WHAT IS A PRIEST?

By JOSEPH LAISHLEY

WHAT IS A priest? If we are to reflect on spirituality and priesthood it would seem useful to clarify our notions at the very start. But the question itself raises a basic problem in that the concept of priesthood seems clear until the discussion begins. Then it dissolves into a host of apparently conflicting notions. An exploration of the brief I have been given — the relationship between theology and practice — gives us an opportunity to clarify the concept in the light of this problem, and that in three ways. We can look at the varied history of priesthood in practice and see how it has given rise to a plurality of notions about it in theology down the ages; we can examine the sort of factors which govern our present choice, that is to say, the variety of presuppositions rooted in our experience out of which we can construct different theologies of priesthood today; and we can see as a result the diverse practical attitudes which can arise from the theories. The whole makes a sort of circle, from practice to theory to new practice, and it is my hope that this will provide a framework, a context, for the more specific contributions to this Supplement.

Historical models of priesthood

The most striking thing about the early Church's attitude as conveyed in the new testament documents in our subject is that priestly language is not central, and nowhere is an individual in the christian communities called a priest. The role of Christ is explored on the analogy of a high-priestly role (Melkisedek's) in the Letter to the Hebrews and this provides a very deep theology of Christ. But it is important to note that even here Christ's role clearly breaks out of the analogy used to interpret it: at one point, Melkisedek resembles the Son of God rather than vice versa (7,3). And the key to Christ's priesthood at the very centre of the letter is 'the power of an indestructible life' (7,16), his divine being in virtue of which he is mediator of the new covenant. Certainly no one else can be a priest forever. Elsewhere, in the confines of the New Testament (in 1 Peter 2,5-9 and Revelation 1,6; 5,10; 20,6) the people are called priestly, with a reference to the demand of holiness ('to be holy as priests') from the covenant passage of Exodus 19,3f. It is, then, in the language of 'new covenant' (most especially in the last supper narratives) that the seed of later sacrificial and priestly language is sown indirectly.[1] For this language does germinate in the soil of the New Testament.

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But if the language of priesthood is not used, what language is? The answer to this question depends on where one starts. If one starts with apostleship, the origin of this special call in the common christian discipleship is obscured, perhaps out of a (much later) concern to mark the distinctiveness of the apostolic role as it was 'handed on'. I would wish to start with discipleship — that gospel theme that becomes the 'in Christ' of St Paul — out of my concern (and of course this marks a decision, a choice) to emphasize that the context of all ministries is the whole body of the people of God. *All* are called to be in Christ; *all* are endowed with gifts of service for the building up of the Body of Christ; *some* are called to exercise their particular gifts of leadership as a service in the Body of Christ.[2] Nor is ministry simply to be equated with apostleship. The apostles are foundation, are the witnesses to the resurrection. But because they are this, they are irreplaceable, and continuity with them is continuity with their pastoral care of the ongoing Church rather than succession to their state. The apostolic group of the twelve is a centre of unity, a focus of authenticity for the Church, not the source of gifts, which come from the Holy Spirit. Two words recur: service (*diakonia*) and gift (*charisma*) — gifts of service, above all service of the word, which grows and spreads in the communion (*koinonia*) of the Churches.

The multiplicity of service and proclamation was very diversely organized in the early days. But the leadership soon settled (most noticeably in the Pastoral Epistles and Acts) into the more stable form of elders (presbyters) and overseers (*episcopoi*). It is secular ('city council') language. It betokens corporate leadership continuing the work of pastoral care of the Churches 'founded on the apostles and prophets'. Gradually the *episcopos* emerges as chairman, not just in a secular role but with oversight defined by the purposes and concerns of this unique community of salvation.

In the time subsequent to the New Testament there are three strands I would like to isolate: the continuance and eventual decline of corporate, community leadership; the emergence of priestly language to describe ministry; and celibacy as a positive, yet institutionalized value in the western Church. Corporate or collegial government presided over by the episcopus-bishop was established early but a more individual concept of leadership developed later. The bishop retained the leadership of the local community but the presbyters came to be seen as his auxiliaries with the accent on their deputation to assist him in his ministry rather than on their corporate sharing in a common responsibility. Even so, consciousness of the whole community as the context for leadership persisted for a considerable time to come.[3] It was social and ecclesiological

factors which had a great deal to do with this development. The increasing adoption of state-like structures of rank and dignity on the imperial pattern of government stressed distinctions rather than shared communion, the superiority of the bishop over the clergy of 'second rank' and eventually the clear distinction between clergy and laity. Leadership 'from above' superseded leadership 'from within'.

