

THE PRIESTLY CHARACTER OF MONASTIC LIFE

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Last year Dame Agnes read a paper on 'The Universal Call to Holiness: its significance for monastic life and liturgy'. In this paper she examined the teaching of Vatican II on the common priesthood of all believers and in particular how monastic life could contribute to the Church now it is clear that it cannot claim any monopoly on sanctification. The discussion which her paper prompted extended her consideration both of how the monastic life is rooted in the baptismal life of Christians and of how the circumstances of monastic life, 'structured around the liturgy', encourage a deeper celebration of the Eucharist. The value of this discussion lay, I think, particularly in the way she saw the solidarity of monastic life with the life of the Christian laity, a partnership grounded in the common priesthood of believers. In this paper I want to develop Dame Agnes' discussion, and in particular to consider the place of the sacramental priesthood in relation to what she had to say about the role of monastic life.

For monastic life, the rediscovery of this relationship between monastic life and the baptismal life of Christians was a major fruit of the Council. Inevitably it led to a considerable discussion of the place of the sacramental priesthood in monastic life. Instructed to pursue the renewal of religious life by a *ressourcement*, an idea hardly translated by the phrase 'return to the sources', the participants on all sides of this discussion undertook a largely historical evaluation of the data. This exercise in justification (or criticism) seems to me often to have assumed that monastic life and the priesthood are two different things, whose eventual 'marriage' over the course of time, has been more or less successful depending on different points of view.¹ As far as I can see the conclusion of the discussions of the 60s has been to a great extent a pragmatic equilibrium, communities finding their own balance between the monastic life and their attitude to the ordination of monks to the priesthood. That is to say, the ordination of monks is accepted on practical grounds that there is enough work of a priestly kind to do to justify the ordination of monks to the sacramental priesthood.² The tensions which arise at a practical level can even be given the positive value of a creative tension.³

But there is a different way of looking at the relationship. In a famous remark to Italian major religious superiors in 1966, Paul VI spoke of a 'union in the same person of sacerdotal character and religious consecration, by which a person offers himself totally to God which wholly configures him in a special way to Christ who is at once priest and victim.'⁴ The remark was regarded, together with others by Cardinal Garonne,⁵ as an affirmation of the place of the priesthood in monastic life that had not been discussed by the Council itself. The terminology used by Pope Paul suggests his sense of intrinsic relationship between a monk's sense of monastic identity and his sense of identity as a priest. For this there is a long tradition in the ascetic understanding of the priesthood evidenced by monks in an early period

¹ See, for example, the discussions by G. Lafont, 'sacerdoce claustral' in ed. B. Steidle Comm. in R.S.B. (St. Ans. 42) Rome 1957; J Leclercq 'le sacerdoce des moines' c. 5 in 'Chances de la spiritualité occidentale' Paris 1966; L. Leloir 'sacerdoce et monachisme' NRT 94 (1972)

² Armand Veilleux, in a Conference to the community at Scourmont, 18 Nov 2001, sees the debates of the 60s as largely superfluous now.

³ Brian Daley in TS 48 (1987) 628 is an example of this kind of approach.

⁴ 18th November 1966 (AAS 1966, pp 1178 – 1179)

⁵ in a conference at Hautecombe in August 1966, cited in Leloir *art. cit.* 287.

as well as the strong development of eucharistic practice in monasteries in the Carolingian period.⁶

But, however evocative his remark, the Pope did not offer any justification for it. This is regrettable as the ascetic model of the monastic priesthood had been criticized by Leclercq, on the grounds that the imitation of Christ, even in his suffering and death, is not the prerogative of the monk but the vocation of all Christians. The union of which the Pope speaks could be found in the union between monastic life and the common priesthood of all the baptized, not in his priestly ordination. This critique was raised more recently in an article on monastic priesthood in ABR 1990 by Irwin.⁷ In a very sympathetic treatment he showed how an understanding of the priesthood in terms of ecclesial function dominated the Council's treatment of the sacramental priesthood. But this treatment emphasized the relationship of the priest to the Bishop within the presbyterium of the local diocesan Church, as well as his role as leader and teacher of a particular eucharistic community, which underlay his liturgical role in the celebration of the Mass. Little here fitted the role of a monk-priest within his community, although there are analogues, which Irwin considers. He quotes the remarks of Pope Paul VI as evidence of a different christological model of priesthood. But, however valuable this model is for a spirituality of priesthood, Irwin too finds it vulnerable to the objection that it can apply to any monk as sharing in the common priesthood of the faithful; it does not give any specific hold on the idea of a monastic sacramental priesthood.

