

# THE PRIESTLINESS OF THE HUMAN HEART

By JOHN O'DONOHUE

**B**EHIND THE VENEER OF OUR EXTERNAL LIVES the eternal is at work. The eternal is an unseen and ancient presence. In and through the daily round of work, confusion, fear and hope it is quietly creative. The eternal is patient and subtle; its rhythms are oblique and shy. Each human is a crest of threshold in which the temporal grounds in the eternal and through which the eternal suffuses the temporal. Thus, there is a secret immensity in every life. There is a depth and an outreach in us that we seldom glimpse. In its subtle wisdom the eternal carefully designs a unique destiny for each person. To be born is to be chosen. You have a task of creativity to realize here that no one else can accomplish. If someone else could bring this to birth, they would be in your place and you would never have been sent here. Who you are, where you are, your time, your mind, your family and friends, your limitation and possibility are not accidental. Even though your life may seem divided and scattered into disparate moments and forms, there is yet a refined and deeper coherence to your life; this is how your destiny is secretly shaped within the creative weave of the eternal. You are an artist of the eternal. The privilege of individuality is the burden and promise of its veiled destiny.

Modern culture is desperate and driven. Life is being robbed of its natural rhythm. Real experience is being replaced by what is merely simulated and second-hand. Consequently, the inner life is being subtly evicted. Externality invades all dimensions of the heart. Its power and forcefulness confuse and subvert the deeper longings of soul. Time no longer includes the silence or stillness which are vitally necessary to spiritual self-discovery and journey. Time is reduced to the instant; the moment is digital and rhythm has become exponential rapidity. This loss of rhythm is the most destructive force of alienation today. The staccato beat of our culture severs our deeper inner connection and separates us from our nature. We live in a precarious interim time. As Nadine Gordimer says, an interim time is very tender because the old is not yet old enough to have died and the new is yet too young to have

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

been born. Traditional religion is subconsciously aware of its increasing irrelevance. Most of its leaders are clinging desperately to their particular ledge of conviction as the ocean of different consciousness rises all about them. They repeat the same old answers, oblivious to the new questions. The complexity of the new spiritual hunger makes the old answers redundant and unhelpful. Consequently, modern psychology and psychotherapy are the areas into which soul-work is being pushed. Yet despite its frequent luminosity much psychology is unsuited to this need to ground, focus or nourish the longing of the eternal that awakens within. This is primarily priestly work. In this paper I would like to argue for the inner priestliness of each woman and man. I will attempt to distinguish between priestliness and priesthood, clericalism and priesthood. I wish to ground this priestliness as the deeper rhythm of human presence. In order to articulate this I want to explore the theory of creation that underlies the claim for human priestliness.

Creation is intense with divinity. The divine is not separate or outside the world in a distant heaven; rather, the Trinity is the largest embrace in the universe. There is nothing outside God. All of us live within the circle of the Trinity. No one or no thing can fall out of this circle. In God there is no outside. Consequently, regardless of how numbed, ordinary or dull a life might seem to itself or to others, each life is urgent with divinity. There is nothing neutral in the divine. Its nature is creativity, its urgency is transfiguration. Each individual is made in the image and likeness of this divine creativity. This is where all human longing has its source. We are the expression of divine transfiguration. In each individual a different aspect of God finds form. To be spiritual is to incarnate and realize this new dimension of God. Each of us is born out of a different place in the circle of God's heart. This is the reason why each individual is unique: each comes from a different nest in the divine. It is towards this nest that our deepest longing tends; it is only here that the soul can discover her true poise and rhythm. Consequently, each of us creates out of a different place in the divine and each of us prays to a different place in the divine. This infuses the deepest freshness into the heart of every soul. To allow this to come through into the texture and fibre of our feeling, thought and action is the task of faith. Much of our weariness and emptiness comes from our blindness to the secret divinity of our hearts. God is never in competition with the human, rather the human is the language of the divine.

Yet despite its beauty and possibility, creation is haunted by limitation and darkness. As Meister Eckhart says, everything stands under

the *umbra nihili*, the shadow of nothingness. This fragility lurks at the edge of beauty, its darkness pushes at the rim of light. All awareness is shadowed by this ambivalence. Its duality pervades experience. We inhabit the frontiers between light/dark, love/evil, mercy/indifference, harmony/chaos and freedom/slavery. If creation were not rifted by such structural ambivalence, there would be no need for transfiguration. Everything would exist in the harmony and unity of innocence. But our innocence is fractured and we know only too well the negativity which kills possibility and numbs the heart. This ambivalence is the root of conflict, contradiction and pathos. Unity, belonging and harmony do not simply occur, but are brought about through the activity of transfiguration. Our sense of weakness, absence, distance and nothingness give the grace of transfiguration its urgency.

