19.

What Makes Priesthood Special?

I probably ought to begin by qualifying the question a little. The truth is that I’m far less concerned about what makes being a priest special in other people’s eyes than about what makes priesthood important to me. I grow uncomfortable when people voice expectations of a priest beyond what he is capable of, and I feel awkward when they think that we are closer to God than we actually are. In between there lies the ground where the priest tries his utmost to be a good Christian.

All have a vocation

Whatever shape and path they take, vocations are matters of mystery. Every human being can appropriate the language of vocation—of divine calling—because God has called every one of us into existence. That God out of love created us is something we can do little more than wonder over. Still, the fact remains that life is our calling and love is our vocation. And to take things one step further, every Christian can claim that he or she has been called to follow Jesus with evangelical perfection. Jesus’ words “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48) are addressed to all of his disciples, not just to a select few.

Yet the reasons why each life takes the form it does and why individual Christians follow such distinctive routes to God are things we shall never completely understand, either. Social environment, family histories, emotional and psychological makeup, educational backgrounds, and so forth, play their essential part. They weave together and, under the impulse of the Spirit, constantly work us over until we reach full stature as
a son or daughter of God. Although Christians are drawn to do many different things, they are not drawn by the Spirit to be many different things, since in the end what really matters is our being clothed with Christ, indeed our being new creations in him, as St. Paul says: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17).

Nevertheless, who we are and what we do are very much tied together. If there was one thing that Paul was certain of, it was that God had called him to be an apostle. It was as if his deepest self—his soul—had been indelibly stamped with an urge to preach the Gospel, and woe to him if he failed to do so! (1 Cor 9:16) While many had been called to follow the Lord and thus to be his disciples, not all had been called to be an apostle. There was, after all, a variety of gifts, since in the Church there was a wide variety of needs.

**Callings should not be compared**

There is no particular satisfaction in comparing myself, for better or worse, with others. Isn’t there something immodest and self-justifying when a person seeks to elevate one vocational choice over others? That fact is that I am not a missioner, that I am not a Carthusian, that I am not a married man, or that I did not choose to work in medicine, or law, or politics, or human service. We are who we are. I don’t have the least inclination to speculate about what might have happened if. Whatever specialness I feel, then, derives not from drawing comparisons with other lifestyles or even with other roles in the Christian community. My sense of who I am comes first and foremost from the conviction that it was God who called me into existence and that God’s hand has ever been at work in my life fashioning me into the kind of person that I am. Psalm 139 has long been the one I turn to most—and the prayer I invite
others to pray as if Jesus were standing alongside, reciting the words with us. Paul tried to help the Corinthian Christians appreciate the importance and complementarity of the different gifts the Spirit had bestowed upon the community by appealing to the metaphor of a body (1 Cor 12:12-31). Yet nowhere does he suggest that the body would be whole without a particular member or that it could still function without certain parts.

In other words, the hand is not “better” than the foot, or the ear more elevated than the eye, and so on. Each member contributes to the life and well-being of the person. Likewise, a priest would never think of himself as special because he is more prayerful, more theologically literate, or more conscious of his baptismal vocation than anyone else. How would he know that? A priest might locate some personal distinctiveness in the fact that he is a religious, or a missioner, or a medical doctor, or a licensed counselor, or a theologian, or perhaps a bishop, and so forth. But his specialness arises from his being placed or situated within the whole body of Christ. And so too for everyone else. We are all special because we come from God and because we have been immersed in the dying and rising of Jesus. The fact that one exercises a position of leadership in the community does not automatically guarantee his or her holiness, which accounts for why the truly effective priest is above all a man of God.

A ministry of word and sacrament

For most Catholics, it may be safely said, priesthood spells two basic activities: the priest preaches and he presides at the Eucharist. Yet underneath this twofold ministry of word and sacrament, of course, there lies the one commitment that transfigures the individual’s Christian consciousness and characterizes it as priestly, namely, the person’s overriding
concern for the welfare of the Christian community. For the community is the place where men and women discover the rich possibilities of wholeness, reconciliation, and genuine freedom of spirit. Church is, or at least it ought to be, the place that nurtures and sustains hope, and the school of right living. Indeed, parish communities create the framework within which men and women encounter the mystery of God in Christ. Yet while word and sacrament clearly contribute to the building of the Church and its ongoing life, they do not exhaust what a priest does.