Another influence at work was the scattering of the presbytery. As Christianity percolated into the countryside, the presbyters tended to settle in widely scattered communities. Corporate action thus became more difficult and declined. Yet another important development was the growth of monasticism, which was crucial for the maintenance of the religio-cultural tradition but which in this matter was a potent factor in the weakening of the notion of ministry as corporate local leadership. The growing number of ordained monks with no pastoral charge or with no direct relation to a bishop introduced a more mobile, universalized model, but contributed to the diminishment of collegiality. Thus quite early in the Middle Ages the idea and practice of collegiality became obscured and remained so until the present day.

To return now to the language of priesthood. If it was not used of ministry in the New Testament, how did it develop? Chiefly, I think, in relation to the eucharist, which from the seed of covenantal language used to interpret the last supper soon came to be described in sacrificial language, as early as the *Didache* (perhaps at the end of the first century). But at the same time there was a vigorous rejection of the models of jewish and pagan sacrifice. This ambiguous attitude helped to underline that the sacrificial language was analogous and so the eucharist was far from being seen as fulfilling a definition of sacrifice in its own right, a definition based on old testament sacrifice. The relation of eucharist to ministry was also radically different from that in a later age. Cyprian may have already called the bishop *sacerdos*, but throughout the period it was the leader of the community who celebrated the eucharist as the memorial of the Lord's sacrifice (cf St John Chrysostom's Homily 17,3 on Hebrews) and so came to be called *sacerdos*, rather than the celebrant of a sacrificial eucharist who was appointed the leader of the community. For this crucial shift we have to look further afield. A stream of reflection which is usually attributed to Jerome as source turned theology away from seeing the minister-priest as exercising an overall responsibility (which resided most fully in the bishop), towards defining the priest in terms of his function of celebrating the eucharist. Jerome was anxious to preserve the standing of presbyters against both the pretensions of deacons and the autocracy of bishops.

(Jerome was always a fighter, and fighting on two fronts he was in his element). He defined the essential superiority of the presbyter over against the former in terms of sacrificing power, and his essential equality with the latter in terms of the same. The bishop was superior only in having jurisdiction (cf Jerome, Letter 146). What resulted was a tradition which took precedence over all others in the Latin Church of seeing the ministry in terms of sacrificing priesthood. It was defined in terms of this function and the presbyter now priest became the basic form of ministry, whereas the bishop was a priest with more powers. Many such definitions were elaborated in the Middle Ages. This view had its influence on the Council of Trent in that it defined the ministry primarily as a priesthood (founded at the last supper) with power to consecrate and forgive sins.

It was against this notion of sacred powers, and that of priestly power, that the Reformation protest was directed. It led to a single-minded stress on the proclamation of the word, a valuable witness for the renewal of catholicism but one which was one-sided in its rejection of sacramental values (the word itself is, after all, an effective symbol, a sacrament, and a sacrament is an 'enacted word'). Roman Catholicism, however, settled into its composite model of priestly power with sacred powers, holder of the place of Christ, successor of the apostles, celebrant of the sacred mysteries and the other sacraments, teacher of the faithful, and administrator of the Church's goods. But times change and the Catholic Church, albeit slowly, changes with them. Modern re-thinking on the priesthood is concerned most of all to unwrap the composite package and to re-accent service not power; to reaffirm the diversity of gifts among which leadership certainly plays a central role, but to re-situate ministry within the community and in a collegial ('team') manner; to see the sacramental role as flowing from that leadership and not vice-versa, and to emphasize the aspect of spiritual leadership which may have a prophetic dimension.

The third strand I wished to pick out for comment was celibacy and the reason for singling it out in the historical development is twofold: to highlight the assimilation of community leadership to monastic ideals and to emphasize its consequent institutionalization into a priestly state, even a priestly class. Celibacy 'for the Kingdom of heaven' has been a positive value and charism from the earliest days of the Church both for individuals and for groups. The growth of monasticism strengthened and structured the charism and provided a focus, an ideal of perfection for renewal and reform in the Church. Thus a monastic-type regimen became the norm for penitent sinners, even if married. Likewise ecclesiastical reform

movements in the western Church sought to implement celibacy both as a spiritual ideal and as a means of binding the clergy into a more closely-knit body, distinctive by their state of life. The legislation was patchy up to the time of the Lateran Councils and was only fully implemented in the post-reformation period. The eastern Church meanwhile left the local leadership free to marry and thus remain within the community, but tended to limit its role to sacred functions. The bishop, however, is invariably celibate. The overall effect on the Church in the west was to turn the leadership into a state of perfection dependent on the charism of celibacy and thus further detach it from its community roots. More recent theology of priesthood, in re-accenting the values mentioned above, has questioned the link between priesthood and celibacy without questioning celibacy as a complex value.

Thus in sum, we can see from this survey the changing patterns of priesthood conditioned by historical and theological factors and providing us with a variety of models for present consideration.