What is transfiguration? Transfiguration is the only trustable form of inner change. The Christian life has always been a struggle towards perfection. Yet the recommended models of change have been very damaging, either metamorphosis, where the old self was somehow expected to graft onto a supernatural level and become abruptly sanctified, or moral surgery, whereby the undesired dimensions of one's life were cut out. Such externalist violence is always resisted by the psyche's organic and inclusive spiritual instinct. Transfiguration is in harmony with the deepest rhythm of the soul because nothing is denied, excluded or forced. Attention is focused reverently on the whole complex of one's presence. In the light of this reverence to one's self the places of entanglement, limitation, blindness and damage gradually reveal themselves in ways that suggest and invite changes in the configuration of one's heart. In this way false and destructive configurations loosen and the depth and intensity of one's inner life finds new configurations which heal, clarify and challenge one's longing. This is slow soul-work where rather than forcing one's soul to submit to the arrogance and interference of neon analysis one keeps back from getting in the way of soul's luminous instinct and wisdom. The soul is the best guide to its own wells of wisdom and healing.

Each person is a sacrament. In this way each life transfigures its own experience. It brings the secret creativity of grace to visible form. As Elias Cannetti says, that which has no form cannot transform itself. Precisely because individuality has such an intensity of contour and form, its power to transform itself is endless. From this perspective we can claim the implicit priestliness of the human heart. Each woman is a priestess and each man a priest of transfiguration. We are called to free the captives, heal the broken, bring sight to the blind and good news to

the poor. Each human priest, man or woman, is called to minister to the possibilities of awakening and realizing this divine presence. It is only against the background of a fecund implicit priestliness that explicit priesthood makes any sense. Were there no implicit priestliness, then the human would be internally without the divine and the explicit priesthood would be an élite, who, because of their small numbers could in turn only serve a preselected élite. This divisive selectivity seems to run counter to the kindness and imagination of a God who forms and holds together the mystery of each individual life.

Priestliness is participation in the creative and transfigurative nature of God. The call to priestliness is a voice whispering at the ontological heart of every life. Priestliness is ontological. Only in a secondary sense can it be considered functional; even then, in explicit priesthood, its function is to awaken and realize the implicit priestliness of each person. The call to explicit priesthood comes out of the recognition of this deeper implicit priestliness. The intention of priesthood is not to bring people something which they lack and with which you have been exclusively gifted. Rather the priest attempts to kindle in them the recognition of who they are. Explicit priesthood serves the *who* not the what. Priesthood longs to awaken the *who* to its origin, presence, possibility and promise. In this way priesthood attempts to awaken the fecundity of being to the possibilities of its own becoming. Consequently, priesthood is ministry to the deepest nature and identity of the person. It attempts to bring the hidden rhythm of our priestliness to awareness and realization. It longs to bring the person lost outside in the exile of image and dislocation home to the warm hearth of spirit.

In priesthood priestliness becomes explicit as a commitment. A vocation to the priesthood is a calling to the realization of one's own priestliness in the service of the implicit priestliness of all people. This vocation is akin to the vocation of the artist. A real artist is no functional fabricator of words, matter, colours or sounds. The vocation of the artist is towards a creativity and creation that is beyond ideology and its external and quantitative epistemology. The artist is called to minister to the eternal, to bring its unseen forms to visibility. No artist can force her way into such work. An artist is called: there is a necessity and inevitability about the artistic vocation. The most profound art emerges from this necessity. While refining her craft and readiness the artist realizes that great art is a gift. It comes from elsewhere; it is inspired. Thus, the artist mediates the eternal through refined attention to the imagination. Without the presence of the imagination the eternal could never reach us. The imagination is the

great friend of the eternal. Imagination and divinity are sisters. Consequently, explicit priesthood demands the awakening of the imagination as the way to bring our implicit priestliness home to the awareness of its eternal potential. As the sacrament of transfiguration, the eucharist is the source and summit of priestliness and priesthood. A priest is an artist of the eternal. Part of the difficulty of priestly work is its invisibility. When one works in the physical or conceptual world one sees results and effects of one's labour. However, when one works in the invisible world of soul, one may labour for years without seeing anything, and when something is finally disclosed it is usually in sign or glimpse form. The eternal is reserved, subtle and shy. When explicit priesthood denies the imagination it becomes functional and reduces itself to clericalism.

