

*The Power of the Priest: Dogmatically***Taken from among Men**

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IN his Letter to the Hebrews the great theologian of the priesthood, St. Paul, gives this classic statement of the priestly character:

"For every High Priest, in that he is taken from among men, is appointed as a representative of men in the things that have to do with God, that he may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins, as one who can be duly gentle with the ignorant and erring, since he himself is clothed with frailty; for which reason he must make offerings for sin, not merely on behalf of the people, but also for himself. And none taketh to himself the honor, but one who hath been called by God, as was Aaron" (Hebrews 5, 1-4).

Perhaps in this brief note I might at least indicate the two essential traits of the priestly character, as revealed in this inspired passage.

The priest, to be a priest, must be "taken" from among men—that is, separated, isolated, consecrated, invested somehow with the character of God Himself; for he must enter into the sanctuary of God, and represent God before the people. Such is the honor of the priesthood; it is an honor so lofty that no man may dare take it to himself—he must be called to it by God.

Yet, on the other hand, the priest, to be a priest, must be taken "from among men,"—that is, he must be a man, not different from other men, nor a stranger to them, but identified with them, a sharer in their common human experience; for it is on behalf of mankind that he enters the sanctuary, to

represent mankind before God. Such is the lowliness of the priesthood; it is a lowliness so profound that no man would wish it for himself,—to it, too, he must be called by God.

Loftiness and lowliness, these two qualities make the priest. And they make of him a man of contradictions. He has, in fact, two conflicting ideals to achieve: perfect divinity, the identification of himself with God in all His holiness—and perfect humanity, the identification of himself with man in all his sinful wretchedness. Though set apart unto the sacredness of the sanctuary, he must plunge himself into the profanity of the world. He must feel all the weakness of his people, yet be their unfaltering strength. He must descend to all the vileness that lurks in the secret places of the human heart, yet ascend thence to the altar of God with unclouded mind and clean heart. He must live in heaven and on earth; he must cleave wholly to God and wholly to man.

His whole life is a constant "tension" between two extremes; and this by reason of his "in-betweenness." For he is by his office a "mediator,"—that is, one who stands between two extremes, and unites them to each other by uniting them in himself. For this reason God took him, a man, from among men, that he might achieve in himself the union of humanity and divinity, and thus be the means whereby men are made one with God.

"And for such things," asks St. Paul (in whose own life, incidentally, the "tension" of the priestly office is start-

lingly evident; one might read, for example, his Second Letter to the Corinthians), "and for such things who is sufficient?" (2 Corinthians 2, 16).

As a matter of fact, so impossible is the priestly ideal of "in-betweenness" that no mere man could ever perfectly achieve it. That it might be perfectly achieved, God Himself had to become man, in order to be, as Man, humanity's High Priest. In the hushed sanctuary of the virginal womb of Mary the ordination took place, when the Triune God anointed the human nature of Christ with the Divinity of the Word.

By that act of omnipotent power mankind had a Mediator, to stand between itself and God; for He was "perfect in divinity, perfect also in humanity, true God and true man" (Council of Chalcedon).

To Him was given in its fullness the priestly right of access to the Holy of Holies, where God Himself dwells. Not even He dared take it to Himself; "Christ did not appoint himself to the honor of being High Priest, but he who said to him: "My Son art thou, this day I have begotten thee" (Hebrews 5, 5).

And for the honor He paid the price of a staggering lowliness: "he emptied himself by taking the nature of a slave and becoming like unto men" (Philippians 2, 7). For to be the High Priest of mankind He had to be a man, from among men, not one "who is unable to realize in himself our weaknesses, but rather one who hath been tried in all things like ourselves, short of sin" (Hebrews 4, 15).

We who had wandered far from God by sin were to draw nigh again in Him. But how could we draw nigh to God in Him, if He Himself were not approachable, lowly, like ourselves? And how could He plead our cause before God, unless He knew by experience what our cause is: that of a creature, clothed with frailty, upon whom the burden of obedience to God's Law rests heavily?