Presuppositions

It is time, therefore, to pause to ask what choices we should make in the light of this history, and of present needs. The history suggests that we can ask whether we are to think of the priest as primarily a man endowed with sacred powers to celebrate the eucharist and other sacraments or as a minister of the word. And if we can hold these in tension, what is to be the relation between these godly notions and the more humanly based concept of leader in the community? Is a person leader because ordained a celebrant of the eucharist and minister of the word, or a celebrant and minister because the appointed leader? And what sort of leadership in what sort of community? Is it to be an omni-competent sacro-secular leadership in a largely passive community or a more general, co-ordinating, facilitating leadership in a co-responsible group? And is the community to be seen as an ark of salvation in an evil world or as servant of an already redeemed yet still sinful humanity? Finally, is the community to be seen in terms of smaller primary groups (where relationships are essentially affective) or of larger secondary groups (where the relationships are primarily functional)? Answers to these sorts of question are needed before we can determine what sort of life of the spirit a priest should nourish.

My first point here is that a theology and a spirituality of priesthood depends on its context in a practical theology of the Church.[4] The changing history of priesthood took place within changing forms of Church. The early Church saw itself in opposition to the religious and social structures both of the jewish and the graeco-roman

worlds. But from Constantine onward began the age-long assimilation of the Church and its leadership to public, state-like structures. The pendulum swung from the sacral kingship in which the emperor predominated to the governing priesthood symbolized by the gregorian reform in the eleventh century. Only recently has the Catholic Church begun to relinquish very tentatively these types of institutional and monarchic models for a more community-centred model of the People of God.

The second main factor in predisposing a choice of view on the priesthood is the theology of grace. The unreflective near-fusion of sacred and secular that underlay the imperial and medieval models of society came increasingly under fire. Originally that fusion had universal implications for the presence of grace in the world, in so far as the Church claimed an explicit, universal, sway. But the increasing marginalization of the Church led it to a growing otherworldly mentality, a dualism of sacred and secular, of grace and nature, with the Church in opposition to a hostile, ungraced world as the one ark of salvation for all. A renewed theology of grace released grace from the limits of its *explicit* signs (on which the old fusion models had relied) into an *implicit* presence in all humanity, signalized, but not solely present, in the Church. The centre of interest has thus shifted to a great extent from the Church as the centre of God's saving plan to the Church as servant of redeemed humanity. And the function of ministry is seen, not as 'taking grace' to places and people as if for the first time, but as serving and fostering grace already at work.[5]

My third main concern in this section is to reflect in general terms on the changing patterns. Let me say first that they all have positive features, developing as they do to meet certain needs of the community at the time. But all necessarily have inadequacies, especially in so far as they are one-sidedly stressed. The priesthood can be too detached from its environment in the world: it can also be too identified with it. The priesthood can be too strongly institutionalized; it can also lack structure. The priesthood can be too conscious of the need for authority, to the detriment of freedom: it can also lack authority. Thus all the patterns throughout history are partial and incomplete. And in general, every event, all that is the case, whether seen as natural or as divine is mysterious to us in its uncapturable richness. And so both our concepts of events and our practice in responding to or guiding events are more or less adequate or inadequate. One can never say, or do, it all.

Thus we do well to use the unassuming language of analogy ('the priesthood is like . . . in certain respects') rather than the confident language of identity ('the priesthood is . . .'). Furthermore, each

person will propose analogies stemming from their different interests, perspectives and histories. The standpoint of the observer and not only the development of events, must always be taken into account. Theology in practice arises out of a dialogue of past history and present concern. And this leads me to my last point: the criterion, the yardstick, for the use of a model in theory or practice. From all that has been said, it is clear that my model for the use of models [*sic*] is not that of determining the essence of a notion in its timelessness and applying it to each circumstance (even with modifications) but that of forming a response to the needs of the present time. This does not mean ignoring the past and its traditions. Far from it: for a community, like an individual, needs continuity for health; thus it means making a response to the *historical* reality that is the Church now.

Diverse spiritual attitudes

How then are priests today to grow in that integration of the divine and the human aspects of life which I take to be the goal of the life of the spirit? What I wish to do in the light of the plurality before us is to suggest some of the particular tensions which condition the life of the human being who is also a priest. (For in my view there is not a spirituality of priesthood, nor even spiritualities of priesthood, taken in isolation, but the human life of the spirit in relation to priesthood). There are four tensions which seem to arise from the history we have surveyed: they are set up between sacred and secular models; between the 'already present' sacramental values deepening and illuminating human life, and the 'not yet fulfilled' eschatological values of the kingdom symbolized by celibacy; between individual and corporate models of leadership and between models of power and models of service. The purpose of reflection on spirituality in relation to priesthood is thus to determine where priests stand between the poles of these tensions, given the adoption of certain models of priesthood.