Explicit priesthood is a ministry conferred by the institutional Church. It has the power to choose who can become a priest. Such discernment is necessary because the attraction to religion can often be suspect. Yet the institution works with a rather narrow model of who should be a priest. The seminary system is a highly questionable way to bring people to the priesthood. It usually weeds out the more creative and interesting people and allows the safer and more pious ones through. In subtle ways it takes over the initial longing of the one who wishes to be a priest. It works on this idealistic and vulnerable longing until it is safely brought on to the predictable institutional tracks. Often the borderline between spiritual training and indoctrination becomes exceptionally blurred. Seminaries tend to produce more clerics than priests.

A cleric is someone who attempts to be a priest from the outside in. He assumes and adopts the uniform, behaviour and language of the institution. Ultimately even his perception and thought become institutionalized. The role creeps deeper and deeper inwards until it houses at the heart of his identity. This can only be described as a tragic takeover of individual identity by an external and anonymous system. The tentacle structure of the seminary reaches down even to the presbytery and parish structure. In this way the cleric is insulated against the longings and possibilities of his own humanity. This isolates him from the humanity of others; he keeps himself out of reach in a limbo within the metallic surface of the role. The clerical role subsumes the complexity, conflict and depth of individual interiority. It offers no context or language which is hospitable to the intimacy, doubt or sexuality of the individual. Consequently, these are driven underground and often surface in addictive or twisted form. Often it may be

years later before he realizes how much was secretly stolen from him in the name of an ideal that could have been realized in a more creative and human way. Then he may look back woundedly on his one life, on the possibilities that generously approached him which his indoctrination prevented him from even seeing. When role subsumes the natural rhythm of identity, it is no wonder that so much of clerical life is governed by fear. This fear keeps many lovely people confused and unsure, marooned on lonesome ledges in their lives. They usually opt to go along with things, even though their instinct is to disagree profoundly; subtle mechanisms of control keep them silent and ensure that they will never raise the awkward or wounded question.

In contrast to the cleric, a priest works on the frontiers. The priest is drawn to the frontiers where quest meets question, where possibility opens to fact, where freedom engages slavery, where presence transfigures loss and where divinity suffuses humanity. In order to attend at these frontiers, the priest must be alive to the depth and complexity of his own interiority. When he awakens to this complexity, he recognizes the limitations of the institution and its functionalism. Rather than treating the system as a parent, he will perceive it as an instrument of service to the kingdom of love. He will feel free to question and critique its limitation and blindness and demand that it keep to the rhythm of its gospel founder. Such priesthood is complex and difficult. Yet there is no choice for the one who feels called in this way. This is priesthood at the edge. The edge is a precarious place. Here change continually creates new perception. Here ideas stay alert and tentative in their urgency to mirror the new shapes that come across the frontier. Priesthood at the edge engages in a poetics of growth. As J. H. Newman said, to grow is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often. Here the role cannot be used as a protection against question and critique. Rather it is recognized that question and critique keep intellect and consciousness vigilant. The edge is also the real frontier or transfiguration. Increasingly in modern culture it is evident that the centre is not really the centre any more. It has atrophied, and a dead centre deadens all around it. It seems that the centre has moved to the edge.<sup>1</sup> Facts that seem closed begin to pulse with new possibility. Imagination is the great friend of possibility. Where the imagination is at work, fact never hardens or closes. Real priesthood activates imagination as the primary spiritual faculty to awaken the eternal. Whereas the cleric assumes a readymade role, the priest is called to a destiny that unfolds gradually, offering only enough light for the next step. Priesthood is not a role, it is an identity.

A priesthood that is alive to the imagination finds itself in rhythm with the greatest sacrament of all, namely, the sacrament of life. It is within the unity of this rhythm that the priest becomes mediator. Mediation is the secret rhythm at the heart of reality.<sup>2</sup> Despite the surface immediacy that life seems to offer, everything in life is mediated. There is no instantaneous and total unity or belonging. Everything reaches us in and through the rhythm of mediation. It is only at the deepest level of the soul that this dynamic is suspended; there the soul is touched by neither time, space nor flesh. Here the presence of divinity remains immediate and undisturbed. With this exception everything else in our experience is on the move in the ebb and flow between immediacy and mediation.

