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**Experiencing Priesthood Today**

The birth of a prophet is something of a mystery. I’m not referring to a prophet’s biological origins but to the prophet’s spiritual or interior awakening. Prophets would undoubtedly have possessed some prior sensitivity to the things of God—it would be hard to imagine someone’s becoming a prophet who was utterly lacking in any sensitivity to the way of the Spirit or whose ears were not already primed to the word of God. I think of the piety of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and the temple precincts in which the young boy was reared. I think of the faith of John’s parents Elizabeth and Zechariah, who was a priest—as was the father of Jeremiah. While not much is known of the background of prophetic figures like Amos and Hosea, I’d wager that the religious history of each of them had been unfolding long before their encounter with God. Indeed, Ezekiel reports that he was a priest before he became a prophet.

**Vocation and cultural context**

Prophets believe themselves “called”; the word of the Lord, they are convinced, has been spoken to them. But so far as I can tell, the Spirit does not speak and thereby awaken the prophetic vocation or mission unless the times—the political, ethical and religious situation of the people—require a prophetic voice and witness. Thus in periods of social or cultural upheaval, in response to oppression and exploitation of the poor or covenantal infidelity, the biblical prophets emerged to name and denounce in the name of God what was wrong in Israel. Prophetic vocations are generated within particular social and

If we are on the right track here, then perhaps we could broaden the point to include vocations to the priesthood. Calls take place in specific contexts and those contexts shape and often dictate the responses we make. No one is drawn to priesthood in the abstract, any more than the biblical prophets were drawn to prophecy in the abstract; one is drawn to a particular way of evangelical living and serving the people of God. Someone who says “I want to be a priest” is articulating a desire for a distinctive place in the life of the Church, a vocational role scripted more or less in terms of what he or she has observed priests doing. When St. Thérèse of Lisieux cried, for instance, “If only I were a priest! How lovingly, Jesus, would I hold You in my hands when my words had brought you down from heaven and how lovingly would I give You to the faithful,” she was reflecting her understanding of priesthood.

Of course, to the degree that others are now doing what priests alone once did, the customary picture or definition of the priest’s role and place in the Church was bound to become less precise. I would suggest though that “priesthood” is not a great Christian universal—timeless, abstract, conveying the same essential idea from one age to the next. In many respects priesthood is a social construct; it takes its form or definition within the everyday life of the Church. In this sense priesthood becomes what the Church needs and wants it to be.

For most of us priests have been models of selfless dedication to the spiritual and corporal needs of the Church and the wider human community. Yet there have been numerous others, non-ordained, who have also served the Church and the world tirelessly and without any desire for personal gain. The
one thing that distinguished priestly ministry from everything else was obviously the sacraments. After all, priesthood in itself is a cultic notion. But as other baptized persons have been enlisted to serve the community as catechists, ministers of the Eucharist, spiritual directors, hospital chaplains, presiders at non-Eucharistic worship services, preachers, evangelizers, missionaries, reconcilers of the estranged, and so on, our conception of priesthood has been undergoing a subtle but sure adjustment.

It ought to be said, however, that for many Catholics the integrity of a priest’s cultic service—the impression priests made on us as they preached and celebrated the Eucharist—was intimately connected to how they had served and stood by their people. In particular we intuited that the faith that led them to align themselves with the poor, the sick, and social outcasts was the very same faith that undergirded the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Successful fundraising, important though it was, did not carry the same evangelical valence as caring for the indigent or laboring to keep school doors open for poor inner-city children. In other words, the Eucharist alone never fully delineated what priesthood was all about. It was the Eucharist plus service, and in particular service slanted towards those most in need, that best captured—and continues to capture—what it means to be a priest. Archbishop Romero’s assassination while reciting the Eucharistic prayer would be not nearly so memorable if one did not know the story of his solidarity with the poor of El Salvador.