I would like to review this objection and try to restate the case for what Irwin calls a christological rather than an ecclesial model of the priesthood which brings out its relevance for monastic life, and which enables us to develop an understanding of the relationship of monastic life to Christians who are seeking to respond to the universal call to holiness. I will begin by examining the relationship between monastic life and the common priesthood to which we are consecrated by Baptism, and in particular the relationship between Baptism and monastic consecration; in second place, the relationship between the sacramental priesthood and the common priesthood; in third place, the parallels between the sacramental priesthood and monastic life in their relationship to the sacrifice of Christ. Finally I will give my own reflections on the role of monastic life in relation to the universal call to holiness.

MONASTIC LIFE WITHIN THE COMMON PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

LG 10 presents the scriptural sources of this doctrine,⁸ which is rooted in the teaching of Exodus 19, 5 – 6.⁹ The emphasis is on the separation of God's people from the rest of mankind to be his own possession. In Revelation, the separation is by redemption through the blood of Christ. The implications of being priests 'for God', are however, left implicit. Translations suggest 'to serve God'; the NJB goes as far as to say that they are to consecrate the world to God. 1 Peter spells out the work of this priesthood in two phrases: to offer spiritual sacrifices, to sing the praises of God, perhaps to sing of his mighty deeds or strength (*αρεται*). The concept of a 'sacrifice of praise' occurs in Hebrews 13, 15 – 16. In Hebrews

⁶ Jean Leclercq gives many examples of what he calls the 'ascetic model' of the priesthood. The idea can be found as recently as last year in a Carthusian ordination sermon (Serra San Bruno, 27th October 2002);

⁷ K.W. Irwin 'On Monastic Priesthood' ABR 1990 225ff

⁸ Rev. 1, 6; 5, 10; cf. 20, 6; 1Peter 2, 5 – 9

⁹ Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

there is only one High Priest, Jesus Christ, the Pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who has offered once for a single sacrifice for sin. But in virtue of our faith in him we too are exhorted to ‘offer an unending sacrifice of praise through him, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.’ The letter goes on to exhort us to ‘keep doing good works and sharing your resources (for this last, the word used is *κοινωνία*) for these are the kinds of sacrifice that please God.’ This passage is often glossed with Romans 12, 1 – 2, where sacrificial language is also used: ‘present you bodies as a living sacrifice, pleasing to God, your reasonable worship (*λογικὴν λατρείαν*)... do not model your lives on this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds to discern for yourselves what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable and perfect.’ Paul goes on to urge his readers to the practice of humility and charity.

The Council discussion applies these texts to all believers, and their application to the monastic life is particularly clear: separation from the world, consecration, the work of praise, especially of the mighty acts of God, the life of the community with good works and all the sharing implied by life in a monastic community, and especially the renewal of our minds in a life of *metanoia*. These are the kinds of way in which monastic life may indeed assist the faithful as a whole in answering the universal call to holiness and in being ‘a kingdom and priests to our God.’ Nevertheless it is instructive that the Council’s discussion of the path of holiness to which all are called is structured by the evangelical counsels which form the terms of religious profession and consecration. This should not be overlooked.

For while monastic life shares with all the faithful a separation from the world, and a consecration by Baptism to the common priesthood, monastic consecration is itself a further consecration, by which monks and nuns are marked out within the common priesthood for the service of God. Not to do something else than to be the people of God, but to engage with Baptism in a more radical way, so that the Christian vocation, with its universal call to holiness, may more clearly be seen by those who respond to it. While this is expressed and nurtured by the liturgical life of a community and sustained by the various disciplines of monastic *conversatio*, which will certainly be a service to the Church as a whole, the meaning of monastic life for the Church lies more profoundly in its contemplation of the divine mystery, and its letting nothing whatever stand in the way of the love of Christ. In relation to the faithful consecrated religious are not only fellow travellers on the path to holiness; they are also signposts, or perhaps better, witnesses to the road ahead.