It is the imagination that most truly holds to this rhythm. It brings the secret forms of our experience to visibility. Imagination allows the subtle divinity of our lives to unfold. This terrain between the visible and the invisible is where the priest works. Through the generosity and vulnerability of imaginative presence he helps people to behold the secret divinity of their lives, to sense the eternal light within, which no darkness can quench. This is very tender and patient work. There is no programme or special method which can elicit this vision. Only in the grace of real presence does it emerge, always shy and tentative, yet somehow always new and appropriate to the hunger that calls it forth. There is no external script for the destiny of individuality, it unfolds only in the attention and expectation of presence. Intention, will and agenda are helpless here. Only the imagination knows how the divine can be utterly creative without the slightest ripple of intention or agenda. Thus the great call in priesthood is the call homewards to this intimacy where there is neither shadow nor separation. This is the reason why priesthood is a graceful and gracious calling and is not to be confused with the repetitive, strained and mechanical externality of clericalism.

It is the invidious task of modern priesthood to cut through the dead layers of modern image, language and second-hand simulated perception in order to awaken the divine ground within the human heart. This is the ground of our implicit priestliness. It is only through attention to the inner voice of experience that the priest can hear the whisper of God which the noise of modern culture drowns. This is the cause of the desperate spiritual hunger that rages today. Nothing in the universe has the stillness of God. Nor is there anything in the universe as silent as God. To come into the divine presence the modern psyche needs to re-learn the old wisdom of the natural life. To be natural is to be holy, but

it has now become so difficult to be natural. Our so called progress has become regressive and primitive.

Much of the heart of modern culture is empty and desiccated. The wells in our psyche have become silted. Yet the refreshment that we crave is not outside. It is within our own depths. When these depths open and flow, we come into rhythm with the divine within us. The priest is awakened to this and hopes to awaken the divinity of others. This ministry of imaginative spiritual presence prevents the priest from falling into the clerical trap of didacticism. The cleric as didact preaches and instructs others in the teachings of religion without bringing such language or perception anywhere near the inner threshold of quest and question within the human heart. Such didacticism is an act of separation and distance. It serves exile not presence. Such sermons and instruction become an overlay on people's already crowded receptivity; they free no wells in the soul for people to refresh themselves. A language or perception that issues from didactic intention lacks the sense of complexity, tenderness and prophecy really to call people home to the divine. Such an idiom is externalist, repetitive and removed. The priest, on the other hand, attempts to find new words that arise from within the hunger, pathos, contradiction and complexity of people's lived experience. Rather than straining to fix the label 'spiritual' onto everything, the priest practises reverence before the icon of otherness and attempts to show the luminosity of the spiritual as it quietly emerges. Theologically expressed, this is the articulation of the dynamic of the resurrection which pervades everything. There is nothing in the universe as alive and urgent as the divine. The slightest taste of this divine presence transfigures and intensifies both language and perception. Cliché and dead language, on the other hand, speak of an idol, a God that has become fixed and dead.

One of the great joys of priesthood is to be spiritual midwife, i.e. to help a person to give birth to the divine that stirs within, in dark and bleak times to show a person that there is a window where they sensed only a wall. Faithfulness to experience as the language and medium of the divine keeps priesthood prophetic, creative and alive. This can never be functional in the sense of being a method or a model of proceeding with priestly work. It is an art of life and spirit in which the individual priest honours his own depth of complexity and possibility and works towards the integrity of their balance and coherence. This sense of the sacramental energy and intensity of experience will infuse in a natural and unforced way all dimensions of the priestly work. It frees the priest from the pressure of forcing his spirit to portray itself



outwardly according to the expectations of the clerical role. He will not labour under the burden of continually proving that he is a true priest. He can trust his destiny as a priest and allow the divine to claim his presence for its creative transfiguration of life. Such a priest will feel free and indeed called to demand that the Church change its imperative of forced celibacy. He will struggle for the freedom of choice in regard to celibacy. What is forced damages, what is free enhances and replenishes. Forced celibacy is essentially a political strategy to control priests and a financial strategy to avoid supporting the priest's wife and family. Such a priest will also feel called to struggle for the possibility of the ordination of women. Were women to withdraw their support all over the world for one month, the Church would collapse. There are no credible theological grounds for their exclusion from ordination. It is a tragic poverty in the Church that the wonderful priestliness of the feminine is not allowed full expression in explicit priesthood. One of the greatest duties of the current male Church is to get over their fear of the feminine and allow women full participation in ministry so that the kingdom of love and creativity can be built up.

The source and inspiration of all priestliness is the priest Jesus. It was this young poet who brought the implicit priestliness of every woman and man to light.

