

The Place of the Priesthood

by Nicholas Lash

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In a paper published in *New Blackfriars* a few months ago,¹ Mr Eagleton applied a number of political insights to our understanding of relationships within the Church, in an attempt to prevent the formulation and implementation of theological ideas that would be at variance with a correct understanding of our society. He is convinced that 'our changing ideas about the priesthood aren't only theological but are part of a general pattern of change in our whole society which for over a century has been redefining relationships, values, functions, attitudes'.² He is concerned lest we block this process of development by merely changing our tone of voice, or our terminology, leaving intact and unquestioned a pattern of ecclesial relationships that is inappropriate to our contemporary understanding of political reality. Much that he says in criticism of what he describes as the 'liberal paternalism' of English Catholicism is both penetrating and important. But it seems to me that his analysis is defective because he has failed adequately to ask the question: what is a priest? It is certainly true to say that 'we have in fact to make a clear division between what theology tells us about the priesthood, and the whole historical accretion which this has gathered in society',³ but, if insufficient attention is paid to the data of revelation, we shall extricate the idea of the priesthood from one particular historical entanglement only to drown it in another: that of the dominant perspectives of contemporary politics.

The purpose of this essay is to comment on four recent books on the priesthood,⁴ and Mr Eagleton's paper provides us with an excellent frame of reference. Before discussing these books, however, I should like to state, as briefly as possible, the difficulties I have in accepting Mr Eagleton's analysis. In the first place, although he is aware of 'the inherent ambivalence in the nature of the Church – its status as simultaneously a cultural and transcendental force,'⁵ he

¹*Priesthood and Paternalism*, by Terry Eagleton. *NEW BLACKFRIARS*, December 1965.

²art. cit. p. 143.

³art. cit. p. 153.

⁴*Discipleship and Priesthood*, by Karl Hermann Schelkle. Sheed and Ward, 9s. *Christ the One Priest and We His Priests*, by Clement Dillenschneider, C.Ss.R. Vol. 2. Herder, 46s.

Qu'est-ce qu'un prêtre? by R. Salajün and E. Marcus. Editions de Seuil. *The Priest*, by Giovanni Battista, Cardinal Montini. Helicon, 25s.

⁵art. cit. p. 149.

seems, in practice, dangerously to relax the eschatological tension that is the expression of this ambivalence. He is convinced that the Church must become genuinely democratic, 'For the meaning of the pattern of emerging democracy in our society is the realization of a genuinely *common* responsibility in the fullest sense: a community of care, a community of guilt, a community of consolation . . . if we look to each other, this is common responsibility, if we are trained to look at one man, this is paternalism'.⁶ Now it is certainly true that if we consider the Church at the level of the achieved reality of communion in Christ, at the level of spiritual relationships,⁷ then the members of the Church, hierarchy and laity alike, possess an equality, in virtue of their baptism, which is far from being reflected in the current social structures of the Christian community. But it is *also* true that if we consider the Church as an incomplete reality, as a visible means or sacred sign of grace, then some members of the Church are given a *generative* function, for the realization of the community by Word and sacrament, which introduces an element of inequality into the Church's structure until the community is perfectly achieved in the Kingdom.⁸

In the second place, this failure to give due weight to the generative function of Christian ministry produces a description of the priestly task which rests on a misconception of the liturgy, and so of the Church. Mr Eagleton is surely correct in seeing that the meaning of the priesthood must be sought in terms of 'skill and function'⁹; he is further correct in seeing this function as being that of 'president of the liturgical assembly'.¹⁰ But the inferences he draws from this seem to me to be seriously inadequate. The inadequacy does not consist in desiring (perhaps idyllically) priests 'who are ordinary workers with families who have this special function to celebrate the liturgy within a church where the activities of teaching, welfare and preaching are genuinely common and not the monopoly of a caste'.¹¹ After all, whether or not this state of affairs is desirable or practicable, whether or not it takes sufficient account of historical developments which, in some cases, may have shaped the unfolding tradition irreversibly, it *does* bear a closer resemblance to the state of affairs that obtained during the first three centuries of Christian history than to the Church as we know her. No, the inadequacy consists rather in the implicit suggestion that 'presiding over the liturgical assembly' is an *intermittent* activity, something that starts with the

⁶art. cit. pp. 152, 153.