There used to be a painting somewhere in Lisieux, a friend mentioned to me recently, of St. Thérèse vested like a priest for Mass (the picture may still be there). His comment put me in mind of a crucifix in several nearby parish churches where the
figure of Jesus appears vested with alb, chasuble and stole, signifying the conjunction of priest and victim. Besides being anachronistic, this particular way of representing Jesus skews the image of priesthood. The one standing at the altar saying the Eucharistic prayer in the name of the whole people of God is not simultaneously representing all victims; only Jesus can do that. Furthermore it is not the priest’s faith that makes the real presence of Jesus possible during the celebration—in the readings and prayers, in the homily and the body of believers, and in the bread and cup—but the Spirit, who animates the Church and enables each of us to lift our minds to God.

Each person in church bears a measure of responsibility for the fruitfulness of the Liturgy. Each person’s faith and dispositions of mind and heart are as vital to the celebration as the faith, piety, and recollection of the priest. The celebrant, in other words, does not represent the crucified Jesus, and so Jesus should not be portrayed as wearing a chasuble and stole. A vested Jesus leaves everyone except the priest disconnected from Jesus crucified. No one in his right mind is going to be attracted to ordained ministry because of a fascination with vestments. A liturgically clad Jesus fosters a spiritual and moral apartness in the community’s thinking about priesthood that is unlikely to help anyone.

**Looking to the future**

I have no firm idea as to what priesthood might look like in another twenty years. What I do know, however, is that communities of faith need tending. If faith communities were to disappear the world would look and feel increasingly like the biblical Sheol. I know further that our culture is bracketed by individualism on one side and consumerism on the other, and that these cultural pressures together can suffocate the life of the
spirit. In response to this danger, Christian liturgy will increasingly highlight solidarity and community as key elements of the Christian religious experience. Increasing attention will be paid during penitential rites and reconciliation services to the ways in which individualism and consumerism have seeped into family and civic life. And there will be a corresponding thirst among many Catholics for a fuller and richer way of being human, of being women and men of God, and of being church. The priest of the future will be someone who thinks, lives, and breathes community; someone for whom local community is inconceivable without solidarity and a truly global consciousness; someone who exemplifies the vital connection between the virtue of solidarity and the option for the poor. Vocation is shaped by context.

As I look back over a number of years in ministry, three sources of enduring consolation stand out. I mention them because consolation is an indication of what has brought freedom, peace, and joy into one’s life. Consolation confirms decisions and eases misgivings, second-thoughts, and even regrets over roads not taken.

First, I relish every opportunity to preach. I love to spend time studying and thinking about scriptural texts, reading them aloud over and over, inflecting phrases differently each time, weighing the sound and meaning of each word. To hold a lectionary or a Bible in one’s hands is to take one’s place within the innumerable generations that make up our religious tradition—those who composed the texts, those who lived by them, and those who handed them along to us. I imagine the people before whom I will be standing, reconstructing what their week may have been like—what they may have done each day, what their worries might be, what has brought them
happiness, where failure may have presented itself. I review the events of the week at home and abroad, connecting the dots between the local community and the global community. I start praying for the people who will be listening and remind myself that the scripture readings and the homily are not about me and my concerns but about the Lord and his relationship with his people. I enjoy being a steward of sacred texts.

Preaching is most gratifying not when I have the chance to illumine a text’s historical background or offer fresh insight into a passage but when in and through the scriptural word I feel the connection between what I believe, what the Church has always believed, and what the people in front of me somehow already know in the depths of their own minds and hearts. And yet I cannot imagine a worship service that would stop after the homily or where the homily would be the highpoint—something has to follow. The bread of life is not only a word for the heart and the mind; it must enter the soul through our mouths, not just our ears. The word has to be performed. Jesus did not just teach; he taught and he sat at table. Tables were as much his classroom as the synagogues of Galilee.

And this brings me to the second consolation. Priesthood makes it possible to step into people’s lives and into their homes. Several years ago I made it a point to visit the homes and apartments of the families with whom I worship each week in order to bless the family tables. There is a profoundly religious connection between the table where families share their meals and the Eucharistic table—a connection that merits continual explanation, cultivation and attentiveness. On Sundays my mind’s eye recalls each of those tables, where I’ve probably had coffee. More importantly, I am minded of the particulars of each household and immensely grateful for
having the opportunity to be a small part of so many lives—an opportunity made possible by the nature of priesthood and the role it plays in building the Church. For the Church would not be the household of God apart from families; their spiritual and material wellbeing is absolutely essential if the Church is to be salt, leaven, or light for the world.

