CHRIST THE PRIEST

By BERNARD LEEMING

CHRIST'S priesthood is unique, and he himself is unique. His priesthood is impacted in all that he is and all that he did; and hence it is not possible to lay down a definition of priesthood and show how it is verified in Christ. Priesthood must be characterized and defined, in so far as it can be defined, through and in Christ. All the priests of the Old Covenant were priests in only a comparative and even defective way, since their priesthood only foreshadowed in mysterious ways the one Priest to come, and all christian priests are such only in as far as they share in and reflect the priesthood of Christ.

Not, of course, that we do not know what we mean when we call Christ a priest. On the contrary, there is a general concept of priesthood which is verified in Christ, but is verified in him in a negative way – how often does the Letter to the Hebrews deny of Christ what was true of the levitical priesthood – and in a 'superlative' way. Thus our concept of priesthood is analogical, that is, a concept whose import we cannot fully grasp, even though we may grasp something of its meaning.

God to men and men to God

As St Thomas Aquinas says, the office of a priest is to bring divine things to the people, and to bring the people to God; in other words, the office of a priest is essentially a reconciling and uniting function. In many ways Christ brought unity between God and man.

He brought the unity of sympathy and compassion. The Letter to the Hebrews, which alone among the writings of the New Testament deals explicitly with the priesthood of Christ, may have included among its readers converted jewish priests. In Acts 6, 7, we are told that 'a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith'. Yet they were undergoing trials, sufferings and even temptations to apostasy. And to strengthen and comfort them, the Letter describes the greatness of Christ, and then his complete understanding of human sufferings and trials.

'In these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he created the world.

He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power . . .'[1] And the Letter goes on to show Christ superior to all the prophets and priests of the Old Covenant, superior to the angels and 'seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven'. Yet this Son of God, this eternal high priest, since his brethren and children have flesh and blood, 'likewise shares this in common with them',[2] and 'is made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest . . . for because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted'.[3]

Again, 'we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin'.[4] 'In the days of his flesh Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. And although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated a high priest according to the order of Melchizedech'.[5]

Not only the Letter to the Hebrews, but the whole of the New Testament, and many of the prophecies, bear witness to Christ's unity with men in their sufferings and afflictions. This unity differs in two respects from the sympathy and compassion which an ordinary man can have for the afflictions of his fellow men. For Christ, being an infinite person, by the union of the incarnation lifted the whole of human nature to a new dimension; and, having an awareness of God his Father through intuition, he could know each individual human being and all their deeds and sufferings.

An ordinary human being is a limited person in a limited nature; when he says 'I', or 'myself', he indicates one who exists only in this concrete nature, of this family, this country, this period of history. The 'I', the 'self', is limited and has only a restricted existence. But with Christ it was not so: having the full reality of a human nature, nevertheless the 'I' who spoke and acted, the 'self' referred to, is not a merely human 'I' and 'self'. When Christ said 'I' he meant the eternal Son of God, the Word, whose existence is not limited to a human existence. 'Before Abraham was, I am'.[6] His human nature was, so to say, made personal by the second person

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[1] Heb 1, 2–3. [2] Heb 2, 14. [3] Heb 2, 17–18. [4] Heb 4, 15.
[5] Heb 5, 7–11. [6] Jn 8, 58.

of the Trinity, and therefore in him the normal limits of human nature were transcended.

Not a few of the greek Fathers say that in the incarnation the Word of God took to himself the whole of human nature and, in a sense, assumed all mankind. He did not assume any human person, John, or Peter, or Thomas. He took a true individual human nature and united it to himself in a truly personal union, and yet did not cease to be the creator of the world, 'who is before all things, and in him all things hold together'.[1] St Hilary says that 'the Word made flesh assumed the nature of the whole race', and Marius Victorinus that 'the whole man was assumed and being assumed was made free; for in him all was universal, universal flesh, universal soul, and both were lifted up on the cross and purified by God the Word, the Saviour, the universal of all universals'. All Christ's human words, actions and experiences are the words, actions and experiences of God the Son.

Consequently, all the events of Christ's life, though they happened in a definite time and place, nevertheless as happening to a divine person, take on a certain timeless and limitless quality. St Leo therefore can say most truly that the cross is the altar on which the whole of human nature is offered to God, and St Cyril of Alexandria, that 'we were crucified with him when his flesh was crucified, that flesh which somehow contained in itself universal human nature'.[2]

Thus Christ is not only the representative man, empowered to speak for men and intercede for them. Nor is he only the typical man, the model for all men, to which they must be conformed in life and being. He is these, but he is also 'the second Adam'. Scripture represents all men as united to Adam by a nature received through natural descent from him; and so, likewise, all men must be united to Christ by a supernatural nature, received from him by a new birth. And as Adam contained in himself, potentially, all of his descendents, so Christ contains in himself, potentially, all his spiritual descendents. And this by reason of the incarnation: 'No man comes to the Father save by me'.[3] 'The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh'.[4] Christ is not a spirit but is a true man and it is only by union with him as he is that men receive sustenance for true life.

