

Introduction

As far back as 1961, a Belgian priest, Louis Bouyer, published a book on the meaning of the priestly life in which he commented that the conditions in which the clergy live, and even more especially the circumstances in which they exercise their priesthood, have changed so much in the space of a few generations that it comes as no surprise when we hear that many of them are experiencing some unrest.

Unless a priest goes back to the very roots of his vocation to the priesthood, it is never easy for him to grasp the demands made by the Church on those who have responded freely and willingly to the divine call, those who have accepted that enormous task and taken on that tremendous responsibility. It can never be easy, but it is especially difficult in times of crisis, such as we are now experiencing.

The present book has been written as a reflection on the priest and his work, not a theological reflection—though it makes use of theology—but mainly ascetic and pastoral. I am not thinking of priests in general, but rather of those priests who spend their lives day after day in the care of souls, dealing with concrete problems, in real circumstances, with worries more closely related to practical life than to theory, those living and working in cities, towns, and rural areas. I have in mind particularly the self-sacrificing and courageous secular clergy, laboring tirelessly and humbly to bring the Church home.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Christ the Eternal Priest, obtain from her Son that these reflections may help us all to devote ourselves entirely to the fulfillment of our vocation as servants.

F. S.

The Priest

If he is to consider his position and think seriously about his priesthood, a priest must first of all approach the question from a point of view that will help him to see things clearly. If any deep thought is to be possible on the subject of the priesthood, we must situate the priest in the context in which he lives, works, and justifies his existence, as well as examine the nature of the priesthood itself. We cannot think of him apart from the Church, for he is inconceivable without it. He is surrounded and penetrated with the Church's ethos; only the mystery of the Church can throw light on the mystery of his vocation.

The Church thinks of herself as “a kind of sacrament” by her relationship with Christ, a “sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity” (*Lumen Gentium* [LG], 1).¹ Christ founded the Church, and it was he who entrusted it with the task of announcing the Kingdom of God and of “bringing all men to full union with Christ,” for the Church on earth is the beginning, the seed, of this Kingdom.

There is only one people of God, one Mystical Body of Christ, one Church. She has only one mission, and it devolves upon the whole Church, the whole people of God, the whole Mystical Body. The fulfillment of this mission, then, is “entrusted to all the members of the people of God, who through the sacraments of initiation have been made sharers in the priesthood of Christ, to offer to God a spiritual sacrifice and bear witness to Jesus Christ before men. Each has his own role to play in this mission of saving and building up the community.”²

This is a universal mission. It extends to all people of all times and all places. Christ died for each and every one of them. And for this one mission, there is but one priesthood, namely, that of Christ, the eternal Priest, in which all the faithful share in different ways and to different degrees. By divine institution, some of those faithful who share in that common priesthood are called to something else, to the ministerial priesthood. This differs essentially and not only in degree from the other, although it presupposes it: "The ministerial priesthood confers a *sacra potestas* which enables its recipients to share in the authority with which Christ, the head of the Church, builds up, sanctifies, and governs his Body." ³

Only this ministerial priesthood gives one the right to offer the eucharistic sacrifice, forgive sins, and publicly exercise the sacramental priesthood for the benefit of others, because it is the result of the special sacrament of Orders by which the Holy Spirit bestows on those who receive it a particular character which likens them to Christ the Priest, and enables them to act in the name of Christ, head of the Mystical Body.

The highest degree of priesthood was conferred by Christ on his apostles and, through them, on their successors, the bishops. But from very early times when the people of God were beginning to take their first steps forward, the apostles "legitimately handed on to different individuals in the Church various degrees of participation in this ministry. . . . Although priests do not possess the highest degree of the priesthood, and although they are dependent on the bishops in the exercise of their power, they are nevertheless united with the bishops in sacerdotal dignity. By the power of the sacrament of Holy Orders, and in the image of Christ the eternal High Priest, they are consecrated to preach the gospel, shepherd the faithful, and celebrate divine worship as true priests of the New Testament" (LG 28).

Hence the priest is above all else a man of the Church, and he can be understood, his position is meaningful, only within the context of the Church. His vocation is so closely

linked to the Church's mission that it merges with it. Indeed, to a great extent the Church exercises her mission through and by means of the priest, so much so that not only the propagation of the message of salvation among those who do not know Christ but even the "renewal of the whole Church depends in large measure on a ministry of priests" (*Optatam Totius* [OT], preface).

