Christian Priesthood
and Secularised Mentality
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Statement of the Problem . . . Latin America

In Latin America and specifically in Chile the most dynamic (soc-
ially concerned) clergy have experienced the phenomenon of
secularisation in a way that is perhaps different from the clergy in
Europe or the United States. In these countries the strongest impact
has probably been made by the scientific and technical discoveries
of recent years. On the other hand, in Latin America the impact is
felt especially through the experience of the power of mass move-
ments to produce cultural transformations which pastoral action
has never been able to bring about. These mass movements have
become a reality, thanks to leaders, generally non-Christian, who
understood and could make use of socio-economic and socio-
political laws which allowed radical changes in structures of ex-
ploitation. Seeing the effectiveness of these mass movements and
technical expertise of their leaders, some of the clergy became in-
creasingly conscious of the contrast with the more or less total fail-
ure of large scale ecclesiastical pastoral action such as Catholic Ac-
tion, Y.C.W, Y.C.S, the Christian Family Movement ... etc. I believe
that this feeling of frustration built up within the clergy a sense of
inferiority and ineffectiveness which today appears as their major
problem. What social changes had the Church been able to achieve
in Latin America, bearing in mind that 99% of the people are bap-
tized, that is to say are people who might be expected to respond to
the directives of the ecclesiastical leaders? It is this uncomfortable
feeling that has pushed the progressive clergy to look for new forms
of theological understanding that will promote really effective
Christian thinking on the radical transformation of the structures of
exploitation. This is where we find the psychological roots of action
and indeed the theological roots too, for the breath of the Spirit
can surely be felt there. It is these movements of thought and deed
that have crystallised into what today we call "theology of libera-
tion" or, sometimes "theology of revolution" (cf. the pamphlet on
"Theology of Liberation" of the Servicio de Documentacion Series
1, No 23 to 24; Montevideo MIEC).

However, this new theological mentality which might be expec-
ted to give the priests a new sense of their identity as revolutionary
clergy, seems to have produced more complex reactions. Such reac-
tions are classified under two headings:

1. That of those who cannot accommodate in this new image what
they consider to be their role as clergymen (a role which does not

seem too clear to them either) so that they live in a state of constant tension between tendencies born of their revolutionary or liberating theological mentality, and the demands of their clerical function, understood basically as "sacred" and "sacralizing".

2. That of those who solve the problem by assimilating themselves fully into the struggle for liberation and the structural revolution; more or less explicitly abandoning their "holy" function and often technically abandoning the priesthood (a well known example is that of Camilo Torres in Columbia).

The principal reason for the tension lies in the premises of the Theology of Liberation. The socio-political and socio-economic liberation of man is being achieved mainly by non-Christian movements and so this theology seems to involve approving of forms of action not directly inspired by Christian principles and Christian leaders. At the same time such a theology demands that Christians be fully integrated into such movements of liberation.

This is approximately the present situation and it is characterised by a lack of clear criteria and a general uncertainty. Ecclesiastical documents and standpoints adopted by the hierarchy appear to oscillate between a certain degree of audacity, overprudence and a reaction inspired perhaps by fear or insecurity. The laity are traditionally allowed to take risks, but the clergy are urged to be "prudent" and to preserve their special "neutrality".

This paper does not pretend to be "doctrinal" in the usual sense of the word: a body of teaching well founded on the sources of tradition. It is rather an attempt to shed some light on the present crisis of the clergy, starting with the contributions made by religious phenomenology and a reading of the Bible which is not essen--tialist or dogmatic but rather kerygmatic or existentialist.