⁷Meaning relationships with the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit.

⁸In this context, cf. a comment of mine on an earlier article of Mr Eagleton's - in *Slant*, number 5, Summer 1965.

⁹art. cit. p. 153.

¹⁰art. cit. p. 154.

¹¹art. cit. p. 154.

Entrance Chant and ends with the Blessing. The liturgical assembly is the Church in miniature; it is a 'picture-statement' of the nature of the Church: it is the sacrament of the Church. Therefore, whatever functional differentiations are shown to exist, during the actual celebration of the liturgy, must be the sacramental expression of differentiations that exist in the diffuse, extra-liturgical life of the Church. Working out what this should mean, in terms of social structures, is one of the principal tasks of Church reform. But to deny that the problem exists, to deny that the 'presidency of the liturgical assembly' must have *some* extra-liturgical correlate, is to deny the very nature and function of the liturgy. More particularly, in the present context, it is to fail adequately to ask the question: what is a priest?

Fr Schelkle's little book is an examination of the New Testament teaching on the apostolic ministry. It is simply and clearly written, with scrupulous fidelity to the biblical evidence. After examining the ideas of 'discipleship' and 'apostleship' (with a brilliant summary of the way in which the 'following of Jesus' in the days of his flesh becomes 'life in Christ' in the new community), he discusses, successively, the apostolic function in regard to the 'care of souls', proclamation of the Word, and worship in spirit and truth. Sometimes, compression gives rise to ambiguity: the correct statement that the apostolic office 'neither exists *by* the community's election . . . nor is subject to its judgement' (p. 30) misleadingly suggests that election by the community is in some way improper, and that all exercise of the apostolic office is immune from fraternal correction.

While the apostles regarded it as perfectly proper to describe their relationship to other members of the community as one of paternity (or maternity, cf. Gal. 4, 19), this did not for them (and could not, in the light of Mt. 23, 9), imply some intrinsic *superiority* (cf. pp. 43–45). But is this not another example of what Mr Eagleton describes as 'the confusion we have all been led to make between function and relationship'?¹² Does not any concept of paternity, applied to the apostolic office, introduce that note of *inequality* into the relationship which Mr Eagleton protests against? It seems to me that we have to resolve an ambiguity latent in the idea of 'unequal relationships'. The relationship between two people, or between one person and a group, may be unequal in the sense that one person is 'above', 'superior to' the others. This sort of inequality in relationship, 'social inequality', is by no means essential to the Christian community. Indeed, our common baptismal relationship, as sinners existing in total dependence on God's creative love, must positively exclude it. However, the very existence of differentiated function within a community introduces an inequality of a different sort into the pattern of relationships. In this case, the inequality consists not in being 'above' or 'below', but in the fact that the exercise of a specific

¹²art. cit. p. 152.

function implies a *non-reciprocal* relationship. A doctor, when exercising his particular function, is 'giving' healing but he is not 'receiving' it. Mr Eagleton rejects this analogy¹³ but, in doing so, he seems to prejudge the sort of function which might be regarded as proper to the ordained minister. It is still possible that he may have *some* function to perform which would entail an unequal, in the sense of non-reciprocal, relationship, to the rest of the community. I suggested earlier that a description of this function should be sought in the notion of 'generation', of building-up the Church, and Fr Schelkle gives an illustration of this in his treatment of the teaching role of the apostle. Certainly it is true that, in a mature society, 'teaching must be a continuous activity involving everyone as teacher and taught',¹⁴ but, in the Church, this does not exclude the Spirit-given responsibility borne by the ordained ministers to proclaim, prophetically, the Word of God to arouse and revive saving faith. This permanent status-as-prophet does not exempt its holders from permanently remaining 'hearers of the Word' – a Word which they hear principally from the Church, the community. And the existence of permanent prophetic office is not ruled out by the fact that the *whole* community has the gift and duty of proclaiming the Word, and that certain other individuals may be called upon by God to exercise a 'temporary' prophetic role.¹⁵

