

THE MYSTICAL BODY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:

Some Observations on Priesthood, Personality and Progress

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CHRISTIAN thought is not only permeated by the cross—it is dominated by it. The cross, in fact, is no mere symbol of religious belief, but a constant reality: it is the sign of triumph, the sign of redemption, and its tremendous implications are not restricted to an historic moment in time. That is to say, the redemption was not a process accomplished at Calvary, without any further relevance in the everyday existence of mankind. On the contrary, the process of redemption is continually manifested in all the activities of the mystical body, Christ's Church.

This is often overlooked by the faithful who constitute the Church. We are prone to underestimate our riches and our potentialities; we tend to seclude ourselves in spiritual catacombs, fearful of identifying ourselves with the events of the world at large.

In this respect, the true significance of the cross is lost to us.

The death of Christ is the source of our life, and the resurrection is the guarantee of our immortality. That is the real meaning of the cross, and in this marvellous victory of Christ we—as members of his mystical body—share in quite a unique way. We participate in the work of redemption as well as partaking of it. And yet, so long as we imagine sanctity to be a monopoly of the cloister, and the spreading of the faith to be entirely the responsibility of the ordained ministry, we are leading fundamentally self-centred and fruitless Christian lives.

Our habit of not really fulfilling our obligations in this light is a source of considerable weakness in the apostolate of the Church, and popular misconceptions were emphatically corrected by the late Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis Christi*.

'Indeed', he affirmed, 'it is to be observed, especially in present circumstances, that fathers and mothers and godparents, and particularly those among the laity who co-operate with the

ecclesiastical hierarchy in spreading the kingdom of the divine redeemer, hold an honoured though often an obscure place in the Christian society, and that they too are able, with the inspiration and the help of God, to attain the highest degree of sanctity, which, as Jesus Christ has promised, will never be wanting in the Church.'

Yet the idea that the laity, as well as the clergy, are in a very real sense priests, is somehow a revolutionary one to many otherwise devout and well-instructed Catholics. They appreciate, perhaps, the urgent necessity for its implementation; but, at the same time, they view it as an essentially modern concept, evolved because of contemporary exigencies. The doctrine of the 'invisible and inner priesthood' of the faithful, however, is as old as the Church herself. It was promulgated by the head of the apostles: 'Be you also as living stones built up, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore it is said in the Scripture: Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious. And he that shall believe in him shall not be confounded. To you therefore that believe, he is honour: but to them that believe not, the stone which the builders rejected, the same is made the head of the corner: And a stone of stumbling and a rock of scandal, to them who stumble at the word, neither do believe, whereunto also they are set. But you are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people: that you may declare his virtues, who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Peter ii, 4-9).

In his sermon on the third anniversary of his accession to the papacy, St Leo the Great declared: 'The sign of the cross makes kings of all who are reborn in Christ; but the anointing by the Holy Spirit consecrates men as priests, so that all that are Christians in spirit and in truth know themselves to be of kingly race and priestly degree, with duties quite distinct from those of our special corporation of ordained priests'.

St Augustine wrote: "They shall be priests of God and Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years": not only is it said of bishops and presbyters, who properly are called priests in the Church; but as we call all men Christians because of a mystical anointing, so also are all called priests, because they are members of the one priest' (*The City of God* XX, 10).

Clearly, the idea of the common priesthood is far more than

the Church's reply to modern stresses. In point of fact, the growing attention it is receiving is actually a re-emergence from the darkness cast by the reformation, and one instance of this is provided in the present tendency towards the more intimate sharing of the laity in the sacrifice of the mass. At the onset of Christianity, the mass was frequently alluded to as the 'common sacrifice', and in the earliest known liturgy of the mass—the *Didache*—the only real line of demarcation between clergy and laity simply emphasizes the pre-eminence of the former as regards the power to consecrate. The Church has never taught otherwise than that the mass is an act of worship on the part of celebrant and faithful alike.

It follows that the common priesthood is an integral part of the Church's structure. We all of us share it, and, inasmuch as we utilize it also, we contribute to the building of the kingdom of God on earth.

Yet regular reception of the sacraments, or a purely personal pursuit of virtue (though good and vital in themselves), are an inadequate expression of our priestly function. The common priesthood, complementary and not opposed to the ordained priesthood, must consist of Catholics saturated in Christ—eager and able to put the wonderful impress of Christianity upon every facet of existence.

Before considering how this may be achieved, however, it is necessary to examine man—albeit briefly—from two directions: firstly from the personal aspect, and secondly, in his historical or evolutionary context.