1. *The "Sacred" mentality.*

For this analysis I think it is important to illustrate exactly what is meant by the so-called *process of secularisation.* This process represents a movement of *desacralisation* with respect to a previous mentality which was "sacred". What exactly was this primitive "sacred" mentality? Primitive man distinguished two kinds of heterogeneous periods of time:

Sacred or Mythical time and *Profane or Historical time.*

Sacred or Mythical time is that of supernatural or mythical beings. Their actions were those that gave rise to the historical realities of the human or profane world: the cosmos, man, sexuality, work, health, suffering, death as a condition of life ... etc. This mythical, a-historical period when the gods originated everything human, is considered by primitive man to be the "ideal time" or rather the "real time", the "sacred time". This period provides the explanation, the origin and the basis for everything experienced during our existence.

On the other hand, the profane, historic time which follows the

mythical time is a time which is in constant flux, without any real consistency, a time which becomes progressively more degraded. Everything that takes place during the profane time is characterised by its precarious nature and its lack of reality. Thus primitive man experiences the structural necessity of a return, somehow, to the original, sacred, mythical time. The return is possible for him through the ritual re-enactment of the sacred myths. For the "sacred" or mythical mentality, ritual is therefore fundamental because it links profane realities with their mythical origin. Without this contact with its sacred origin, the profane world has no possible salvation. However, ritual has to be performed in a proper place: the holy place or temple: in the same way it needs the right person: hence the holy minister or priest. The minister or priest appears, then in primitive religious societies, as an irreplaceable central figure. Without him, ritual would not be possible and profane reality would lack a solid foundation for it could not be linked with the mythical sacred time.

To understand this mentality we need to recognise two levels: that which constitutes the language or objectivity of the myth, and that which constitutes its intention or meaning. The language of the myth as such is pre-scientific; it pre-supposes a cosmological and a physical causality which has nothing to do with modern scientific concepts of the world. Thus if we today are to understand the mythical mentality we must submit it to a process of de-mythologising to reveal the essential intention or meaning of myth. This meaning lies in the fundamental affirmation of the myth: man, in his profane state, is not *self-sufficient;* his basis is not found in himself but in another (transcendental) reality. This other reality cannot in fact be viewed objectively; that is, mythical language exposes another reality to man, but it cannot *reduce* this transcendental reality to the level of human use and comprehension. Such a tendency, however, is constant in the mythical mentality. The ritual may spontaneously be used *magically:* magic constitutes the most evident expression of the objectification of the sacred, converting it into a physical thing which influences events—sickness, storms and so on.

The Secularised Mentality.

We have seen what constitutes the primitive sacred mentality. Now we shall try to clarify what constitutes the modern secularised alternative. The question can be approached in two ways, one more sociological, the other more theological. Both are intimately connected; however, I shall limit myself to the theological viewpoint. The process of secularisation or desacralisation which is highlighted today by the scientific way of thinking, in fact owes its origin and its development to the Bible.

At the risk of over-simplifying it can be said that two types of mentality are found in biblical history: a *priestly* mentality and a

prophetic mentality. Occasionally these two mentalities coexist peacefully, but more often they are in a state of tension, if not direct opposition. The priestly view was that its own sacred structure guaranteed the existence of the nation. Thanks to the rituals provided by the priests (circumcision, ritual offerings, sacrifices, blessings ...) the tribes of Israel were the holy or blessed nation, the people who were the object of Yahweh's pleasure. This sacred view which in its intention or meaning seems to express man's lack of self-sufficiency and dependence on God took an objective form and was degraded into "sanctification" (sacralisation or formalism, which operated as a mechanical guarantee of "salvation" irrespective of man's inner state of being. It is against this that the prophets fight. They are extremely critical of the priests and their "holy" institutions (cf. Hos 4:4-11; 6:9; Jr 2:8; 6:13; Mal 6:2-9 ...). Thus the prophets initiated a strong desacralising and secularising movement; they attacked all ritual or sacred institutions which served to guarantee or protect man against the demand for a genuine conversion of heart. The prophets therefore proclaimed a "new alliance", which would have as its seal man's heart and the spirit that inspires it: "I will set my law within them and write it on their hearts" (Jer 31, 33). "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh" (Ez 36:26).