But if the prophetic (and priestly) roles of Christ are shared by the whole community, must we not be able to say with some precision what it is that differentiates the 'general' and 'special' priesthood? Here Fr Schelkle does not help us. It is at the very point when he says 'Now it is becoming completely clear in what sense there is an individual priesthood in the New Testament' (p. 134), that one suddenly feels it has not become clear at all.

Fr Dillenschneider's book offers little assistance. It would be unfair to regard it as a theological treatise on the priesthood since it is devoted to 'our priestly spirituality', and is complementary to 'the first volume of our work . . . a profound theological study of the priesthood'.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the author's underlying theological conception of the priesthood shines through clearly, and it is a profoundly unsatisfactory one. The concept is that of the priest as a special, spiritually upper-class Christian,¹⁷ surrounded by 'souls' who, being more or less identified with the 'world', at once constitute for the priest a threat and the field of his apostolic activity. This understanding of the priesthood allows a simple pattern to control each stage in the discussion: if such-and-such is demanded of the

¹³art. cit. p. 153.

¹⁴art. cit. p. 154.

¹⁵Cf. Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, art. 12.

¹⁶p.v.

¹⁷'The . . . priest is not just a member of the Church. He is a privileged member, a member of the elite, *more highly ransomed*' (p. 10, my stress).

Christian, *how much more* is it demanded of the priest. On this view of things, what function does the priest perform? The answer is that he is a mediator, standing between Christ and the common faithful. Not surprisingly, this leads to what one can only describe as 'sacerdotal monophysitism': 'He is not allowed to be merely a man, even a better man than others. *He must be much less a man than a Christ*' (p. 12 my stress).

Apart from the questionable theological foundations on which this book rests, the language in which it is written does little to commend it. Having got used to the idea that 'the world is a concrete and polyvalent evangelical cosmos' (p. 128), we are then asked to see our Lady's role in the redemptive process as a 'ratification of her dolorous parturition on Calvary' (p. 264). However, the book does force us to face up to a central problem in the theology of the priesthood. Granted that the use of the concept of mediation at work here is profoundly unsatisfactory, does it follow that *all* idea of the priest as mediator must be rejected (an important question in view of the ratification of the term by Trent)?

Qu'est-ce qu'un prêtre? is the best study of the priesthood that I have come across for a very long time. The fact that one of the authors is a priest of the Mission de France is sufficient to ensure that its starting-point is an examination of the actual problems that beset the Church and the ministry in contemporary secular society, rather than some *a priori* speculation about what 'should be the case'. Indeed, the greatest merit of the book consists in its impeccable methodology. The concern for sound method ensures both that the correct questions are asked, and that the limits of all the partial insights that might contribute towards a solution are clearly stated. The first part of the book is an examination of the present situation, from the point of view both of the actual tasks on which priests are currently employed (Ch. 1), and the various theories advanced for our understanding of the priesthood (Ch. 2). These theories mostly share a conviction that the priest has a special role which entails his *separation* from some area of concrete reality (consecrated for *God*: separated from *men*; consecrated for *Christians*: separated from *non-Christians*; consecrated for the *spiritual*: separated from the *temporal*). In each case the authors show that a useful insight, with its own limited validity, has been elevated into an erroneous statement of principle. So, for example, to restrict the priest to activity within the Christian community, giving him no specific task in the Church's general mission to the unbeliever (and this, it seems to me, is what Mr Eagleton does) would limit his preaching role to 'didache', excluding him from the whole field of the 'kerygmatic'. To say the least, this view of things is hard to reconcile with the New Testament evidence. The last section of this chapter is devoted to a preliminary analysis of the problem of the 'priest as mediator'. It ends by distinguishing three ways of considering 'mediation':