Few experiences have proven so strengthening and reaffirming as being invited into people’s homes—to hear their stories, to share their concerns, to admire their accomplishments, to watch the affection and care they lavish on their children. The experience of being trusted is one of the warmest and most humbling consolations of anyone’s life. In priesthood such graces can be overwhelming. It would be a pastoral calamity of the worse proportions if because of the exposures and scandals of the past few years the door that opens between the two tables—the table of the Lord and the table in each home—were henceforth closed to priests. Such a pass would spell personal desolation and the end of the Church as we have known it. People welcome us into their hospital rooms or when we visit them in prison, for that is where they are more likely to feel vulnerable and alone; but no one wants to stay there.

The third consolation comes in the distribution of Communion. And here I’m not echoing the sentiments of Thérèse so much as drawing attention to a facet of Christian sacramentality, namely, the wonder of human hands. Giving Communion is no longer a practice reserved to priests—we all know that. But when joined with the sense of finding God in preaching and the experience of having been trusted by others with a share of their life, placing the Bread of life in people’s hands is an extraordinary consolation.
Hands reveal biographies, lives far spent or lives just beginning. The thin, wrinkled skin of the elderly. Joints made painful with arthritis. Hands permanently creased from hard work. A mechanic’s hands blackened from grease and motor oil. Wedding bands, whose silent histories one recalls or reconstructs with the quickness of an Amen. The taut palms of a teenager who has played endless hours of basketball, the hands—full of promise—of a youngster who only months ago received First Communion. “It’s all in the hands,” I tell myself, “Christ’s hands.” For how else does he touch, embrace, heal, repair, teach, untie, set loose, and bless? Some hands have arrived at church fresh from painting a wall, others from slicing onions, changing a diaper, weeding a garden, or maybe even fingering a rosary. The hands tell the story, and into those hands one places the body of Christ. The effect lingers long after the Communion rite is finished. I go home, still seeing those hands before me, marveling at how priesthood could bring the sheer ordinariness of grace so close and astonished at how the life of God displays itself among us. Sometimes I recognize hands more easily than I can remember faces.

I am simply describing several consolations which, taken together, have helped me to understand what priesthood can mean and confirmed for me a vision of priestly ministry. Needless to say, priests engage in a rich variety of works as healers, teachers, and community-builders. These works, moreover, are not so much expressions of their ordination but of their baptism. Watching priests one cannot fail to notice an impressive range of human gifts, skills, and interests.

How we identify the specific role or function of a priest does not hinge on the way we first think of Jesus, because Jesus’ life sets the pattern for all of his disciples. In other
words, baptism is logically prior to ordination; priests are disciples like everybody else. But our vision of priesthood does depend very much on how we think of the Church and the needs of the people of God in the world we wake up to each morning. In a general way priesthood represents an intensification of concern for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of God’s people. Each member of the believing community is concerned for his or her sisters and brothers in the Lord; but when this concern intensifies to the point at which “Zeal for your house will consume me” (John 2:17) we have, I believe, the first sign of priestly calling, which is less about cult than about care. Perhaps this verse could tease us into appreciating the dynamic of passing from the priestly to the prophetic, which was what Jeremiah and Ezekiel did many centuries ago.

Which leads me to the more specific. To the extent that communities fracture—the global community, societies, neighborhoods, families—some among us are going to be aroused by the Spirit to the point of dedicating their lives to reconciliation and renewal within the Church itself. Why? Because they know in their bones that the Church is truly meant to be a sacrament of God’s oneness with the human race. To the extent that the human spirit has been compromised by individualism, some are going to feel drawn, irresistibly, to preaching and bearing witness to solidarity as a very different way of being human. And to the extent that we become more aware of the awful disproportion that exists between rich and poor, some among us are going to discover that they breathe best and rest most securely when the poor can claim them as their friends. I cannot imagine priesthood any other way.

[2003]