THE SACRAMENTAL PRIESTHOOD AND COMMON PRIESTHOOD

The same paragraph of the Decree on the Church points out that the priesthood of all believers is not the same as the sacramental priesthood, which ‘differs essentially and not only in degree.’ And these texts suggest wherein the difference lies. For, according to Hebrews, the priesthood of Christ and the sacrifice he offers is distinguished from the living sacrifice or the sacrifice of praise offered by the faithful, who are never in this context called priests. Moreover, it is the sacrifice of Christ, by which we are redeemed, that makes us into a kingdom and priests for God. This sacrifice is the sacrifice to which the sacramental priesthood is ordained.

Hence the sacramental priesthood is ordained to take the offerings of the people and offer them to God as eucharistic sacrifice in union with Christ’s offering of himself; the people who

form the liturgical assembly share in the offering, but do not themselves offer the sacrifice. In the same way as the priests of the Jewish covenant, the ordained priests are the ones who offer the sacrifice for themselves and for the people (Hebrews 5, 3).¹⁰ Whereas the priesthood of Christ is seen as providing a remedy for sin and is exercised on our behalf, the priesthood of believers is only a way of expressing our belonging to a people that God has made his own.

The Council decree nevertheless asserts that both styles of priesthood are real and share in the priesthood of Christ in their own ways. It also says that, while they are distinct, they are 'ordered to one another'. Although no more is said about the relationship between the two there, I think we can go further.

For within the drama of this sacramental sacrifice something more sophisticated is also going on. To make this as clear as possible we need to bear in mind the distinctions between the sacramental offering in the eucharistic sacrifice (A), the living sacrifice (B), offered, according to Hebrews and Romans, by the common priesthood of the faithful, and the sacrifice of Christ (C). For the bread and wine that form the basis of the sacramental offering represent the lives of the faithful as priests in this other sense. And it is also clear that communion in the sacramental offering enables the faithful to go out and make their own lives an offering to God. So the Eucharist (A) does offer the living sacrifice of the faithful (B) united to the sacrifice of Christ (C), but only in signs of bread and wine. By means of these signs, the faithful are able to identify their lives with Christ who offers his life for all. Both bespeak the offering of Our Lord. Two conclusions follow. In the order of grace, the sacramental priesthood is what enables the common priesthood of the faithful; in the order of signs, it also shows the faithful the sacrificial nature of the priesthood of Christ in which they also participate in their own way.

The Pauline doctrine of the Body of Christ is commonly used in discussing this point. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul identifies the eucharistic species with the Christian community: you are the Body of Christ. Our own lives are wrapped up in what we celebrate at the table of the Lord's Supper. To be sure, Christ is the Head, and it is he who declares the bread and wine to be his body and blood, signs of his own offering of himself to the Father. Patristic exegesis of this text shows that the sacrament of the sacrificial offering of Christ was understood to be in the Christian community, and it is this Body of Christ that is represented in the signs of bread and wine offered and shared in the Eucharist. Later exegesis, on the other hand, shifted the primary sacramental sign of the Body of Christ to the Host. This has been regretted by some who see it as an impoverishment of the patristic sense of the mystery of faith. But it perhaps reflects a clearer sense of the relationship between the different ways in which the offering is made, both as the sacramental Body of Christ by the sacramentally ordained priest acting, as is continually recalled in Papal teaching, *in persona Christi capitis*, and in a living way by the living Body of Christ, the priesthood of the faithful. For we become more deeply united in the Body of Christ by being continually fed by the Body of Christ. So too the gloss of the priest's representation of Christ in the Eucharist as the head of the body, which includes a reminiscence of Ephesians 4, 15,¹¹ reiterates the teaching that the sacrifice is offered sacramentally by the priest, but it also makes it clearer how the sacramental priesthood helps to realise the offering of its life by the priesthood of the faithful.