The most fundamental tension is that between sacred and secular. All human experience is conditioned by the fact that we are created beings, 'other' than God and given to ourselves (our nature), and yet are called in his free love to communion with him in divine life (grace). But all our practice and theory is conditioned by the way in which we *interpret* this duality-in-unity of nature and grace. We can so stress the duality that we divide sacred and secular into compartments and give rise to the familiar vision of the priest, therefore, as a man apart, and prayer as time apart, and liturgy as the worship of God as totally Other. This represents very real values, but does it, in the forms we know, stress them one-sidedly and does it meet present

needs? The pendulum has certainly swung more towards an integration of grace with nature and this demands an incarnational vision of involvement, of prayer 'at all times' on the basis that the fully human is the Christlike, since God became man. What, however, has proved a danger in many communities is a sweeping away of the symbols of the sacred and the near-substitution of social and psychological values. Integrated though they should be, they are not the same thing.

Of equal importance is the tension between sacramental presence and eschatological hope. Again, all our experience is conditioned by the fact that God-for-us is both now and not yet, is mediated through the real symbols of his creating love (for the world is the fundamental sacrament), yet at the same time drawing us onward to God's, and our future, and stressing that this world is passing away. The paths of sacramental celebration of God's love in all things and that of patient waiting for the Other in renunciation symbolized by celibacy, fasting and waiting in vigil, are complementary but different. If so, then both must be represented, but with different emphases, in the lives of all Christians. A defect of much christian life, especially that of religious and priests in the recent past has been too eschatological, too futuristic a vision, a denial almost of created and creative gift. The serious questioning of the *de facto* link between celibacy and priesthood has been part of the reaction against this one-sidedness, but more fundamentally it has been a questioning of the siting of the priesthood on the spectrum that stretches between this-world and other-worldly values. Why should it be assimilated to religious life? If wholeness of commitment is the goal for *all* (as the great commandment shows), is there not a flaw in the argument that totality ought to be symbolized by celibate life? Yet it remains an option if freely chosen for its own sake.

More particular to priesthood is the tension between individual and corporate forms of leadership. At one end is the strong, even charismatic, pastor and father figure, bearing the burdens of his flock, seeking strength from the 'grace of state' of being an *alter Christus*. Love on this pattern tends to be realized in freedom, in the finding of self even though then given for others. At the other end is mutuality and self-effacing co-operation, with the accent on the sacramental values of visible mutual, support and affirmation, sensitive to the gifts of others and facilitating their operation. Love here is expressed in communion, in losing self to find self. It is vulnerable if isolated, but strong in union. It flourishes more in primary groupings, whereas the other is geared more to larger numbers. To this it is important to relate the tension between masculinity and femininity as elements within the character of each, and each needing balanced expression.

Lastly, I would draw attention to the tension between power and service. Both can act as valid principles of spiritual growth: the former stresses the priority of ends, of goals to be achieved, and assumes the corporate surrender of large degrees of individual interest, whereas the latter emphasizes the priority of means, committed to never pursuing a worthy goal by any means that *de facto* infringes the free response of the other. This latter therefore assumes a mature, co-operating group. Perhaps what has been lacking (even given the familiarity of the individual leadership model in the Church) is a proper development of a spirituality for power's exercise. Perhaps the gospel strictures on those who exercise power, and its option for service has inhibited that development. But it is not enough to remain with Lord Acton's 'Power corrupts . . .', even though the development of state-like structures in the Church has brought with it a great deal of corruption. Models for the spirituality of power have to do with responsibility before God, and major ethical questions of the relation of means to ends. Much work is done here but more needs to be done to marry ethics to the life of the spirit. Service, however, has proved a stronger evangelical value: perhaps the strongest imperative for those with power is not to use it — except for service.

In conclusion, then, I have tried to open up the diverse patterns for the theology and practice of priesthood. But I would like to end with my conviction that the main path to tread is to reduce the *particularity* of questions concerning priesthood; to be less insistent on being a priest and more on the common lot of being a human being. In her introduction to *Merton*, Monica Furlong says *à propos* of being a monk in the twentieth century:

> As the years stripped away the obvious answers . . . he felt himself to be left with little but his humanity. Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his prison he began to see that the highest spiritual development was to be ordinary, to be fully a human being in the way few human beings succeed in becoming, so simple, so naturally themselves.

NOTES

[1] See R. Murray: 'Christianity's "yes" to priesthood', in *The Christian Priesthood*, ed. N. Lash, J. Rhymer (London, 1970).

[2] For modern statements, see *Modern ecumenical documents on the ministry* (London, 1975).

[3] For this, and the whole topic, see E. Schillebeeckx: *Ministry — a case for change* (London, 1981), especially pp 38ff.

[4] See A. Dulles: *Models of the Church* (Dublin, 1976).

[5] See K. Rahner: a lecture in *The Tablet* (6th March 1971), p 236f.