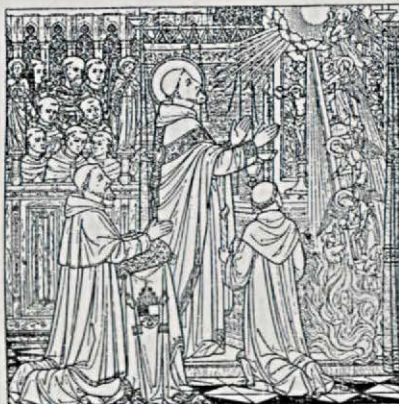
And so, while keeping all the utter sacredness and sinlessness that gave Him access to God, he surrendered Himself to the full experience of our

h u m a n i t y. He opened His human Soul to be tried, as ours is tried, by that paralyzing fear of pain and death that is at the root of all our rebellions. And it put Him in an Agony:

"In the days of his flesh he offered up prayers and supplications to him who could save him from death, with a loud cry and tears, and was heard, in that God freed him from his fear; and

though he was Son, he learned from what he suffered the cost of obedience" (Hebrews 5, 7-9).

Chiefly at the moment when, overcome with fear before the spectre of death, He prayed "Yet not my will but thine be done", Christ exhibited the perfection of His priestly character in all its loftiness and in all its lowliness: its loftiness in His unshakable consciousness of His total consecration to God and His Holy Will—its lowliness in His piercing consciousness of the frailty of human flesh, that fears the cost of its own consecration. And of this twofold consciousness was born



The priest "a mediator, . . . or one who stands between two extremes . . . humanity and divinity . . . the means whereby men are made one with God."

in Him the supreme priestly gift, "a due measure of gentleness with the ignorant and erring."

Without this gift He were no Priest of mankind: "For verily it is not angels that he is succouring, but he is succouring the seed of Abraham. Whence it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren in all respects, that he might become merciful to them, and a faithful High Priest in all things pertaining to God, so as to atone for the sins of the people. For because he hath suffered, being tested himself thereby, he can give help to those who are under trial" (Hebrews 2, 16-18).

Such was the character of humanity's High Priest,—infinitely lofty, incredibly lowly, perfect in divinity, perfect also in humanity. And He is the ideal of all those with whom He

has deigned to share His heavenly call; they, too, must be both divine and human.

Over the garment of frailty, with which they are clothed by nature, they must wear the sacred vestments with which God has chosen to clothe them. Both are garments of office, and without treason to that office, neither may be put off. For by the one they are brought near to God and have access to His sanctuary; and by the other they are brought near to us that we may have access to them.

Both are a weight upon the shoulders, it is true. And yet, so captivating is the glorious contradiction of it all, that perhaps no priest could say which brings him greater joy, wearing the robes of the King, or the rags of the slave . . .

St. Augustine on the Priesthood . . .

"O holy and heavenly mystery, worked in us by the Father, Son and Holy Ghost! At one and the same moment the same God who reigns in Heaven is in your hands in the Sacrament of the Altar! O venerable holiness of hands! O blessed army! O true joy of the world! Christ handles Christ,—that is, the priest holds the Son of God. At this privilege so remarkable, Heaven stands in wonder, earth is amazed, man is in awe, the devil is in terror, and the angels adore!"

"O wonderful dignity of the priest! in whose hands, as in the womb of the Virgin, the Son of God becomes Incarnate!"

"O Priest! How close are you to God in celebrating Mass! For since your voice, swift as thought, passing the nine choirs of angels, ascends to the very throne of God taking thence the Word Incarnate, sitting at the right hand of the Father, to reduce Him anew to the state of a victim; since you have Him then before your eyes and in your hands; and since after a moment He shall be substantially united to you body and soul in His two-fold nature, divine and human—can it be said there is any distance left between you and the Divine Majesty?"

"The innocence and perfection of a priest must be so great that if taken up amid the angels in Heaven, he would not be found out of place amongst them,—and more than that, having been preferred to angels for this glorious ministry, he should lead a life more angelic than human."

—*Saint John Chrysostom.*

"The priest must enter the sanctuary like Christ Himself, assist at Mass like an angel, minister like a saint."

—*Saint Laurence Justinian.*