The attempt by the prophets to desacralise tends to make the heart of man the sacred place of contact with God, or of "sanctification or sacralisation". Numerous examples could be quoted to show this desacralising message which at the same time shows the responsibility of the prophets:

"Loyalty is my desire, not sacrifice, not whole-offerings but the knowledge of God" (Hos 6:6 cf. Matt 9:13; 12:7).

"Think of your father: he ate and drank, dealt justly and fairly; ...

He dispensed justice to the lowly and poor; Did not this show he knew me? (Jer 22:15).

"Circumcise yourselves to the service of the Lord ... (Jer 4:4).

Christianity follows the tradition of the prophets. Jeus Christ was perhaps the prophet who most emphatically confronted the priests, so much so that in the end they condemned him to death. Christ appears as a prophet who is pre-eminently critical of all "sacred" laws or institutions, whenever they make the heart impermeable to true conversion. It is obvious that the prophets and Christ himself did not want to eliminate the cultic institutions of Israel; no one has more vigorously preached "Law and Worship" than Christ and the prophets ("I have come not to abolish the law but to fulfil it"). But his preaching is radical precisely in the sense of combating all mythical holiness (cf. Von Rad "Theologie de l'Ancien Testament", Vol II p 362 ss). There is a particularly sig-

nificant passage in St John's Gospel: the dialogue with the Samaritan woman of 4:21 ff. Jesus finishes with these words:

"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. *For these are the worshippers that the Father seeks.* God is spirit and they who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth".

In this statement one finds the fundamental contribution of Christianity that has permitted a theologian like Bonhoeffer to say that Christianity is not a religion. As long as man exists both profane and sacred remain necessary but the revitalisation of the sacred, or the real place of contact of man with God, is not Jerusalem or Garizim or Rome but rather it is the *heart* of man, "in spirit and in truth". In this way the process of secularisation becomes one of self-awareness or taking responsibility. This is at the same time the authentic biblical meaning of the "new man". It is the man who has become conscious of himself and become capable of response, the man who lives the reality of God without reliance on any "holy" structure. Some profane structures can also become "holy" when they are converted into values-for-their-own-sakes (the proverbial sacred cows) rather than responding to the demands of God and the needs of man "in spirit and in truth". Thus man is asked to respond on the level of his historical life, on the level of freedom, for or against his brother, and not on a ritual or "sacred" level. (Matt 25:31-46).

This does not mean abolishing ritual and the sacraments; it does, however, mean that the sacraments are not objects but symbols. Things are here and have a value of their own, through their objective reality; and they can exercise physical influences of a mechanical (or magical) type. On the other hand "symbols" represent a free appropriation by those for whom they are symbolic. The symbol always presupposes freedom. As soon as the symbol ceases to be related to freedom it is changed into a "thing", it becomes objectified; it is changed into an "idol". The process of secularisation begun by the prophets is precisely the struggle against idols in order to rediscover authentic symbols. (cf. P Ricoeur, "De l'interpretation Essai sur Freud, Paris 1965, p 510 ss).

It is within this perspective that the following statement can be understood:

Easter—the Christian message—constitutes the authentic myth or symbol which demands for man the freedom to live and die through Christ's sacrifice. This is what is meant when it is stated that Christ's sacrifice is the Christian kerygma. That is to say, to announce the kerygma is not simply to offer a hope but to demand

action. This action is determined by the self-emptying (kenosis, Phil 2:7) of Christ for man, "for us", "for all", "for our sins", "for me": (1 Thess 5:10; 2 Cor 5:14-15; Rom 4:25; Gal 2:19-21—texts which represent the earliest Christian teaching and which have their literary and theological origins in Is 53:8). In this way, Christian preaching requires man to become "man for man" as Christ was. "If God has so loved us, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us . . . (Jn 1:4 11-12). "If you love one another, then they will know that you are my disciples". (Jn 13:35).

