate realities. So there is at least a common ground between priesthood and poetry. Can we find now a convincing and final way in which poetry and priest shake hands?

We can, and it is located in the person who is not only priest/sacrifice, as we have just seen, but who is also the very Word of God. Because of the convergence of God and human in Christ, Jesus can be called the utterance of God. He is the way God speaks to us when God uses humanity as a language. 'Philip, who sees me sees the Father', Jesus cries out, as if the apostles were blind and deaf.

It is no stretch to call the perfect Word a poem. In order for there to be a poem there must be a 'conception' at its beginning. The one-ing of God and human flesh in Christ is that inception. God's convergence with the world does not *cause* the Word, it *is* the Word. Christ is the union of God and world. All the levels of one-ing in this article are analogies for this wondrous event. Even as man and wife conceive a child, so God, after a long and passionate courtship throughout history, marries the human race and conceives a child that is identical to the union between them, Jesus. This union that constitutes Jesus is the fulfilment of the very longing for reconciliation with the sacred that gave priesthood and sacrifice their reason for being. God's poetic union with the world is his Word to that world, the very poem of God, which is called Christ. The fourth step of our investigation has yielded this result, that Christ is the Poem.

But the fifth stage is not as easy. Not only is Christ the highpriest of the New Testament, he is the highest poem. If so, then who is the poet? Is it God? Of course there is a reason to think so. At first glance it would seem that God in heaven does what the poet does, God speaks the divine reality by means of the Word. Therefore God would be analogous to the poet. But to see why this is not the case we must look back for a brief moment to our analysis of poetry. We saw that the poet's soul is analogous to the woman whose ovum unites with the incoming seed. And though this is a union of equals, a drawing of two equal parts into one, still the locale for nurture and gestation of the union is the soul of

the poet, be that poet woman or man. If we transmit this analogy to the situation of the Word of God, it becomes apparent that Christ is the locale that is created by the union of God with the world, the place where nurture and gestation of that oneness takes place. Christ receives the union as his very soul, and 'combs and curries' it through childhood, baptism, desert, preaching, miracles, opposition, cross and resurrection. Christ, in other words, is the poet, whose life is the poem of God. As poet he spoke forth the whole world at the beginning of time ('through him all things were made, and without him was made nothing that was made'),¹⁵ so he is an author of surpassing merit. Christ is the Poet of the Word.

This analogy is not always easy to grasp. Distinctions tarnish in so momentous a one-ing. This has to be the case whenever such a profound confluence as that between God and the human race takes place. Christ becomes priest and sacrifice, both poet and poem. We have reached the answer to our questions, whose roots are hidden in the oneness of that diverse unity called God.

We conclude, therefore, that Christ is both High Priest and High Poet of God. And we can no longer imagine priesthood and poetry to be at odds. Poets, who partake in God's convergence with the world, are only a step from priests, who partake in God's convergence with the world. Why is it so easy to think of a married poet and not of an ordained one? The Church teaches marriage as an imitation of God's one-ing with the world, as we have seen in these pages. A poet could be ordained priest as easily as be married. Hopkins's initial reticence to be religious priest and poet, based as it was on so many strictures of religious and Victorian life, gave way to his own penetrating vision of Christ and the world, through which he ministered to the world on a scope no one could have imagined at the time. Blessings upon that vision. Blessings upon that rector who cocked an eye heavenward one day in Hopkins's presence and idly asked for 'someone' to write a poem about the wrecked ship *Deutschland*. Priest/poet, after seven long years, was set free that day to do the work of Christ the poet/priest.¹⁶

NOTES

¹ Cf. Hopkins, G. M.: *Poems and prose* (London: Penguin, 1988), Letters XVI-XVII, pp 187-191, and XX, with Dixon's comment, 'Surely one vocation cannot destroy another'. Such questions as the appropriateness of a poetic career for one who is already professed as a religious and priest, public notoriety, obedience to the 'guidance conveyed partly by the action of other men, as his appointed superiors, and partly by direct lights and inspirations' (letter XX), and the sheer attempt to live humbly: all these surely entered into his struggle.

² I will speak throughout of the 'poet', the 'poem' throughout, but of course I mean my remarks as reflections on the activity of all creative artists: painters, composers, sculptors, dancers etc.

³ This comparison thus provides for the *haecceitas* or 'thisness' of Scotus to which Hopkins was so attracted.

⁴ The Latin word upon which the word 'conceive' is based is helpful here: *concipere*, meaning 'to take to oneself, to take into oneself and hold', or 'to take effectively', from *con*—altogether, and *capere*, to take. *The compact edition of the Oxford English dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p 500. According to the *OED*, nearly all the senses of the word 'conceive' present in English today were already developed in the Latin word.

⁵ Hopkins, *op.cit.*, 'To R. B.', p 68.

⁶ From the Greek word meaning 'to yoke'.

⁷ Cf note 5.

⁸ Could it also be said that the artistic soul's *inspiration* is truly an incursion of the spirit or Spirit that 'over the bent/World broods'? *Ibid.*, 'God's Grandeur', p 27.

⁹ 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart . . .'
(1 Pet 2,9).

¹⁰ My use of male pronouns here reflects the Old Testament usage.

¹¹ Or, in poetic words, ' . . . I will get rid of the rat inside of me,/the gnawing pestilential rat./God will take it with his two hands/and embrace it'. Sexton, A.: *The awful rowing toward God*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), p 2.

¹² The Israelites too offered sacrifice, with destruction and at times eating of victims, sprinklings of blood, burning of remains. Again this was based on the distance between God and the world of human supplicants.

¹³ *OED*, vol I, p 135. According to the *OED* the combined form 'atonement' began to take the place of 'onement' early in the 16th century and 'atone' to supplant the verb 'to one' about 1550.

¹⁴ Isai 42, 1-9; 49, 1-6; 50, 4-11; 52, 13-53, 12.

¹⁵ Jn 1,1.

¹⁶ 'But when in the winter of '75 the *Deutschland* was wrecked in the mouth of the Thames and five Franciscan nuns, exiles from Germany by the Falck Laws, aboard of her were drowned I was affected by the account and happening to say so to my rector he said that he wished someone would write a poem on the subject. On this hint I set to work and, though my hand was out at first, produced one.' *Op. cit.*, Letter XVI, p 187.