I find abiding consolation in preaching and presiding, and I am bold enough to think that there is an experience of the risen Lord which is specific to these ministries. One knows Jesus in preaching about him, and one knows him as one recites, in the name of the whole community, the Eucharistic prayer. But what I bring to homilies and to leading an assembly in worship comes from an awareness not of ministerial function, but of something else. It is my attachment to God’s people that has come to define my sense of who I am as a priest. It often seems that my private life has been displaced by the life of God’s people, and the older I grow, the more their life and historical fortunes claim my heart’s attention. What happens to God’s people anywhere moves me, shapes my praying, conditions how I read Scripture. Physically I can only be in one time and place, but my spirit suffers no such limitations.

I think of the amazing grace that was Paul’s. He could be in prison, but physical confinement imposed no restrictions upon his consciousness of the people to whom he had been sent. Paul wrote them letters, prayed for them, corrected and encouraged them, and beheld them continually with his mind’s eye. Solitude and solidarity are by no means incompatible, as
Thomas Merton showed us, and Thérèse of Lisieux before him, and so many others who have pioneered the ways of the human spirit. Indeed, if what we know about Israel’s prophets provides any clue here, how could Jesus have been alone with God for more than a few moments before the voices and faces he had encountered on his travels through Galilee crossed into his prayer? Sharing this experience may not be sufficient for someone who wants to know with conceptual precision what makes a priest special, but for me it has been the grace that confirms and reconfirms the call to which I am constantly responding.

The Bible’s call stories may mislead us

For me there has long been a note of unreality about some of the classic call stories of the Bible. God has never spoken to me with the directness one might fantasize on the basis of the story of Abraham, or Moses, or the young Samuel, or Isaiah, or Paul. For most of us, the Spirit’s vocational action is mediated through the example of faithful Christian witness, whether clerical, lay, or religious; encounters with grave misfortune, severe human need, or everyday heroism; the idealism of close friends; a vibrant worshiping community; religious art; key historical events; biographies of faith; frustration with the Church or perhaps excitement about the Church. Any of these can prompt one to consider a tighter, more focused, or more intense relationship with the people of God.

The biblical stories are quite realistic, however, in the fact that divine calling is usually portrayed as a process rather than a once and for all instance of divine action. There was nothing static, for instance, about Moses’ vocation or Paul’s. And there is nothing static about the priesthood, either. Priesthood in the Church is not a timeless essence but an ongoing relationship
with the people of God. Who I am is necessarily being affected by the people among whom I live and work and worship. Indeed, in real, tangible, sensible ways the people have been drawing priesthood out of me, bringing shape and definition to a call that I sincerely believe comes from God.

From one point of view, then, I suppose priesthood does become a matter of what someone is. The people of God become the instrument through which the Spirit makes us into a particular kind of person. More than a role, more than a clearly defined job, priesthood corresponds to what the Church needs and expects of us at our particular historical moment. Are we to assume that the way Oscar Romero perceived priesthood in the months and weeks prior to his assassination was the same as on the day of his ordination? His understanding would have been the same only if his being a priest of the Church was completely divorced from who he was as a human being and from the historical fortunes of the Salvadoran people. The “character” of his priesthood was forged in that mysterious juncture where grace meets history and where political, social and economic circumstances determine the shape of a people’s expectations and hope. God’s word is never announced in a vacuum, and the Lord’s Supper is never celebrated in sterile isolation from the everyday world. Thus priesthood is not so much a matter of function or role in the Church, but a relationship with the people of God. If Christian baptism initiates a relationship with God’s people, then ordination represents its intensification.

The Council and the world: two formative forces

My understanding of priesthood has certainly changed since I entered the minor seminary almost forty-five years ago. Some of that change I naturally trace to intellectual, affective and spiritual growth on my part; much of it came as pastoral
experience seasoned some youthful naïveté. But in large measure that change occurred, first, because Vatican II set in motion a process of renewal so vast and deep that no element of church life was left unaffected, and second, because for the greater part of this century the world has been going through technological and social developments of seismic proportions.