The life of the individual—natural and supernatural—revolves about his personality. Personality, self-identity, is a fetish of the twentieth century. The human *ego* has never been so popular a centre of concentration as it is today, nor has it previously been so profoundly misinterpreted. Man has turned in upon himself with such absorption that God—in whom and by whom human personality has its being—has faded into comparative unimportance. Modern man, when he is materialist or humanist or of any other non-Christian persuasion, is almost completely engrossed with the idea of what he terms 'self-fulfilment', and this vain pre-occupation has brought him to the frontiers of nihilism.

Now for the Christian, personality is a far different matter. The Christian's struggle for self-fulfilment is a struggle towards

self-perfection, towards spiritual maturity. That is why, for example, the Christian's attitude to freedom is so vastly unlike that of his non-Christian fellow: the Christian's liberty is inevitably (though not destructively) restricted by his membership of the Church, whilst the liberty of the non-Christian is basically anarchic.

With regard to our own particular civilization, these opposing concepts are at the root of literally life-or-death issues. What we see around us in modern Europe, in the way of disruption and degeneration, is the outcome of the great medieval breakdown of Christendom. Such a statement is not meant to imply that the middle ages were a high meridian of human attainment or human wisdom—a fixed scale of perfection, by which we should evaluate and adjust contemporary standards—but at least medieval western man possessed a deeper grasp of spiritual realities than we possess ourselves; he was more inclined to look upwards to God, rather than immerse himself in pragmatism and introspection.

That is why our transition from medievalism has been a descent. The macabre dialectic of Marx and the clinical psychology of Freud have, in this respect, set the seal on the disintegration of our civilization, a disintegration begun by the Protestant reformation and intensified by the industrial revolution. To state a truism, we have advanced materially as greatly as we have declined in things of the spirit. Now we stand at the brink of that brave new world symbolized by the test-tube superman and the atomic pile.

Nevertheless, the soul of man remains to be reckoned with. He has lost none of his theological implications, none of his spiritual potentialities, despite the biological, cultural and temperamental changes thrust upon him by the passage of time. We cannot do else, therefore, save measure contemporary man as a human soul, however much of a political, economic or psychological unit he may also be. And, in this light, the solutions to our present-day problems, and the ultimate salvation of European society, are dependent upon a return to the traditional values of Christendom.

Thus we come to our second consideration, that of human progress. Here again, the Christian outlook is fundamentally different to that of the non-Christian. Obviously, it is quite futile to entertain any notion of progress unless the eventual objective of such progress is established. In this connection, the non-Christian stops at utopia, the Christian at heaven. The

natural man's vaunted liberty takes him towards a supposed state of material contentment and self-indulgence; the supernatural man's discipline fits him for the end for which he was created—union with God. The non-Christian cannot help being vague and confused as to his destination; the Christian, not content with knowing what he is, has discovered, too, exactly where he is going. The whole life of the Christian is founded in the pursuit of virtue. He comes from God, and his earthly existence is essentially a going back to God. This is the Christian conception of progress.

These three entities—priesthood, personality and progress—are bound inseparably together in the Catholic mentality, and only when taken in their intimate unity do they reveal the stupendous significance of the cross. In the last analysis, all the perplexities basically affecting modern man are theological. God makes a claim on all men, but in a very special way on all members of his mystical body. As Catholics, we are privileged to be armed with an array of staggering spiritual weapons; we are privileged, too, to possess the gift of understanding, sufficiently, at least, to perceive that the west can be salvaged from its chaos only by the Church that gave it birth.

Still, the recognition of this fact is scarcely enough. We have to go beyond the mere admission of the Church's role in restoring society, and admit our own calling in any such renaissance.

Some thirty years ago, Professor Karl Adam, in his collection of essays entitled *Christ and the Western Mind*, declared: 'We may say with great caution, that as the historical Christ bore the shape of the sin of David, so the form of the mystical Christ is western.' It is undeniable that, in former ages, the genius of western man was given without stint to the service of Christ, whereas twentieth-century Europe has drifted sadly from that brilliant fidelity. When we come to sift the wheat from the tares, however, the possible strength of the Catholic laity is tremendous; so too is our inertia. The confusion of non-Christians is not incomprehensible; the apathy of Christ's members is inexcusable. So many have allowed themselves to become overawed by their materialist environment. 'So we see everywhere instances of the apologetic attitude of Christians, of the feeling of inferiority at least in sentiment and imagination which takes many forms, from the speculative to the devotional. We have become unduly worried

by the conclusions of the so-called science of comparative religion. We make the problem of the salvation of infidels an acute theological question, much to the damage of the doctrine of the salvation of the faithful through Christ. We admire too readily the works of the modern world, and we become unjust towards Christianity in our judgments of the Christian past. In politics we readily become the prey of catchwords and we are led astray gregariously like those who have not Christ for their leader. Not infrequently our devotional life reveals a lamentable ignorance or forgetfulness of the essential doctrines of the supernatural order as it is in Christ' (*The Victory of Christ*, by Anscar Vonier, O.S.B., p. 16).