¹⁰ Hence the clumsy phrase in the Offertory rite of the Roman Missal: 'my sacrifice and yours'.

¹¹ 'We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.'

The relationship between the common priesthood and the sacramental priesthood can therefore be redescribed by saying that the sacramental priesthood is not only a sign showing the faithful the nature of Christ's priesthood in which they also participate in their own way; it also gives sacramental expression to the common priesthood of the faithful to which they are consecrated by their baptism into the paschal mystery of Christ. By representing Christ as the head of his body and in offering at the altar the eucharistic sacrifice of Christ, the sacramentally ordained priest sets before the people the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection into the participation of which we are all called to enter more and more fully in our lives of faith.

There is a provisional conclusion to be drawn from this argument. The common priesthood of the faithful needs the sacramental priesthood. For the Eucharist is the sacrifice of our redemption which makes us kings and priests. We could go further and state that the common priesthood is incomplete without the sacramental priesthood. For it is in the Eucharist, the sacramental feast of our *κοινωνία*, that we are able to sing the praises of God with fullest voice, just as it is the worship of the Lamb that was slain that calls forth the hymn of the 24 elders in Revelation 5. So a monastic community too will need the ministry of the sacramental priesthood in order to realise its solidarity with the faithful in terms of the common priesthood of believers. And monastic priesthood can be understood as a service of the priestly life as a service of the priestly life shared in different ways by all the members of the community.

This prompts us to go a little further.

MONASTIC LIFE AND THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST

The Letter to the Hebrews teaches us a great deal about the priesthood of Christ. But that letter subverts the concept of priesthood: the priest is himself the victim; his sacrifice is an execution for blasphemy, in an unclean place, at the hands of sinners. Jesus is priest of a temple worthy of far more honour than Moses.¹² But there is no temple; Jesus has entered heaven itself.¹³ It is also a polemical argument; there should be no backsliding: the death of Christ displaces all sacrificial cult; there can be no more sacrifice for sin.¹⁴ Hebrews uses the vocabulary of priesthood as a set of symbols to understand the mystery of Christ and especially the mystery of his death as our salvation.

The sacramental priesthood uses the symbols of priesthood and the sacrificial cult in the same way, as a sign of the reality that they express sacramentally. What they point to and what they nourish is the life of grace, of humility and charity, in the Paschal mystery to which we are introduced by Baptism. So the priesthood of Christ, expressed sacramentally in the ordained ministry of priests, is a symbol for what is lived out for real in the Christian life of all the baptized in so far as they cooperate with divine grace and are drawn by it more and more into the mystery of Christ.¹⁵

¹² Hebrews 3, 1 – 3

¹³ Hebrews 9, 24

¹⁴ Hebrews 10, 18

¹⁵ Cf. Ephesians 3, 16 – 19: 'that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being

But there is a close parallel here with the monastic vocation. By perseverance in the path of humility and obedience a monk or nun strives to share more fully in the sufferings of Christ so as to be a partaker of his Kingdom.¹⁶ This is where monastic life includes what I call a priestly character, in the sense that priesthood is a good symbol for the sacrificial way of living the Christian life marked out by the Lord himself as the way from death to life. The *conversatio* of monastic life, which engages a monk or nun in the sacrificial mystery of Christ's love, engages him personally in the same mystery that is expressed sacramentally in the sacrifice of the eucharist. What the priest represents sacramentally, the monk or nun lives by religious consecration.¹⁷

The line of argument I have tried to follow suggests that the specific character of monastic consecration in relation to Baptismal consecration is to be found in its particular relationship to the sacrifice of Christ. This is not different in essence from Baptismal consecration, since we are buried with Christ by Baptism so as to share his resurrection, but monastic consecration does seem to me to try to express this at more than just a sacramental level of reality. In doing so it shows the direction of the Christian vocation to which all the baptized respond, a witness to the goal of our faith where all sacraments pass into the real thing. The Letter to the Hebrews sees Jesus, the High Priest, as 'the author and perfecter of our faith.'¹⁸ It seems to me that the monk and nun, who are trying to run the race that is set before us with that little bit more singleness of purpose, are in the process of discovering and of disclosing how the sacrificial love of Christ is the goal towards which we are all striving.