The image of the priest in the frequently cited description from the nineteenth-century Dominican Jean Baptiste Lacordaire struck me, even in high school several years before the Council, as too clean, too smooth. It lacked the warmth that comes from human fallibility. Living in the midst of the world without wishing its pleasures. A member of each family yet belonging to none. Penetrating all secrets, healing all wounds. A heart of bronze for chastity and a heart of fire for charity. To go from men to God and offer him their prayers, to go from God to men to bring pardon and hope. The figure of the priest here borders on being unrealistic. It is hard to see how such a man could have signified for anyone the wonderfully down-to-earth Jesus of the gospel parables and healings. Did Fr. Lacordaire think that a priest was supposed to imitate the angels? The letter to the Hebrews captures the reality—and our ministerial hope—better: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:5).

Above all, however, it was the image of the priest as some sort of mediator between the divine mystery and the human world that left me uneasy. It wasn’t that humility should make a priest reluctant to think he stands between his brothers and sisters, and God. The reason was, rather, that the Word became one of us, identified with our flesh, truly lived among us, and thus forever removed the necessity of a special class of
believers to represent the people before God. Perhaps it was an incipient Protestantism on my part, but my head never quite grasped why, given who we believed Jesus was, believers would settle for anyone else in the mediator’s role. Or perhaps I had simply decided for myself that some few human beings were not friends of God more so than the rest. In Christ, we can all relate to God directly and personally as daughters and sons, and the priest’s task is to assure men and women of this basic truth. He is supposed to lead them to taste the mystery of God but without ever insinuating that he had a corner on human access to the divine. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Karl Rahner’s words touched a more sympathetic nerve: *The priest is not an angel sent from heaven. He is a man chosen from among men, a member of the Church, a Christian.* Wherever priesthood shines, it is not because the priest is doing or living something nobody else does, but because he is leading a radically Christian life.

But while it is possible to think of priesthood without importing the notion of mediation, I cannot think of it apart from the dimension of reconciliation. For reconciliation is integral to preaching: the word of God opens our eyes to the presence of alienation in our lives and then it moves us to seek forgiveness and to do whatever we can to overcome it. And reconciliation is obviously central to the celebration of sacraments.

Still, reconciliation is important to my self-understanding not simply because I preach or celebrate sacraments, but because it is so deeply embedded in life of Jesus. That Jesus was profoundly aware of alienation’s many forms in the everyday life of his people—illnesses, demonic possession, injustice, hunger, sin—is apparent from nearly every page of the
Gospels. That his ministry should have been devoted above all to reconciling men and women to one another and to God strikes the reader as the only sane response to the presence of sin in the world. And thus in one way or another all my preaching and presiding constantly draw their breath from the life of Jesus; they have made me keenly sensitive to the myriad forms of brokenness within individual lives, in families, and in society around me. The consequence, in other words, of delivering homilies and leading communities in liturgical worship is that one’s consciousness becomes shaped by the message that pervades the entire Christian mystery, namely, God in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19).

You think about it in reading the newspapers or watching the nightly news, or as you listen to people share their life stories. Your awareness of brokenness—your own first, and then that of others—generates a way of being present to people. Urging people to seek reconciliation, to make peace, to beg the grace of being able to forgive, to labor against every form of injustice becomes practically a passion. This driving concern is not part of a job description, but I believe it is central to every priest’s consciousness the more he ponders the liturgical mysteries in his care.

Why, then, is priesthood so important to me? Because being a priest has enabled me to experience deeply the life of God’s people—an experience that has been a steady privilege and joy. Why is it important? Because I love the believing community called Church, and priesthood allows that love to direct my life and my energies. Why? Because priesthood has enabled me to face the world’s alienation and wretchedness without being overwhelmed, and in the ministry of reconciliation I find a singular fulfillment. Paul’s language about being an ambassador for Christ does not quite resonate
with me, but there is another image that comes to mind. To twist Jesus’ parable a little, what if the elder brother had stood beside his father as he waited patiently for the younger son’s return? What if he had come to share the father’s anxiety for the one who was lost and longed for homecoming just as much as the father did? The sleeplessness and the longing of an older brother who will not rest until all have safely returned to their father’s house somehow captures for me the unyielding passion that makes a priest what he is.

[2000]