

Jesus was not, of course, a clergyman. To describe him as our High Priest is almost as paradoxical as calling him King of the Jews. How he could be called a priest (*hiereus, sacerdos*) and how, or even whether, his followers could share this name are questions of considerable importance for ecumenical discussion. So during the preparation for the Gazzada conference of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission last year, Jean Tillard, O.P., was asked to prepare a position paper on the matter. Its recent publication in English¹ provides an excuse for returning to the topic.

The author is lucid, concise and not particularly surprising. He points out that in the Gospels, Jesus never claims priesthood and that although his death is seen as sacrificial, Jesus appears as victim rather than as sacrificing priest. *Hebrews* represents the work of Christ not as continuing the Levitical priesthood but as rendering it obsolete: he succeeds where the old priesthood failed. It is only in this almost ironic sense that we can speak of his sacerdotal character. He is not *hiereus* because of his symbolic ritual acts at the Last Supper—on the contrary, the priestly or sacrificial character these rites have, derive not from their resemblance to ritual sacrifice, but from their relation to the quite secular killing of Jesus. The ‘priesthood’ of Jesus exercised not in ritual and sacred space but in the course of an ordinary judicial murder, as part of a familiar pattern of political repression, is the only one recognized by Christians. The ‘priesthood’ of the Church is, again, not directly to do with her celebration of a cult but with her holiness, the challenge she offers to the values and institutions of our world.

Fr Tillard remarks that of the passages in the New Testament which speaks of the Christian priesthood, ‘None treats explicitly of the Christian ministry . . . none establishes in a clear and inescapable way, any relation between the Priesthood of Christ and that of the Church as a whole other than the following: because of the priesthood of Christ the faithful can offer sacrifices acceptable to God (*Hebrews*); because of the sacrifice of Christ the baptized are the people who bear the holy priesthood that is exercised in spiritual sacrifices (1 *Peter*). Nowhere is it said that that priesthood of the Church (a royal priesthood, a priesthood of holiness of life) constitutes a participation in the priesthood of Christ. Nowhere is there any question of a relationship between this priesthood of Christ

¹*What Priesthood has the Ministry*, Grove Books, Bramcote, Notts., 20p. The text also appears in this month’s *One in Christ*. The original French text is said to have already appeared in *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* but it is not to be found there. There is a quite important ‘not’ missing from the foot of page 13.

and that which is exercised in ritual worship.' Again, in the passages that speak of the ministry, of the work of presbyters, bishops, deacons, apostles, prophets and the rest, there is no mention of presiding at the eucharist. It is a curious fact that from the New Testament we have no indication who did preside. There is no mention of any 'order' in the Church set apart for this role.

'The Passover at Jerusalem combined the immolation of victims at the Temple with a meal in the home. The properly sacrificial act, necessitating the participation of priests, was that of pouring out at the foot of the altar the blood of the beast . . . the meal was a participation, in thanksgiving and hope, in the redemptive power of the commemorated event . . . the one who presided at this meal was the father of the family. . . .' If we are to see the murder of Jesus in terms of the Passover and the eucharist in terms of his death, then the 'sacerdotal' function is centred on the most unliturgical event on Calvary; it was only by analogy that Christian tradition came later to use hieratic, sacerdotal language, in an even more attenuated sense, for the one who presided at the eucharistic meal. Tillard recognizes this as 'a typical instance of the community going beyond the letter of scripture without, however, intending to betray the spirit of Christ'. The Catholic tradition, moreover, sees in the eucharist not simply the repetition of a commemorative meal but a sacramental realization of the sacrificial death of Christ.

It is important to say these things because we are under constant temptation to see the Christian ministry in pre-Christian terms. Pre-Christian priesthood, with its *ritual* sacrifice for sin, is not only an attempt to cope with alienation but also an expression, and even a kind of validation, of the alienated human condition. It postulates a God who is approached by stepping outside human affairs, a God who is not only beyond but also outside the human. What the gospel offers the world is not a further refinement of ritual but the news that God is beyond and within the human. Our only sacrifice is not a liturgical ceremony but the life and death and new life of a man. Christ's sacrifice is the consequence and expression of his being too human for this inhumane world.

It is indeed a legitimate development to transfer sacerdotal language to the Christian ministry but if we forget that it is a development, if we speak and act as though the Church really contained a priestly caste through whose ritual sacrifices we make contact with the divine, then we are forgetting the goodness of the news, and our version of Christianity will be what Nietzsche and Marx thought it was, a sophisticated expression of our alienated state. The real presence of Christ is first of all in those who need us, in the poor, the oppressed, the victims of the world; everything else in the Church makes sense only in function of this.

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