To sum this up in a sentence: theological language is idolatrous as soon as it ceases to be kerygmatic. That is, as soon as the language is considered "sacred" and does not give priority to the human freedom that is the focal point of Christianity.

The Christian Priesthood.

All these reflections which have perhaps been somewhat theoretical can however bear direct relation to the identity of the Christian or Catholic priest.

The "holiness" of the Christian priest, that is, his role as a sign of another reality which forms the basis for our profane reality is not on the level of a "holy" or "ritual" consecration, but on the level of *freedom:* the most demanding mission in the service of man (kenosis).

1. A certain traditional concept of the "eternal" nature of the priesthood may correspond more to a sacred or mythical mentality than to a truly Christian standpoint.

2. Equally a certain concept of celibacy as "the state of greatest perfection", of greatest mystical union with God, may constitute the "sacred taboo" which prevents real reflection on real service to man.

3. The fundamental distinction between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of all the people of God perhaps ought also to be rethought.

Such a distinction may in its practical consequences be based on a type of mythical or sacred mentality which does not represent typical Christianity. The Christian priesthood seems to be modelled on the mediating nature of Christ, which has as its proper context its "kenosis for man" (cf. Von Rad, op. cit. p 362 ss).

That is, priestly "consecration" does not have a "sacred" meaning but implies a demanding mission in the service of mankind. This, evidently, can be applied to being a Christian in general and to all its sacramental concepts (that of "ex opere operato" as it is found in certain traditions); and basically it criticises certain traditional essentialist concepts of *grace.*

I comment here that I am not talking of the priest as the "leader" or the one who "presides" in the community even when this could appear to be a very traditional meaning of the priesthood

(sharing the Headship of Christ).

This "presidency" only has a Christian meaning, and not a purely sacred sense, in so far as it is a presidency in the mission of the real *kenosis* for man. (St Ignatius of Antioch describes the bishop-priest as "he who presides in charity")

The desacralisation of the priesthood is parallel, on the other hand, to that of a king or political leader; his *value* is not in his consecration, but in his real service to the people. His role is based on a mission of service; if the aspect of service is lacking, no amount of "consecration" will justify the role, and the people of God will be within their rights in withdrawing the mission from him.

It is here also that one ought to base the criterion for the election as well as the removal of bishops.

4. The Christian priesthood is not in the tradition of a "sacred" priesthood, but in that of a "prophetic mission". The Christian priest is a prophet like Christ himself, whose priesthood was above all prophetic: "in spirit and truth".

Conclusion.

The priest feels himself in a crisis of identity. Yes, but perhaps the identity which was so characteristic of days gone by, and may well have met the needs of an earlier mentality, has disappeared for ever. The priest is a Christian with an eminent dedication to the service of man. This is confirmed by a special mission of the Church. In view of this one asks oneself why should there be differences between what is permissible for a layman and what is permissible for a priest? (Membership of political parties, marriage etc.)

Such distinctions seem to respond more to the outlook of a sacred mentality than to the secularised outlook of the "mission of service to man".

The priest must be a prophet who prophesies in any place where his attitudes and his circumstances lead him to perform: work, politics, marriage ... etc. Perhaps the attitude of the priest so involved will testify more clearly that the new man Christ came to create is not within ecclesiastical structures; at the same time he will testify that the new man is not automatically to be found in new social structures either. The new man is always found at the level of freedom, of the heart, of real service to man.

If a "structure" wishes to declare itself as good in itself, or wants to "sacralise" itself, then the prophet reacts here in a critical way and destroys all the idols to affirm that the only sacred place is in the reality of a free and effective response to the service of man.

In this we rediscover the profound meaning of the myth, after submitting it to the process of demythologising or secularisation: every structure, like man himself, is not self-sufficient. Its base is in another reality; and the point of contact with this *Founding Reality* is in the *free conscience* of man ("his heart") which is asked to respond in the service of man, as did Christ, the new Priest.