Firstly, Jesus had a wonderful depth of sensibility and imagination. All his language is fresh and alert. It is a language full of thresholds; it opens the heart to the eternal. It took a powerfully disciplined and inspired imagination to discover and articulate the presence and shape of the the Trinity. No other shape of deity holds such power and tension. In the Trinity the pure wildness of the unknown surges within the intimacy of personal form. It took the most refined non-egoistic imagination to discern within the lineaments of one's own consciousness the identity of the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. It is in this recognition and its outflow that the incarnation consists. Without the ascetic and mystical imagination of Jesus the incarnation would never have been known or realized, since the incarnation happened nowhere other than in the person and presence of Jesus. His imagination discovered the trinitarian divinity within his soul. The imagination of Jesus is grounded in the Trinity where as Son he is the first Other, the first difference and differentiation in the cosmos. He is the nerve centre from which all difference flows and where all contradiction reconciles itself. It is no wonder that William Blake called Christ the Imagination. His priesthood awakened the territories of imagination and divinity where the kingdom of love could grow.

Secondly, as priest Jesus engaged without reserve the duality and ambivalence of our finitude. Time and again his presence evoked conflict and contradiction. Yet he never abandoned the precarious frontier where all dualities meet. He inhabited the nerve line of paradox and contradiction. He never opted for the simplistic reductionism of fundamentalism, but remained true to the depth and possibility of human complexity. For too long our Christology has been one-sided and kept Jesus outside that which is awkward and contradictory. We forget that Jesus knows contradiction, paradox and pathos from within. Despite the tension of the frontier he inhabited, he always kept his dignity, balance and poise. This must have been the fruit of the thirty years of solitary interior work before he emerged in his public mission. The hospitality of his presence worked beyond the categories of convention, legalism and morality. His eye saw divine possibility in the most unexpected situations and neglected individuals. His cross became the crucible which gathered the full intensity and outreach of human duality, negativity and contradiction. He wisely identified death as the wound in the universe, the wound from which all fear, diminishment and negativity flows. In embracing its full threat and destruction, he altered forever the grip of the negative on us. He transfigured it into a light-carrier and healer. The frontier becomes the place of greatest possibility and renewal. This is exactly the life force of transfiguration and healing that meets us in the sacraments. The sacraments are new thresholds where loss is transfigured into presence, darkness into light, fact to possibility and gravity to grace.

Thirdly, as priest Jesus worked outside the categories of image and its array of expectations. He was offered exciting political and religious images of himself, but he refused them all. He kept to the clear inner space of his solitude. He never allowed the intimacy and complexity of the inner life to be grasped or reduced by the vagaries and vulgarities of image. Faithfulness to one's imagination brings great generosity of identity. The reduction and fixation of identity into image is thus avoided. To build one's identity on image is to build on sand. One of the great challenges of priesthood is to hold to the implicit divinity of humanity. As a priest Jesus witnessed to the inner priestliness of the individual which externality can neither name nor claim. He confronted and deconstructed the clericalism of contemporary Judaism. Time and again he unmasked its falsity and exposed the feeble perception behind its arrogance.

Fourthly, as a priest Jesus coaxed people back home to the hearth of their own interiority. He helped them in out of the exile of the external

and awakened a new consciousness in them. He relieved them of the burden of an epistemology of quantity and category by kindling the flame of the soul. He awakened their longing for the eternal, but unlike any previous preacher he did not send them on a Sisyphean journey in search of a distant and unreachable divinity. Instead he showed us that we all live in the neighbourhood of the eternal. Everything we need for our journey is within the divine treasury of our interiority.

It is a difficult time to be a priest. Many of the support structures that religion enjoyed in a more uniform culture have now vanished. While this creates confusion and uncertainty, it can also free priesthood from the grid of clericalism. The functionalism and anonymity of system can no longer reach or converse with the newly awakened spirituality. Now there is an invitation and hunger for a priesthood of the heart. Such a priesthood will not be without form and structure, but these structures will be emergent rather than external, inclusive and organic rather than fixed and separatist. The excitement of western culture is that consciousness is at a new threshold. Something profoundly subversive and new is being born. It is only imagination that can navigate this unknown territory. Naked will and linear intellect are lost here. Consequently, the new priesthood needs to rediscover the imagination as the hearth of divinity. Inspiration, wisdom and guidance are to be rediscovered in the priesthood of Jesus. He navigated beautifully the inner and outer thresholds. He dismantled clericalism, awakened the divine imagination, befriended and transfigured negativity and revealed the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have explored this dynamic in 'The horizon is in the well' in *The Furrow* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> I have explored this theme in *Person als Vermittlung. Die Dialektik von Individualität und Allgemeinheit in Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes. Eine philosophisch-theologische Interpretation* (Mainz, 1993).