For a monk who is a priest, there is, I suggest, a very close relationship between his monastic life and the sacramental priesthood, not an identity, for consecration is not a sacramental ordination. But I think we could speak, as Pope Paul VI did, of a union of two things intrinsically connected, the expression sacramentally of what is implicit in the offering of a person's life through monastic consecration, both ways of sharing in the mystery of Christ's saving death.

In the end the criticism of this view by Leclercq or Irwin does not seem to me convincing. The argument I have been following is that both the sacramental priesthood and monastic life are, in their respective ways, connected to the priestly sacrifice of Christ by being distinguished from the living sacrifice of the common priesthood. The life of the faithful itself participates in the sacrifice of Christ, but in so far as their lives are offered by the sacramental priesthood; the sacramental priesthood is ordained to enable the baptized to enter into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection sacramentally. Monastic consecration, on the other hand, emulates the offering of Christ in a non-sacramental way, but which can find its own expression in the sacramental priesthood. The imitation of Christ in his suffering and death is certainly a central element in any Christian path of holiness: the monk is no different from the baptized, except in this respect, that, as with the evangelical counsels, it constitutes the form of a specifically monastic consecration.

rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.'

¹⁶ RB Prol.

¹⁷ The texts used in the old EBC Rite of Solemn Profession are full of sacrificial imagery.

¹⁸ Hebrews 12, 12

It does not mean that all monks should be priests or that there is a new argument for the ordination of nuns! For the priestly character of monastic life is conferred by consecration and lived out in the various forms of monastic *conversatio*. In fact this seems to be a further argument not to ordain monks: they do not need to be ordained to a sacrifice which they share by consecration. But where a monk is called by his Abbot to the sacramental priesthood this ministry is an authentic way of pursuing the monastic life,¹⁹ not least in sustaining the life of the community by his ministry at the altar, receiving the offering of its common life and uniting it sacramentally with the sacrifice of Christ so that it may share more fully in the Paschal mystery of our redemption.

CONCLUSIONS

The sacramental priesthood is not ancillary to the part which monastic life has to play in helping Christians respond to the universal call to holiness. It gives sacramental expression to the heart of monastic consecration. In doing so it shows how monastic life is for the Church by bringing into focus the way in which Baptismal consecration finds its perfection in the Christ-like sacrifice of one's life. By creating a link between monastic consecration and the eucharist, it is a way of celebrating the mystery of monastic consecration in conjunction with thanksgiving for all the mighty acts of God. It also expresses the monk's and nun's offering of their lives for the continuing work of bringing creation to its fulfilment in the Kingdom of God. It is a way of associating the monastic *koinonia* with the eucharistic *koinonia*, at the heart of the Church's life.

Consecrated in monastic life or not, the priest exercises the same priesthood. For both are ordained to the eucharist and to the service of the community celebrating the eucharist, enabling it to unite its life in the Body of Christ, and to enable it to fulfil the Church's mission. As Lafont pointed out, whereas the priesthood in general serves the mission of the Church, in monastic communities the priesthood serves the mission of monastic life within the Church. Lafont speaks of the mission of monastic life in terms of the unceasing and silent celebration of the sacramental marriage of Jesus Christ and his Church and its preparation in the desert for the Parousia of the Lord. Monastic life is not for its own sake only but also as a sign to the Church as a whole. We could extend this last point by suggesting that, like St John the Baptist, monastic life goes out into the desert to prepare a people fit for the Lord's coming. What the priesthood does sacramentally through signs, monastic life strives to do in and through the lives of those themselves consecrated for this purpose to God. In either way they render a service to the Church, making it a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart, that we may declare the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

¹⁹ Compare RB 62: '...let him make ever more and more progress towards God.' The priesthood can be a motive for a deeper monastic life.