

PRIESTS' DOUBTS AND CERTAINTIES

Few practical aspects of the Church's renewal raise quite so many problems and occasion so much discussion as the consideration of the hierarchical priesthood today. This is but natural for, in a very real sense, the priests are so intimately connected with the life of the Church **"that when a priest falters, the whole Church trembles. When a priest is troubled in heart the tranquility of all God's People is threatened."**

Priesthood today is undergoing a crisis. Only an ostrich would deny the existence of this crisis which is known and deeply felt by most priests today. But this crisis is not of *infidelity*—a myth created by certain elements within the priesthood and in the press, but rather a crisis of *identity*. The priest asks himself just what his role is in the context of today's world.

His doubts may be traced to a sociological fact: times have changed. The priest is no longer likely to find himself the undisputed leader of his flock in all contexts; he is hardly likely to be the only member of the local Catholic community with a higher education. Above all, the community he is called upon to serve no longer feels that its very existence is threatened and thus becomes more open to the world instead of being shut in on itself as a ghetto.

Vatican II, paradoxically, accentuated this crisis of identity. The priests are being caught today in the squeeze between the developing laity and episcopacy, the former moving upward to discharge advisory and supplementary tasks, while the latter expand the beachhead of powers abandoned to them by the Pope.

This acute period of adjustment is made more complicated for the priest by the general climate of innovation and liberty let loose by the same Council. Priestly ministry today is beset with a wave of questions, of doubts, of denials, and of free thinking novelties. As a result the priest is forced to reflect on the true concept, primary function, proper position and reality of his priesthood. The unfortunate thing is that these doubts and these questions might end up in his becoming fearful of having badly chosen how to use his life, in his believing that his celibacy is no

longer a free fullness of immolation and love, but an unnatural burden. From this it is only a question of time when he will look at the world no longer with a sense of apostolic love, but of profane nostalgia.

This would be painfully unfortunate. For the very priesthood in question brings with it the very source of his strength and certainty.

First of all, there is the certainty of the real meaning of being a priest, one that is independent of time and place. The priesthood is not a simple ecclesiastical office; it is a sacrament an inner sanctification, bestowing particular and prodigious faculties which will enable the "vessel of clay" to act *in persona Christi*. It gives the priest a very special and indelible "character" which qualifies him before Christ as His living instrument, and which therefore, places him in a particular and inexhaustible relationship of love with Christ. The awareness of this relationship with Christ should be the primary source of his strength in this troubled world.

Secondly, the priest today should be aware of the fact that he was called from among the People of God to give a service without reservations, without conditions, to the Mystical Body of Christ, to the Church, to the People of God, to mankind. This awareness of giving himself as a gift made forever to charity will give him unsuspected strength to resist the temptation of seeking his own prestige and his own interest.

Finally, conscious of being chosen by Christ as His minister, and convinced of being destined to transmit to others "the mysteries of God", he will find another strength in the certainty of a compelling sanctity manifested through a vital effort to make an example of oneself to be truly an "alter Christus". Freed from the ties of an eroding egotism, the priest will not fear. Inspired by the grace of his vocation and ordination, he will humbly but boldly march to the fulfillment of his sacrifice in the imitation of Christ's sacrifice, toward perfection and the fullness of charity.

There is a profound mystery in the priesthood: the ineffable divine strength working through "vessels of clay." The priest cannot expect everyone to understand this mystery, for he himself must wrestle with it in his own soul. Doubts, fears, and confusions are necessary burdens of his being a "vessel of clay". But there is no reason to feel despondent, for the priesthood brings with it the certainty of being another Christ, the awareness of his deaconship in charity, and the inspiration of a persistent urge to sanctity in imitation of the Eternal Priest, Christ.