‘La première situe l’intermédiaire à mi-chemin entre deux termes à relier, et on comprend qu’il doit être séparé (ainsi voyait-on la situation des anges dans l’Ancien Testament). La deuxième imagine l’intermédiaire comme apparenté à l’un et l’autre terme (ainsi Jésus-Christ qui est Dieu et homme). La troisième s’en tient à l’idée de lien: qui alors n’est pas médiateur dès lors qu’il contribue à rapprocher les hommes de Dieu, du Christ, de l’Eglise?’ (p. 61).

The first two meanings are clearly irrelevant to the role of the Christian minister, and the third is one way of describing the general missionary function of the Church.

Having cleared the ground, the second part of the book is devoted to an attempt to answer the question in outline. In successive chapters, Christian priesthood is examined in the light of pagan priesthood, Jewish priesthood, the mission of Jesus Christ, and the mission of the apostles. Pagan priesthood (or ‘priesthood-in-general’, as an object of study by comparative religionists), is of little help for an understanding of Christian ministry, except to highlight certain dangerous ambiguities latent in the attitudes of many people (including priests) to the ‘men in black’. The study of Jewish priesthood, also, is primarily useful as a cautionary tale. Again and again, in the history of the Church, ideas of priesthood have been lifted from the Old Testament and applied to the Christian ministry, insufficient attention being paid either to the complexity of the Old Testament evidence or to the radical transformation worked by the Christ-event in the relationships that obtain between God and his People. In this context the authors return again to the idea of the mediator:

‘C’est pourquoi, à dire vrai, il n’y a pas de médiateurs homologues de ceux de l’Ancien Testament dans le Nouveau Testament: “Unique est le Médiateur entre Dieu et les hommes, le Christ Jésus, homme lui-même, qui s’est livré en rançon pour tous” (1 Tim. 2, 5). Le temps de l’Eglise n’est pas un recommencement du temps d’Israël, mais le déploiement, la mise en oeuvre, par Jésus lui-même, de la rédemption éternelle: Jésus se déploie en son corps ecclésial, dans lequel et par lequel il opère le salut des hommes. Qu’auraient donc à faire ces nouveaux médiateurs? Servir d’intermédiaires entre Jésus-Christ et les hommes? Mais il n’y a pas de place: Jésus-Christ intervient directement’ (p. 89).

The real error of the priest-as-mediator thesis, as commonly stated, is that it ignores the priority of the *Church*. The priest does not, as Fr Dillenschneider seems to think, come between Christ and his Church: he exercises a particular function, yet to be determined, within the priestly People of God.

The chapter on the priesthood of Jesus Christ begins with an excellent analysis of that ‘religionless religion’ which is the life of the new People. The authors lean heavily on St Augustine’s theology of

sacrifice to show that, in the new order, the order of worship in spirit and truth:

‘ . . . le vrai sacré se trouve, comme physiquement et ontologiquement, dans l’homme lui-même: Jésus-Christ tout le premier, et ensuite ses membres. Il n’est dans les signes, même efficaces de cette vérité, donc dans les sacrements, que secondairement’ (p. 104).

Being dead to the (johannine) ‘world’ is the *Christian* situation, not a specifically ‘priestly’ one, and therefore the sacrificial, priestly theology of the Letter to the Hebrews passes directly from Christ to the Church, not from Christ to the ministry (cf. p. 137).

The new humanity, the ‘perfected humanism’ of the eschatological community is, however, in process of construction. The apostolic office and, flowing from it, the order of Christian ministry, owes all its intelligibility to the situation of the Church as the sacrament of a Kingdom that is in process of becoming. To describe the priest as the ‘servant of the Church’ is not to describe his *attitudes*, but his unique *function* in the construction of the community by Word and sacrament. His ministry is not only to be understood *within* the Christian community, in the measure that this has already become a visible reality, but also as *for* the building of the Church where, for lack of eucharistically-expressed faith, the grace of God in Jesus Christ has not yet been made sacramentally manifest (it is in this context that the directly kerygmatic function of the bishops and their helpers finds its place).

