

The Priesthood

By Richard Bennett

There is a common thread that runs throughout the experiences of former priests whose testimonies are in our book, *Far from Rome, Near to God: The Testimonies of Fifty Former Catholic Priests*. We had a great yearning to be different from those around us. We wanted to be more pure, nearer to God. We wanted to be free in conscience before God, and we sought the priesthood in which we thought we could administer salvation stage by stage to our fellow man. The nobility and charm of the priesthood also drew us, as priests around us were signally honored with special privileges and dignity. Hearing confessions, forgiving sins, bringing Christ down upon the altar, the wonder of being “another Christ”, all of these attracted us. In the words of Graham Greene’s novel on the subject, we were drawn by “the power and the glory”.

We did not question:

1. that there is an office of sacrificial priesthood in the New Testament;
2. that the priest's life revolves around the sacraments;
3. that we were fit subjects to be elevated to this honor. We had all worked hard at being “holy” so we took for granted that a right standing with God was something that we could merit.

1. The Office of the Priesthood

In the early 1970’s, we who gloried in being priests were shocked to read the words of one of our best Roman Catholic Scripture scholars, Raymond E. Brown:

When we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament, it is striking that while there are pagan priests and Jewish priests on the scene, no individual Christian is ever specifically identified as a priest. The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the high priesthood of Jesus by comparing his death and entry into heaven with the actions of the Jewish high priest who went into the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle once a year with a blood offering for himself and for the sins of his people (Hebrews 9:6-7).

But it is noteworthy that the author of Hebrews does not associate the priesthood of Jesus with the Eucharist or the Last Supper; neither does he suggest that other Christians are priests in the likeness of Jesus. In fact, the once-for-all atmosphere that surrounds the priesthood of Jesus in Hebrews 10:12-14, has been offered as an explanation of why there are no Christian priests in the New Testament period.¹

Later in the same chapter, Brown argues for a priesthood like that of the Levitical class in the Old Testament. He makes his case for the development of such a doctrine by means of tradition. Even those of us who knew very little of the Bible knew that the Pharisees counted tradition superior to the clear Word of God. Brown did more to demolish the conviction that we were indeed priests than to ease our troubled minds. Now I see that what Brown stated in the section quoted is biblically and absolutely true. Other than the royal priesthood, which applies to all true believers in Christ, there is no office of priesthood in the New Testament. Rather, as Hebrews states so clearly of the Old Testament priests, *"And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: But this man, because he continueth ever, hath*

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (Paulist Press, New York 10019, 1970), p. 13.

an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them"² "Unchangeable priesthood" means just that in the Greek: *aparabatos* means "untransferable". The reason it cannot be transferred to men is that its essence is Christ's own, "*who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.*"³

2. The Priest's Life Revolves around the Sacraments

The second presupposition was that the Roman Catholic sacraments gave, as our catechism books said, "outward signs of inward grace". Our mindset, in the words of Canon 840, was that the sacraments "...contribute in the highest degree to the establishment, strengthening and manifestation of ecclesiastical communion."⁴ In fact, the sacraments themselves were for us the center of salvation and of sanctification. For example, regarding confession to a priest, Canon 960 declared that it was "the only ordinary way by which the faithful person who is aware of serious sin is reconciled with God". Rather than proclaiming the finished work of Christ Jesus as the answer to the problem of our sinful nature and personal sin record, our lives revolved around these physical signs. Some of us were shocked to read in Dollinger (the most respected Roman Catholic historian) that the sacrament of penance (confession) was unknown in the West for 1,100 years and never known in the East. Dollinger said, "So again with Penance. What is given as the essential form of the sacrament was unknown in the Western Church for eleven hundred years, and never known in the Greek."⁵ How could this be? The bishops were declared to be high priests "first and foremost" (Canon 835). Were not we as priests also declared to be dispensers of the sacramental system? In the light of God's Word, this was magic rather than the Gospel message.

The New Testament has two signs as instituted by the Lord; yet rather than the two signs, center stage in the Bible is the proclaimed message. But for us the sacraments themselves were of major importance. Every day began with Mass. Our doubts regarding the physical sacraments as central to our life with God began from experience. Many of us, priests for many years, had baptized countless infants, and had said the words, "I absolve you," over countless heads. We had anointed many aged, sick and accident victims with the words, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." Year after year we saw the children we had baptized as infants grow up as pagan as the pagans on the mission field. The myriads of people over whose heads we had pronounced absolution came up off their knees as much sinners after our words as before them. When the sick and the aged were neither saved nor "raised up", it was then that some of us dared to check the Bible. Here we discovered, "*It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life*"⁶ "*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast*"⁷

² Hebrews 7:23-25

³ Hebrews 7:26

⁴ *Code of Canon Law*, Latin-English ed. (Canon Law Society of America, Wash. DC 20064) 1983. All references to canon law are taken from this volume unless otherwise stated.

⁵ von Dollinger, *The Pope and the Council by Janus*, (Authorized tr. from the German "*Janus*": *Der Papst und das Concil*), Roberts Brothers (Boston, 1870) p. 50.

