

# We Are All Priests

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Baptism makes all Christians priests, inasmuch as it grafts them to the Body of Christ. It consecrates them so that by their presence in the world they may insure the continuous manifestation of the communion between God and humanity.

For at least the last forty years, theology and the official teaching of the Pope and bishops have been insisting on a priestly reading of our Christian experience; and yet, even today, when we hear the words “priests” or “priesthood”, it is exclusively in order to designate the ordained minister. The very idea of baptismal priesthood has not yet succeeded in penetrating the mentality or even the common vocabulary of our Christian communities.

## High time

This realization of the little progress made by the Christian community in receiving and assimilating the Council’s teaching about the baptismal priesthood of the faithful indicates the persistent danger of over-emphasizing the ministerial priesthood and its importance (*clericalism*).

It is high time we understood that we are all priests! The underlying prejudice that Christian life is the ordained priest’s affair lingers on. It is as if Jesus had died only for the priests, with the laity at most helping them to carry the burden of things that in reality are theirs!

A change of mentality is necessary on everybody’s part. We must try to overturn our customary way of thinking. Jesus came to save everybody; he died so that all may be saved. Jesus’ consuming passion was to save humankind, to make people able to praise God, to live in communion with him and with all other human beings. This is the content of Jesus’ priestly mission that continues in his priestly people, the Church.

This does not mean to belittle the function or the dignity of the ordained ministers. St. Francis Assisi, who did not want to be ordained as a priest because he thought he was unworthy, used to say that if he had met an angel walking with a priest, he would have greeted first the priest and then the angel! One of the things that move me very deeply and that I met only in the Philippines, is the children coming to me at the end of the Mass for the blessing: *Mano po! Mano po!*

## Mediating love

All this is beautiful, but what about the baptismal priesthood? It is like the hidden treasure that most people have forgotten.

To understand our baptismal priesthood we must first gain new insight into the priesthood of Jesus - of which our priesthood is the extension and continuation. Jesus was not a ritual priest; he did not belong to the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe. He did not perform the priestly rites by sacrificing animals.

The term the Bible uses to describe Jesus' salvific work as priest is "mediator": Jesus is the bridge-builder (*pontifex*), the one who has bridged the infinite gap between God and humanity. He did this by loving us to the end and accepting in his body the consequences of his genuine love faced with evil.

Jesus' priesthood is a mediation of love. His sacrifice is his body offered once and for all on the cross. At the eve of his passion, during the last supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist to declare publicly and to celebrate his salvific death out of love. He then went out of the upper room to face his enemies and to die. The fulfillment of his mediation of love is on Mount Calvary. That is the new Passover.

The Church continues Christ's mystery and mission: Christians are a priestly people. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people at all and now you are the People of God; once you were outside the mercy and now you have been given the mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10)

### **No more temple**

All the believers can then say: it is wonderful to live the Gospel, to continue the mission of Jesus. We want to make the Gospel shine in the family, in the workplace, where people study and trade, in all human relationships.

This is the new worship that pleases God: not made of sacrifices outside the self, cut off from life, the bloody sacrifices of animal. Our very life will be the acceptable sacrifice, our affections, our love, our work. This is what the first Christians had understood when they stopped going to the temple, and stopped asking the priest to slaughter a calf or a lamb for them.

There is no more temple: only the body of Jesus and our body. No more sacrifice of animals: only Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross. As for us, God does not expect anything but our communion of life with him and our solidarity with our brothers and sisters.

### **Living presence**

And what about the ordained priests? They are the ministers of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, the celebration of our priesthood. Moreover, they stand among us as the living presence of Jesus among his people and help the faithful make of their lives a gift to God and to the brethren, as a shepherd does with his sheep. Therefore priests are at the service of the laity, not vice versa!

There is a conversion to be done: the common priesthood of the faithful (the baptismal priesthood) is a true priesthood, not only a figurative one. It is the most important and it belongs to everybody.

The baptismal priesthood is an existential priesthood that gives the capacity of making of one's life a gift to God, a "spiritual sacrifice": "Think of God's mercy, my brothers, and worship him, I beg you, in a way that is worthy of thinking beings, by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God. Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what is that God wants, what is the perfect things to do" (Romans 12:1-2)

To be precise, there is only one priesthood: it is of the people of God, the priestly people whom Christ associates to his priesthood, and within it there is the function of the ministerial priesthood.

The whole Christian people continues Christ's mediation of love throughout time and space.