Can the approach adopted here be reconciled with the identification we made earlier (following Mr Eagleton) of Christian ministry with the ‘presidency of the liturgical assembly’? Yes, and for this purpose the authors take up the double imagery which St Paul employed when talking of the Church as the Body of Christ. In the Great Epistles, the purpose of the metaphor is to emphasize the sacramental solidarity that exists between Christ and his members.¹⁸ From this point of view the whole Church is the sacrament of Christ, and each baptized Christian is an ‘alter Christus’ in that he is the sacramental image of the *Sonship* of Christ. But in the Captivity Epistles Paul contrasts Christ, the Head (generative source of life and activity) with us, his members.¹⁹ From this point of view the whole Church is, again, the sacrament of Christ: the sacrament in the world of the *Kyrios*. Within the Church, the bishop (and, derivatively, the priest) is the sacramental image of Christ the Head. If it should happen, in the actual structures of the community, that the ministry is so misunderstood as to allow this ‘merely sacramental’ headship to become a source of ‘social inequality’ a paternalism or dictatorship, this is tantamount to a denial of the transcendent

¹⁸Cf. Vatican II. Constitution on the Church, art. 7, paras 2, 3.

¹⁹Cf. Vatican II. Constitution on the Church, art. 7, paras 4–7.

Lordship of Christ. To correct this situation it would be insufficient (a temptation to which the Reformers were subject) to transfer this reappropriated Lordship to the rest of the community. The solution is to return the Lordship to Christ, the one Head of the Church,²⁰ and to reflect this return, not only in suitably corrected *attitudes* (of priestly humility and self-denial), but in appropriate ecclesial structures and relationships. In other words, the genuinely common responsibility demanded by Mr Eagleton should be the social consequence of our sacramental solidarity as 'sons in the Son', and need not be vitiated by the fact there is, within the community, that order of men whose function it is, both within and outside the liturgical assembly, to be the sacramental expression of the Headship of Christ, as the *source* of life, by Word and sacrament, for a People still growing towards the full stature of the Body of Christ.

The community which *primarily* becomes visible in the liturgical assembly cannot *only* become visible there, or the assembly would cease to be the sacramental expression of any authentic social reality (it would be the expression of a *merely* eschatological hope). And therefore the presidency of the liturgical assembly must, as I said earlier, find its extra-liturgical correlate. (It is worth noting that one aspect of liturgical presidency is the function of *reconciling* individuals to the assembly through the sacrament of Penance.) *Qu'est-ce qu'un prêtre?* does not provide ready-made directives as to how this should be done. Indeed, any attempt to do so in detail would be improper at a time when we are slowly beginning to understand the forms of Christian existence appropriate to the contemporary situation. But it does provide, with considerably greater richness and balance than this summary has been able to indicate, a correct statement of the question, and the heuristic structures within which the answers must be sought.

The Priest, a collection of letters and addresses by Pope Paul VI when Archbishop of Milan, does not provide radically new theological insights: this is hardly its purpose. But it does provide a fascinating self-portrait of a man of burning Christian zeal and a true sense of the urgency of the situation. There is plenty of unrest in these letters, and no complacency: 'Do not look for shelter . . . Bless God who has you live in years and in a world in which you are not asleep' (p. 33). The Church has to find her role in a world 'that paradoxically seems to have appropriated the most beautiful principles of Christianity – freedom, humanity, the cult of man, respect for the person, desire for peace and unity' (p. 61). And part of this process of self-discovery must be a fresh understanding, in the light of revelation, of the meaning of Christian priesthood.

²⁰Cf. p. 148.