⁶ John 6:63

⁷ Ephesians 2:8-9

The verses in Ephesians shocked us most of all. Our standard definitions of sacraments defined them as “works”, as in the famous Canon 8 of the Council of Trent: “If anyone says that by the sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred *ex opere operato* [from the work worked], but that faith alone in the divine promise is sufficient to obtain grace, let him be anathema.”⁸ It was difficult even to begin to doubt the sacraments. These and other physical signs absorbed much of our time. During Lent or Holy Week, for example, we had to make arrangements for procuring and putting in order the newly blessed oils, the Pascal candle, the Pascal fire, the palms, the ashes from last year’s palms, the processional cross, the thurible with its charcoals and incense, the purple, red and white vestments, and so on. How could any of us dare to hear the Lord’s principle stated so clearly in John 6:63: “*It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing.*” But hear the words we did, as these testimonies bear witness. The Father drew us, showing us our own worthlessness and the sufficiency of his Word. As Jesus said to the Father, “*Thy word is truth*”⁹

3. Unfit Subjects for Honor

The last presupposition was the most deeply rooted within us. As a child, before ever wanting to become a priest, I had labored at being “holy”. During Lent I would “offer up” candy and sweet drinks to be a better Catholic. I visited nine churches in one day praying alternately “Our Father” six times, “Hail Mary” six times and “Glory Be” six times in each church. Some of us played at being holy by giving white peppermints to our friends when they would kneel down, as if we were the priest giving communion.

As priests, most of us were very enthusiastic about Vatican Council II. When the documents were published, some of us preached from them. One of the most popular documents was No. 64, *The Church in the Modern World*. But when the excitement had calmed, those of us who studied it saw the same message we had lived and preached. Paragraph. 14 states, “...Nevertheless man has been wounded by sin...When he is drawn to think about his real self he turns to those deep recesses of his being where God who probes the heart awaits him, and where he himself decides his own destiny in the sight of God.” Paragraph. 17 continues, “Since human freedom has been weakened by sin it is only by the help of God’s grace that man can give his actions their full and proper relationship to God.”¹⁰

This type of modern teaching seemed very much like the old message. The old message was also contained in Vatican Council II documents in a less popular document, No. 6, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, Paragraph. 6 which states: “From the most ancient times in the Church good works were also offered to God for the salvation of sinners, particularly the works which human weakness finds hard...Indeed, the prayers and good works of holy people were regarded as of such great value that it could be asserted that the penitent was washed, cleansed and redeemed with the help of the entire Christian people.”¹¹

⁸ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 7th Session, March, 1547, Tr. by Rev. H. J. Schroeder, O.P. (Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., Rockford, IL 61105) 1978.

⁹ John 17:17

¹⁰ Vatican Council II Documents, No. 64, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, Ch. 1, Vol. I, in *Documents of Vatican II*, *Vatican Collection*, Vol. I, Austin P. Flannery, O.P., Ed. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1984)

¹¹ Flannery, Vol. I. (While No. 6, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, 1 January, 1967, is an absolutely official primary source document and is included with the Vatican Council II documents, strictly speaking it is a post-conciliar docu-

All these teachings were endorsed by messages at Lourdes and at Fatima. That many souls go to Hell because there is no one to pray and to do penance for them was part of our third and biggest presupposition. Grace was, of course, presupposed; but it is you who by means of your suffering and good works merit salvation for yourself and for others. This is the net in which all of us who lived the works gospel so intensely were most deeply entangled by Roman Catholicism. This two-fold presupposition; that we were somehow holy and right before a holy God because we had prayed and suffered, and that we would continue as holy and righteous men to practice our religion, became our biggest undoing.

Mankind's Condition Before The Holy God

Christ Jesus describes man's nature. *"That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man"*¹² And the Prophet Jeremiah says, *"The heart is deceitful above all things; and desperately wicked; who can know it?"*¹³ Both Old and New Testaments tell us that we are spiritually dead to God. Adam's sin brought death. The Prophet Ezekiel states, *"The soul that sinneth, it shall die"*¹⁴ and Romans 6:23 says, *"The wages of sin is death."* We are not simply "wounded", as Roman Catholics believe. We are spiritually dead!

The Biblical Message of Salvation

We find the remedy for this situation in both Old and New Testaments. The prophet Isaiah declares: *"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."*¹⁵ Peter and John tell us: *"ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from our fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot". "And he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."*¹⁶ The Bible clearly states that salvation was Christ's work and his alone: *". . .by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high"*¹⁷ Romans 3:26 says that God is *"just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus"*. One is saved by God's work. Salvation is God's majestic, finished work. Woven through these testimonies is the same scarlet thread of God's sovereign grace. Before him, each person is dead in sin. By grace one is saved, through faith.

What the Bible has to say about priesthood becomes crystal clear in these personal testimonies of men who experienced both the false and the true priesthood (the priesthood of every believer in the once for all sacrifice of Christ Jesus). The best summary of what happened to these men in the Roman Catholic priesthood is found in the words of the Apostle Paul, *"There-*

ment of Pope Paul IV).

12 Mark 7:20-23

13 Jeremiah 17:9

14 Ezekiel 18:20

15 Isaiah 53:5-6

16 I Peter 1:18-19, I John 2:2

17 Hebrews 1:3

fore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."¹⁸ ♦

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