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1 Col 1, 17.
2 Leo, *Sermo* 55, 3, PL 54, 340; Cyril, *Scholia* 3, 192, PG 74, 795.
3 Jn 14, 6.
4 Jn 6, 51.

Union by personal compassion and love

Ordinary men of good feeling have a certain compassion for the sufferings of other men, and they have a certain love for all men in so far as they wish them well. But this must of necessity be a general compassion and love, since they cannot know all other men to make their compassion and love individual and personal. But with Christ it was not so. St Paul says, 'he loved me and gave himself for me'.[1] As Christ knew Paul and gave himself for Paul personally and individually, so, too, does Christ know each of us and give himself for each of us. Experiencing as he did the physical and mental growth normal to men, he still had, in a way that left his imaginative and reasoning faculties in their normal state, an immediate awareness of his own divine self and of his relation to the Father which surpasses normal human intellectual powers. 'The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing'.[2] In that inexpressible mutuality of knowledge between Father and Son there is a perceptivity in Christ's human intellect which the mystics in their words about 'the fine point of the soul' can only hint at. Because Christ told Nathaniel he had seen him under the fig tree, Nathaniel believed that he was the Son of God;[3] Peter said to him: 'Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you'.[4] Christ knew by what death Peter was to glorify God.[5] Some may feel difficulties about the reconciliation of Christ's growth in knowledge, his questions and his sufferings with the fact of his intuition of God and of his super-normal awareness; but the difficulties can be solved and, in any case, must fade away before the general christian conviction that the liberation and salvation brought by Christ is not, as it were, 'mass-produced', but is the fruit of Christ's personal and individual compassion and love for each human being. Each can say, with St Paul, 'he loved me and gave himself for me'.

Union with Christ's relation to the Father

'He became what we are in order that we may become what he is': this is the constant theme of the Fathers of the Church, basing themselves on scripture. Nothing is clearer than that Christ, both as God and as man, 'lives because of the Father'. He is Son of the Father, the Word of the Father, the full expression of the Father's being, the image of the Father: all these words are essentially rela-

[1] Gal 2, 14. [2] Jn 5, 20. [3] Jn 1, 48–51. [4] Jn 21, 18. [5] Jn 21, 19.

tive, for a son refers to the father, a word to him who utters it, an expression to whose it is, an image to the model. And so, too, when we call Christ a priest, the very word is relative, implying a relation to God and to men.

In the Gospel of St John, Christ refers all his teaching, his power and his very being to the Father. 'My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me';[1] 'the Son can do nothing of himself, but only what he sees the Father doing':[2] 'I seek not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me';[3] 'my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work'.[4] 'The Father who dwells in me does his own works'.[5] He 'came from the Father';[6] he was 'sent by the Father'.[7] This sending, this coming from, this complete reference to the Father of all that he does and is, reveals on earth the eternal relation of Father and Son before the world was. That relationship is one of complete equality – 'I and the Father are one' – and yet a derived equality, an equality springing from the uttermost mutual love. 'All that the Father has is mine',[8] and 'all things have been given to me by my Father';[9] in turn the Son gives back everything to the Father, in the Spirit of love who is sent by both.

On earth, this mysterious, yet most real, relation is shown by the complete union of Christ's will with the will of his Father, and shown in a supreme manner by the self-giving of Christ upon the cross. Why God chose to permit sin, to permit the killing of Christ; why God chose an order of redemption by the sufferings and death of Christ – we can give no ultimate reason for this, since God could have saved the world without suffering and death. Indeed, God could have given such grace that men would have avoided sin most freely, grace making them more free, not less free. And yet, we can see that the way of human redemption and salvation which God did in fact choose is one which proves his love in a unique way. 'If God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him'?[10] And Christ in turn consecrated, sacrificed, himself[11] that 'the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them'.[12] Christ is the revelation of God's inmost nature and is the greatest revelation of God in his greatest deed, the cross.

That relationship of complete self-giving between Father and Son is expressed, in so far as it can be expressed, in the sacrifice of Christ

[1] Jn 7, 16. [2] Jn 5, 19. [3] Jn 5, 30. [4] Jn 4, 34.
[5] Jn 14, 10. [6] Jn 16, 27–28; 17, 8. [7] Jn 3, 17; 5, 37 & often. [8] Jn 16, 15.
[9] Mt 11, 27. [10] Rom 8, 32. [11] Jn 17, 19. [12] Jn 17, 26.

upon the cross; as in eternity the Father gives his very self to the Son, and the Son in turn gives himself back in love to the Father, so in time upon Calvary Christ as man gave himself to the Father in the last self-giving possible to mortal men, in death.

