

THE PRIEST IN OUR DAY

This is an excerpt from the joint Pastoral Letter of USA Bishops "The Church in our day" issued last November, 1967.

The Relevance of the Priestly Life

On the pastoral level, there are three especially grave problems which we see confronting priests.

The first of these is sometimes said to be disturbing doubt concerning the worth of their lives. It is painful when one, for whatever reason, is faced with doubt concerning the meaning of the career he has chosen. This is a present pain for countless parents, married couples, religious and persons following other special vocations; it must especially afflict, nowadays, many in the armed forces. In the case of the priest assailed by such misgiving there are probably two reasons why his anxiety may today be so acute. One is the sudden review of doctrine and discipline occasioned by the council. This may have left some priests, who are teachers and shepherds of their communities, somehow less secure in their message and with themselves. Here time and the patience to arrive at understanding through study and priestly experience will help. The priest who surmounts the problems and redeems the promises of aggiornamento will find that Church doctrine has been enriched thereby and the service of the Church made more meaningful. He discovers, moreover, that the priest is needed today more than ever before, more needed liturgically in the worship of the people he serves, more needed apostolically in the market place, more needed intellectually in the forum and on the campus, more needed prophetically in the Church and in the world. In every case (and here is the point) he is more, not less needed...

A second reason why misgiving among some priests may be acute in an age of automation is perhaps the prevailing norms by which people generally appear to measure the worth and meaning of modern lives. The priestly ministry cannot be made meaningful in terms of the technological categories we tend to prize here in the United States. Nor can the priesthood be made relevant in terms of any purely humanistic categories such as are widely exalted in Western civilization. Christ's acceptance of the crucifixion, for example, was hardly a "humanistic" approach to the problem of the human condition. Moreover, the Church speaking for Christ, often makes demands which conflict with purely humanistic norms and contradict merely terrestrial humanism. Among these demands we might include religious poverty and chastity, celibacy and obedience, penance, and even worship itself. All these, viewed in the positive premises of the renunciations they require, serve not to diminish the person but to help accomplish in him freedom and resurrection into new life...

Loneliness

A second problem which confronts priests is loneliness. This problem is not peculiar to the priesthood. Any loneliness in the priest can hardly be seen as unique to his vocation. No one knows better than the priest the loneliness of the aged, the imprisoned, those unmarried despite their preference, the exiled, the abandoned, the dedicated who have renounced consolation to pursue art, science or the service of neighbor.

However, mindful precisely of priests, the Council speaks of the "bitter loneliness", and even of the "seining sterility of the past labors" which priests may sometimes experience. Pope Paul also cautions that "loneliness will weigh heavily on the priest" (*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 59). But it is well to keep certain realities in mind when there is consideration of the loneliness involved in the human condition; even more, it is bound up with the vocation of the Christian always a pilgrim and stranger on the face of the earth. We are not yet, in the fullest sense of the word, "home"; we have not here a lasting dwelling-place and ours is the unrest of those who seek a city. Nor do we yet so completely experience the effects of redemption that estrangement

from God, from one another, and even from our true selves is no longer to be feared.

Married or single, religious or lay, priest or people, all must come to terms with loneliness. Often the sustaining of loneliness results in human and Christian maturity, making us aware of our limitations and of our need for one another. "Christ, too, in the most tragic hours of His life was alone—abandoned by the very one He had chosen as . . . witnesses . . . and companions . . . and whom He had loved unto the end" (*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 59) . . .

"And if hostility, lack of confidence and the indifference of his fellowmen make his solitude quite painful, (a priest) will thus be able to share, with dramatic charity the very experience of Christ, as an apostle who is not above him, by whom he has been sent . . ." (*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 59).

In an age perhaps overly given to introspection, personal problems are intensified by the disposition to concentrate on them. A priest who loses himself in his apostolate, serving God's people, particularly the poor and the neglected, in imitation of his Master will find that much of his loneliness disappears. The loneliness which remains is a small price to pay for a vocation whose sacredness and consolations can hardly be exaggerated. In spite of any problems of the priesthood, there is no greater joy than that which accompanies the work of the dedicated priest, no calling more literally divine than his. In moments of isolation, priests, no matter how great their fears, will recall the words which sustained Christ in His greater loneliness: "I am not alone, for the Father is with me" (John 16:32) . . .

