

*The Church has always stressed that her focus is not the things of this world, not even her ministerial priesthood, but the focus is always sainthood.*

## The ecclesial priesthood of Jesus Christ

*By Jeffrey Kirby*

■ In recent shows on “reality television” and in contemporary instructions to aspiring young executives, the counsel is always the same: do more, bigger, and faster. Expressions such as “proactively manage” and “aggressively assert” are buzzwords which mark an environment of extreme activity and busyness. This unchecked spirit of the age, however, can cripple higher thought and more reasoned reflection. But is this drive limited to the business world? Unfortunately, it is not. It is also found in other areas of society and even in the Church herself.

Where in the Church can this spirit of unreflective activism best be seen? Perhaps it can be recognized in the exclusive focus solely on the humanity of the Church. This overemphasis can be seen in many ways, such as in the too indiscriminate use of the word “ministry,” which is then falsely understood as only actions, programs, and projects.<sup>1</sup> The Church’s divinity is ignored and she is seen as only the

“half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate.”<sup>2</sup> These views demonstrate an overly heavy focus on what the Church *does* and *should do*. It is in opposition to a more balanced view, which also seeks to understand and pay attention to what the Church *is* in her full expression, “spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners,” and what she is called to *become*.<sup>3</sup>

But can these two dimensions of the Church be separated? No. The Church as human and divine, the reality of being and acting—that of doing and becoming—cannot be divided. Both are inherent in the Church’s life; however, it is possible for one of these dimensions to be problematically emphasized to the point of error. Where then, in this temptation, can the Church find a balanced source of unity?

She does not find her identity nor her unity in her human existence alone, nor in “action ministry.” She finds her legitimate self-aware-

ness and authentic collaboration in her ecclesial priesthood.

As a kingdom of priests (Rev. 1:16; Rev. 5:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:5,9), the Church exists as a priestly community. She breathes as one mystical person with Christ the Head, participating in his very own priesthood to God the Father.<sup>4</sup> As one person, the Church is not a loose society, but instead shares, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the charism of being an organically-structured, priestly people. The one priesthood of Christ the Head is exercised in the baptismal priesthood of the laity and the ministerial priesthood of the clergy. Although essentially different, they are, nevertheless, ordered to one another and an expression of the single priesthood of Jesus Christ, God made man. As St. Augustine wrote: "As we call everyone 'Christians' in virtue of a mystical anointing, so we call everyone 'priests' because all are members of only one priesthood."<sup>5</sup>

What, then, does it mean to be a member of this priestly people? Popular definitions of a Christian include: "A person professing belief in Jesus as the Christ or in the religion based on the teaching of Jesus."<sup>6</sup> Although accurate, this articulation is ontologically incomplete. A Christian is not someone who merely follows, or who merely professes belief, but is rather someone who, by faith and baptism, has received the sacramental character and is sealed as "another Christ," as a "son in the Son."<sup>7</sup> As Christ the Head was anointed (the very term "Christ" means anointed one), so the members of his Body have also been anointed. In Christ, therefore, each member is himself also a "christ," an "anointed one."<sup>8</sup> By such a consecration, the Christian is incorporated into the Church's unique, priestly identity and vocation.<sup>9</sup>

What does this vocation look like? How does it take shape? The baptismal priesthood enables and commits the Christian to a service of God, first and foremost in the Divine Litur-

gy, and then in the witness of a holy life and in the exercise of practical charity. United to Christ the Head, the anointed Christian is called to exhibit the grace of his Baptism and Confirmation in society: in all the dimensions of his personal, familial, social and ecclesial life.

Unlike the ministerial priesthood, the baptismal priesthood has a specific secular character. The "world," with its temporal affairs and earthly activities, becomes the place and the means for the laity to fulfill their Christian vocation. Their own field of evangelizing activity is the large and difficult spheres of politics, society and economics, as well as the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes the family, education, professional work, and suffering. The baptized should see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people, and lead them to communion with God in Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

This vocation takes on a concrete expression in the Catholic Christian's participation in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, and king. As the Baptismal rite expresses it, "God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life."

As a royal priest, the layman has the privilege of sharing in Christ's sacrifice to the Father. Assimilated into Jesus Christ, the Christian is united to Jesus and his sacrifice to God the Father, in the daily offering of his life. He has the capacity to give his efforts, joys, sufferings, triumphs, failures, and the totality of who he is, to God through Jesus Christ. St. Paul admonishes the Christian to offer his body as a spiritual sacrifice, permitting a



renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:1-2). Through Christ, such a sacrifice becomes acceptable and pleasing to God. These offerings find their perfection in the celebration of the Eucharist, when they are given along with the Lord's body. As worshippers in spirit and in truth, the lay faithful dedicate the world and its workings to God.<sup>11</sup> As St. Leo would exclaim: "What is as priestly as to dedicate a pure conscience to the Lord and to offer the spotless offerings of devotion on the altar of the heart?"<sup>12</sup>

As a sharer in the prophetic mission of Christ, the Christian exists as a witness to Christ and his message in the world. As a member of the Church, he participates in the supernatural sense of faith, which belongs to the People of God. He is summoned to be the salt, light and leaven of the world by working to spread and teach the Gospel and its liberating truths. The Christian as prophet cannot hide the message of Christ nor afford to be

ashamed of it (Matt 5:15). This privilege and responsibility has a natural beginning in the family, where parents teach their children, but it expands beyond the intimate realm of the private home. The Christian's witness is a transmission of the faith to others and to the whole of society. It is an act of justice and love, which establishes the truth or makes it known. To the degree that the Catholic Christian is faithful to his baptismal vows, the message becomes authenticated to the modern person who is looking for answers to his deeper questions.<sup>13</sup>