In Christ the whole of the Godhead was incarnate, but the Godhead as it is in the Son. The Son's being is relative to the Father and, indeed, to the Holy Ghost. And it was that Relation which was 'made flesh and dwelt among us'. Some greek theologians have suggested that there is sacrifice in the Blessed Trinity. Is there truth in such a concept? Surely not, in the sense that there can be any suffering or any 'giving up' in God's eternal nature; and surely not, in the sense that one divine Person offers, as it were, tribute to another as an inferior to a superior. And yet perhaps some truth may be found in the idea of sacrifice within the triune Godhead. The cross of Christ is the outward expression of his utter self-giving: 'this is my body given for you', 'this is my blood poured forth for the remission of sins'. From that self-giving of Christ we learn what Christ is like. But Christ is also the revelation of the Father, of God, and shows us what God is like, not merely by words, but also by deeds, and especially by his greatest deed, the cross. Even on the cross it is true that 'the Father dwelling in me, it is he who does the works',[1] and on the cross Christ shows what the Spirit of God is like, since 'through the Holy Spirit' he 'offered himself unblemished to God'.[2]

The Sacrifice for Sin

Sin is a spiritual evil, and hence can only be depicted in metaphors. It is also an irrational thing, and consequently cannot be understandable; if sin were reasonable, it would not be sin. And so in scripture sin is described in many metaphors; and according to the metaphor in which sin is described, the nature of its abolition, or of expiation or atonement, is likewise depicted in correspondingly different metaphors. Two metaphors which are often used need careful examination. Sin is often described as breaking a law, with consequent guilt, or liability to reproach from one's own conscience and from other men, and with liability, also, to endure the punishment assigned by a judge. According to this metaphor, Christ is sometimes depicted as substituted in the sinner's place, almost as if he were guilty, and enduring the punishment due to the sinner.

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[1] Jn 14, 10. [2] Heb 9, 14.

Now there is truth in the metaphor: sin is a breaking of a law with liability to penalty and reproach. But God's law is different from human law, since it only forbids what injures man himself; and the very faintest idea that Christ were ever guilty of sin is abhorrent and false. Nor would any reasonable man acquiesce in an innocent person bearing the punishment he himself deserves. It is true, indeed, that Christ endured suffering and death because of the wickedness of the jewish rulers of his time; and it is true that the death Christ endured is the common penalty for sin. But Christ endured death in order to overcome death, not as though suffering a penalty were the purpose of his endurance of death. On the contrary, he endured death precisely to rise again, glorious and immortal and to give men a share in his immortality.

Again, sin is sometimes represented as an offence, and a personal offence against God's honour, and, since God is infinite in dignity, no limited reparation is adequate to give back the honour taken from God by sin. Indeed this metaphor is sometimes so pressed that it looks as if God were angry at being insulted and would only be satisfied by someone suffering for it. There is indeed truth in the metaphor, since God, like any reasonable being, must disapprove wrong-doing and wish that right and goodness and charity should prevail. But God does not change. When we say that God is offended the meaning is that God's creatures show themselves ignoble and injurious one to another; and when we say that God is placated, we mean that among men right order is established such that God approves it. How, then, does the expiation or the atonement of Christ fit here? Undoubtedly there is a mystery; but as best we poor humans can understand it, Christ expiated and atoned not only by placing in human nature a goodness which is limitless, and therefore is a counterpoise against all human sin and wickedness, but also by being able to communicate that goodness and charity to other men, to change them from sinners into saints. The human race, because of its selfishness, pride, cruelty, avarice, and all the other hateful crimes in it, must be regarded as somehow out of joint with the purposes of its Creator, as marred and spoiled and contemptible; but with Christ a member of the human race, with Christ as 'the universal Man', then there is in the human race a selflessness, a humility, a generosity, a lovingness and a lovableness which makes the race appear and be entirely different. Christ 'gave power to become children of God', with all that that means.

And yet, in atonement for sin a great mystery still remains. Cer-

tain sins have effects naturally irreparable. No repentance can bring back to life a murdered man. The countless millions who have been murdered by the cruelty and ambition of other men cannot be brought back to life by any sorrow. It is the same with many sins. Calumny can do damage which no retractation can repair.

But it is precisely here that the infinite atonement and the infinite power of Christ's sacrifice come into play. Christ's sacrifice for sin is eternal, as the Letter to the Hebrews so often asserts. But being eternal, it is, in its application in the time series, retroactive. If Cain won forgiveness for the murder of Abel, or if David won forgiveness for the murder of Urias, it was through the sacrifice of Christ. All the graces received by Mary, the mother of God, were received through Christ, the timeless priest.

The evil caused by sin may be naturally irreparable. But it is not therefore irreparable by Christ. If a murderer repents, his repentance begins to share in Christ's universal and timeless sacrifice. In God's eyes the murderer is not merely a man connected with the man he murdered through the act of murder. He is a man connected with his victim through the union of both with Christ, and, since Christ's love embraces both and does good to both, the repentant murderer through the union of his repentance with the sacrifice of Christ can do good even to his victim. As God gave grace in the ages before the coming of Christ in time, so, too, God may give grace to the victim of a murderer because of the union of repentance with the sacrifice of Christ. 'He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world'.[1]

St Augustine says that in every sacrifice one must consider who offers, what he offers, to whom he offers and for whom he offers. But in Christ all these are one: it is God who offers, God to whom he offers, he himself who is offered, and his 'body' which is himself for whom he offers. Sacrifice produces unity: 'that they may all be one, even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me'.[2]

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[1] 1 Jn 2, 2. [2] Jn 17, 21.