There is an essential difference between priest and people no matter how much the heart of the priest identifies with his people. In a dramatic and altogether decisive manner, the ordained priest is a man of the Church; he becomes the sign of the Church as no other Christian does, he gives expression in his priesthood to special ministries of Jesus Christ, the sole High Priest. His ultimate responsibility is not alone to his people, great though his duties to them, nor is it to himself nor to any priestly caste; his responsibility is to God, by whom he has been called, as Aaron was, to a mission apart from that of the

unordained and yet within the community of God's people, a mission to which he is called and ordered by those appointed by God to rule his Church.

Truth itself as well as pastoral solicitude will require a priest, in encouraging the laity in an appreciation of their vocation, not to do so at the price of destroying confidence in his own priesthood. The historic development in the Council of the doctrine of the priesthood of the laity should prove a blessing to all the Church; the fruits of that blessing could be diminished, even lost, if the heightened awareness of the general priesthood in the Church lowered, even momentarily, a true appreciation of the necessary roles of the particular vocation special to the priest called apart and ordained for men in the things that pertain to God.

Many of us think we see an unfortunate eclipse of the clear and separate status of ordained priesthood; this is not good for priests nor for the laity, nor for the Church nor for the world that the Church serves through its diversity of ministries...

Whatever emphasizes the intimate brotherhood of priests, of which the Council speaks, and the tie to their Bishop, as a result of which "they make him present in a certain sense in the individual local congregations and take upon themselves as far as they are able, his duties and the burden of his care" (*Lumen Gentium*, 28), gives firm foundation to the needed theology of the priesthood and direction to a new priestly spirituality. We commend to priests in parishes, seminaries, and religious communities the recommendations of the recent "Instruction on Eucharistic Worship" (May 25, 1967) with respect to the concelebrated Mass and a fresh appreciation of the common life to be shared by priests in rectories and religious houses: these should be made truly homelike by the fraternal spirit derived from Christ Himself who dwells with them.

Pointedly and urgently, Pope Paul calls upon the laity to "feel responsible for the virtue of those of their brothers who have undertaken the mission of serving them in the priesthood for the salvation of their souls" (*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 96).

We understand something of the premises to this pointed admonition, for such it is, of the Holy Father. One consideration was suggested by Rosmini well over a century ago: The people of God produce their clergy and their clergy are therefore a reflection of the spiritual excellence expected by the people from whom they come. Furthermore, a thing would better manifest the readiness of the laity to assume their mature place in the life of the Church and warrant the confidence that the Church will profit from consultation of their minds and hearts than the evidence that they recognize the special reasons for priestly virtue and their own responsibility toward the development of that virtue in word and deed.

Special Witness of Religious

Though we have spoken directly of the priesthood, many of the things we have said apply with equal validity to religious. Without the public witness to the counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience which religious vow, without their generous example of community life, the Church would be sorely impoverished. The religious life should serve constantly to remind us of what the Church is. Religious manifests to us the beauty and the discipline harmonized in the Christian Life, a beauty that does not neglect the sinful human condition nor the reality of death, yet a discipline which is never so severe that it overlooks the redeemed status of the human condition or the inevitability of resurrection. Religious likewise give us a striking sign of the eschatological dimension of the Church; they remind us of the pilgrim road we all travel and of the values by which we shall live in the Promised land.

The very presence of religious in the world is a consolation. It is also a salutary rebuke to any of us who may be tempted to make our Christian vocation an easy or a worldly endeavor. The presence among us of religious is a preaching of the Gospel to the laity and the priesthood alike; in our country this preaching has been notably confirmed by the titanic work of teaching, hospital service, care of other people's children, mercy to the aged and pioneering in social work accomplished by Catholic Sisters and Brothers who, usually anonymous and too often unthanked, have borne a professional as well as religious witness of unparalleled heroism, holiness and achievement . . .