We, as Catholics, are called through baptism to be children of God, revealing God in our lives. Our regeneration in Christ marks us out for an extraordinarily rich life, both natural and supernatural; that is the import of Christ's cross, the basis of our priesthood, and the vindication of human personality. We ought, then, to be highly sensitive of our calling. The common priesthood of the faithful ought to become a profound reality, a great expression of our Christian fealty. We have no need to hide our faces from the world, no need to underestimate our powers, being as we are 'a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood . . . a purchased people'.

However much those outside the mystical body of Christ might fall away from God, *we* must not continue to flee from the shadow of the cross. The domination of the cross affirms the everlasting realism of our Lord's sovereignty, and stamps us as a most favoured society.

But we have now to pass from generalities to practical applications. We have to ask ourselves how, as members of Christ's mystical body, we can bring our faith to bear upon the neopaganism of the world in which we live. By what means are we to 'declare his virtues', who has called us 'out of darkness into his marvellous light'?

Once the Catholic layman becomes aware of his special priesthood, and of his place in the apostolate of the Church, the attainment of personal holiness is no longer something remote. He realizes that, after all, the evangelical virtues are within reach. Assuredly, charity is within reach; charity is love, and love can make itself potent in many ways—in the sacrament of marriage, in the relationships of people in society, in the workings of

authority, in the possessing and uses of wealth. If the layman is to exert any influence in the secularist world surrounding him, personal sanctification is the first necessity. Here, the sacramental treasury of the Church is constantly open to him: through the sacraments the member of the mystical body can become another Christ—an *alter Christus*—and, indeed, this is or should be the objective of every Christian.

'To live to Christ a man must die to self. Self-sacrifice is the condition of entry into the kingdom of God on earth' (*The Spirit of Christ*, by Fr James, O.F.M.CAP, p. 130).

The Catholic layman, therefore, seeking to fashion himself into a true priest of Christ, cannot disassociate himself from the less savoury aspects of the world; but he can have no part in the non-Christian type of egotism already mentioned. Bent upon personal holiness, upon discovering the saint within, the conscious Christian will turn not to himself but to God; as Christ's death brought life, so too will the Christian who dies to himself find the fount of life.

This is the beginning, the preparation. The next step is for the spiritualized layman to educate himself in the faith, so that, besides being full of meaning to himself, it grows significant to those with whom he comes into daily contact. An active laity must be an educated laity—capable of advocating the faith, and able to defend its truths against all the assaults of its detractors.

Surely, there is immense scope for this kind of virtuous and informed apostolate. There is the parish, with its sodalities, guilds, legions and societies. There are the third orders. There is, for those adequately versed, the apostolate of the written word. But, above all, there is the limitless field of personal contact, which is possibly the most neglected.

The Catholic who flings himself into some church organization, however enthusiastically, is certainly achieving something. It is more admirable than resting content with a minimum of devotional observance.

But the danger is that all his gifts and qualities—spiritual and intellectual—will be expended for the elevation of his co-religionists. He will fail to penetrate very deeply into those spheres of society where ignorance, apathy or hostility make his capabilities most needful. In this sense, his apostolic spirit will be largely frittered away to no purpose.

The richest rewards of the lay apostolate are to be gained in the daily communications of Christian with non-Christian: of Christian worker with non-Christian worker, Christian neighbour with non-Christian neighbour, Christian friend with non-Christian friend. The world consists of individuals before it consists of masses, and it is in the day-to-day common personal relationship of man with man that the priesthood of the Christian layman can be most fruitful.

'The Catholic faith must be put into practice in everyday life. It must blaze like a beacon over our work and ways of living. It must show itself true in our relationships with others, and prove itself noble in the deed. Christians will soon become the only bibles which people will bother to read' (*Confirmation in the Modern World*, by M. Laros, p. 80).

This is the kind of presentation of the faith every Christian ought to offer—the enlightened, illuminating witness of the man for whom the cross of Christ is a stern yet glorious reality. Amidst the confusion of thought and general barrenness of modern civilization, the Christian is the custodian of eternal values, the architect of true progress. So long as he confesses and shows forth Christ in his own life, he will be able to say, with final conviction: 'The grace of God in me hath not been vain. . . .' (1 Cor. xv, 10.)

These things should always be in our minds. Every act of love, every manifestation of charity, every declaration of faith, can lead a soul from darkness to the gates of heaven, and strengthen the edifice of Christ's Church on earth.



THE DEACON IN THE PARISH—II

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Further tasks for the parish deacon

THE Church preaches our Lord through the liturgy, through the works of charity, and through the word. The vocation of deacon involves of its nature the function of preaching God's word (e.g. Stephen and Philip), and giving catechetical instruction to children and adults. To this end the deacon would need not a complete theological training, but a