As a priestly king, the baptized Catholic possesses a Cross-earned freedom so that he might overcome the reign of sin in his life. And so that he might also labor for a remedy to the errors and problems of the social order, making justice and the practice of virtue possible in society. As a part of his kingly vocation, the Christian must remain aware that he lives as a member of the Church and of human society. He should strive to harmoniously unite every temporal affair under the direction of a Christian conscience, since nothing can be withdrawn from God's governance. The baptized person should rule his own life in accordance with the Gospel and seek unity in his soul, working to properly order his passions and desires. As St. Leo preached, "What, indeed, is as royal as a soul to govern the body in obedience to God?"<sup>14</sup> The Christian should come to see that his own vocation to rule is also a call to serve, particularly when serving the poor and the suffering, in whom the Church recognizes the image of her poor and suffering founder. In selflessly serving, the Catholic fulfills his royal dignity by a life in keeping with his vocation to serve *with* Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Faithfulness to this way of life, will help to bring about the great hope of Pope John Paul II who wrote, "The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both men and women, busy at their work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes

far from view and quite unclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring laborers who work in the Lord's vineyard," and he continues, "Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history."<sup>16</sup>

In living this life as priest, prophet and king, the layman will find the secure path to holiness, as well as his own specific vocation within the Church. For many, it will be the sacrament of Holy Matrimony. For some, it will be a life of religious consecration in one of the many institutes, societies, congregations or orders in the Church. For a select few, it will be a call to the ministerial priesthood.

What is the "ministerial" priesthood? How is it different from the baptismal priesthood? By the ministerial priesthood, we mean the call of a man to Holy Orders. The Order of Priest marks the man as capable of standing in the person of Christ the Head and of the Church herself. The baptismal priesthood depends on this ministerial priesthood, and the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood of the lay faithful.

How does the ministerial priesthood express itself? First and foremost, it exists as a means by which Christ continually builds up and leads the Church by continuing the offices of priest, prophet, and king.<sup>17</sup> While the baptismal priesthood is exercised in the unfolding of the specific person's baptismal graces, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the baptismal graces of all Christians.

Without diminishing the uniqueness of Christ's priesthood, the human ministerial priest makes Christ's priesthood visible to the community. In the office of priest, he not only offers up his own sacrifices, but the priest also collects the offerings of the Church and represents the sacrifice of the Son to the Father. In the office of prophet, he not only stands as a Christian witness, but also exhorts in the

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name of the Church and becomes the instrument of God for Christ himself to teach the world. In the office of king, he not only seeks to order his own life and selfless service, but works to order the life and service of the Church, as well as reflect Christ as the humble servant of all. It is true, in the ministerial priesthood, it is Christ still sanctifying "as high priest," still teaching "as teacher of truth," and still leading as "shepherd of the flock."<sup>18</sup>

How does this understanding of the baptismal and ministerial portions of the priesthood of Jesus Christ help the Church? It gives her unity. Not through a mere common work, nor a common interest or ideology, nor through just a shared worldview or outlook, but through a radical ontological binding. In the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the Christian finds his and the Church's identity and begins to see Christ as the source of everything in the Church's life and action. Her unified work at evangelization, her shared acts of charity, her very own humanity, only make sense in the common existence, the mutual breathing, of the members of the Body together with her Divine Head. All her efforts and labors, her share in his mission, are done through him, with him and in him.

To the extent that the members of the baptismal and ministerial priesthood live up to their lofty vocations and labor for holiness, the Church will find in Christ the co-fulfillment of her identity and mission in the world. In opposition, therefore, to illusory views and empty day dreams of ecclesial utopias and as a clear, sober tempering of the assertive arro-

gance of Babel, the Church does not rely solely on naked activism, incomplete programs, or soul-less philanthropy, but instead turns her complete attention to Christ alone and earnestly desires unity with him, in his Spirit and in his mission. For this reason, the Church has always stressed that the focus is not the things of this world, nor even her ministerial priesthood, but the focus is always saint-hood.<sup>19</sup> As Pope John Paul II has written, “Today, we have the greatest need of saints whom we must assiduously beg God to raise up.”<sup>20</sup> This is the source and cause of the Church’s unity and the inspiration and hope behind her every thought and action. ■

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *The Lay Members of Christ’s Faithful People*, # 23.

<sup>2</sup> CS Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1982), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Pius XII, *The Mystical Body of Christ*, # 67.

<sup>5</sup> *City of God*, XX, 10, as contained in John Paul II, *Lay Members*, # 14; cf *Lumen Gentium*, #10.

<sup>6</sup> Merriam-Webster On-Line Dictionary.

<sup>7</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> St. Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm XXVI*, II.2, as contained in John Paul II, *Lay Members*, #14.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #941; 784; 1272.

<sup>10</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, #70; John Paul II, *Lay Members*, #17.

<sup>11</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 34; CCC, #901; 358.

<sup>12</sup> Sermon Four, as contained in CCC, # 786.

<sup>13</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 35.1-2; CCC, # 2472; 2495; 2044.

<sup>14</sup> Sermon Four, as contained in CCC, # 786.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, #36.3; CCC, #786.

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, *Lay Faithful*, #17.

<sup>17</sup> CCC, # 1547; cf 1551-1552.

<sup>18</sup> CCC, #1548.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, #3.

<sup>20</sup> *Lay Faithful*, #16.



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