However, "the mission of the Church is not only to bring to men the message and grace of Christ, but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal sphere with the spirit of the gospel" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* [AA], 5). So the priest's ministerial work and his vocation, that is, his divine calling, extend also to this life. God created the world; he made it spotless, well ordered, and good, but it has been diverted from its true course by sin, while God's plan is to unite all things in Christ, "things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). Men cannot be saved outside their normal environment, outside the world in which they live, for that is not how they exist.

The Church's action, through the common priesthood of all the faithful, aims to a great extent at bringing about a situation in which "the faith of Christ and the life of the Church will no longer be something extraneous to the society in which they live, but will begin to permeate and transform it" (*Ad Gentes* [AG], 21). And this is to be achieved "not in any external dominion exercised by merely human means" (*Gaudium et Spes* [GS], 42), but by bringing about the unity of all men through an application of faith and charity to their ordinary lives. This being so, the priest must make every effort to teach faith and charity, doctrine, and moral judgment to those members of the faithful entrusted to his care, so that they too may play their part in the mission assigned to them by the Church as a means of restoring the order distorted by sin.

Priests, therefore, constitute a section of the people of God to whom the Church has entrusted an extremely important and exceptionally delicate task, namely, to transform the world by transforming men and women. However,

they perform this task, not alone, but with the aid of the faithful, who exercise the common priesthood and who also, as a part of the people of God, have an active role to play within the Church in spreading the gospel. All the faithful who make up the people of God (and priests must be among them as leaven, keeping their faith, hope, and charity alive and constantly growing) should show the world God's saving plan, the meaning of life and of creation, how all men and all things are directed toward God through Christ, the center of our entire history. They have to show the world the great mystery of redemption, as well as the mystery of the Church, through which mankind's redemption has been achieved down through the ages.

Since the Church is a sign of unity, not only among people but between the supernatural and temporal worlds, the priest should also regard himself as a sign of unity. The wedge driven by modern philosophy between religion and life, between faith and temporal activity, between this world and the next, affects the minds and attitudes even of Christians and is one of the gravest errors of our time. If this error is to be rectified, the priest has a lot to say and a lot to do, for he is a consecrated man, situated on the frontier of both worlds, active on both levels, and bringing them together.

In the light of these basic principles relating to the priest, showing his position in the Church and in the world, seeing him as a man of the Church entrusted with an important part of her mission, we can now begin to think about the priest and his ministry. We may start with a classic text on the subject, taken from the Letter to the Hebrews: "For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins, as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was" (5: 1-4).

It is clear that these words are perfectly applicable to priests, for “by the sacrament of Orders priests are configured to Christ the Priest so that as ministers of the Head and co-workers of the episcopal order, they can build up and establish His whole Body which is the Church” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* [PO], 12), a task they fulfill as living instruments of the eternal Priest.

A priest is a man, but a man taken out from among men, invested with a new and tremendous dignity through his ordination and then given back again to serve all men and women “in relation to God.” He serves them by offering gifts and sacrifices for sins; for his own as a man—he also is a sinner—and for those of others, for all the sins of the world. And he does this, not as an exceptional man, isolated from all others, but rather in great sympathy with them, for his nature is their nature, and, like them, he is full of defects and shortcomings.

A consecrated man

Above all else, a priest is a consecrated man. There is a clear difference between a man as such and a Christian, for Baptism imposes on its recipient an indelible character, a permanent mark, so permanent and indelible that it can never be erased, and this makes him really and truly a new man. There is also a difference between a Christian as such and a priest, for the sacrament of Orders confers on the Christian who receives it a new character, a new mark, which also is permanent and indelible, making its recipient a priest for ever—a *sacerdos in aeternum*. Just as anyone who has been baptized is saved or damned *as* a Christian, so the Christian who has been ordained is saved or damned *as* a priest. He has taken an irreversible step that leaves him marked out forever.

This man, who has been consecrated by the sacrament of Orders, is not a priest simply by virtue of the acts he performs when using the powers and faculties conferred on