

# **PRIESTHOOD OF THE CHURCH**

## Priesthood of the Church

Jesus said: ‘I am the vine, you are the branches’ (John 15:5). His life, the life of the vine, is the Spirit of love that binds him in intimate communion with God, his Father. The branches share this Spirit and so share in Jesus’ communion of love. Paul can say: ‘It is Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:19). Disciples share in Jesus’ life according to the special grace each is offered, and according to the way in which each responds to this grace. The Church is the Body of Christ carrying out his mission in the world with all the creative power of God, through his Spirit poured out into the community. The divinely powerful and effective grace-gift from Christ is realised in different ways in each disciple and together we contribute to living his life and carrying on his mission.

‘There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone’ (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

The church is a priestly community.

We are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Peter 2:9).

‘Jesus made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father’ (Revelation 1:6).

According to the authors of the New Testament there is only one priest, one mediator: the exalted Christ. From the sanctuary of heaven, he speaks God’s word and draws everyone to himself that we might make of our lives, as he did of his, a self-offering to God. His priestly role is to mediate the sacred to the whole of creation, bringing about the will of God “on earth as in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Peter and John remind their readers that Christ has chosen to exercise his priestly mediation through them. Christ has chosen to share his Spirit with them, thus living in them. Sharing in his priestly mediation, they are to live their lives in union with him in the presence of God. They are to mediate God’s word, God’s will, and God’s blessing to the world. They are called to offer prayer and praise to God, to offer themselves as a spiritual sacrifice, and to draw others into communion with God. They are to show that God delights in those he has made. They are to mediate God’s forgiveness, to reconcile the world with God, to draw people to a life of faith in God and love for each other, and so, throughout all the epochs of time, to effect redemption for mankind.

The Church is an instrument of the priestly mediation of Jesus by:

- being a sanctuary of God’s presence in the world
- faithfully carrying out Jesus’ mission of revealing God to the world
- compassionately drawing the world into communion with God – sanctifying, consecrating the world.

Each member of the Church, through Baptism, is consecrated to share in the life and ministry of Jesus, the king, for each of us is to be an instrument of Jesus’ Spirit to bring about the reign of God in the world.

Each member of the Church, through Baptism, is consecrated to share in the life and ministry of Jesus the prophet-king, for each of us is to be an instrument of Jesus' Spirit to reveal God to the world by 'speaking and doing the truth in love'(Ephesians 4:15).

For each member of the Church the key consecration is that of sharing the life and ministry of Jesus the priest. Through Baptism we share in Jesus' own communion with his Father, and each of us in our own unique way is graced to be an instrument of Jesus' Spirit in bringing others into this divine communion. As with Jesus, so with us, the key to this sharing is a consecration of mind, heart, soul and body. We think of Paul's prayer (Philippians 2:1-11):

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Each baptised person is graced and called to share in Jesus' priestly life and ministry, through the gift of self in love, to God and to others.

The church is priestly because it is living the life of Christ the priest, through the community of believers and through each of its members. It is with him in the presence of God sharing his Spirit. It is mediating God's word and God's blessing to the world. It is offering prayer and offering itself with Christ to God and drawing the world into communion with God. It is a royal priesthood, sharing the priesthood of the king whose mission it is to bring about the reign of God in the world.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1) we read:

'The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament – a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people.'

God mediates his love to the world through those who share in Jesus' life. Each disciple shares in his or her own way in the priestly mediation of Jesus. We are not mediators independent of Jesus. We are not separate vines. It is Christ who mediates through us, as the vine bears fruit through its branches. The church, and each member of the church, shares in the one priesthood of Christ, and so in his consecration and in his mission. Each Christian is consecrated to Christ in a special communion, and so has a priestly ministry which graces him or her to mediate to others the grace of Christ.

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There are as many different ways of carrying out Christ's priestly mediation as there are disciples of Jesus in the Christian community. The essence of this ministry is the same as it was for Jesus. We are priests through the gift of ourselves to God and to others in obedience and love. From her communion in the life of God, a wife mediates God's love and God's word to her husband and children, and by welcoming their loving response she helps draw them into the communion of love which is Jesus' life. Likewise a husband for his wife and family. One can think of teachers, nurses, politicians and public servants. One can think of all the many simple ways in which we are a sacrament to each other of God's love. Jesus is carrying on his priestly mediation through and in us, sanctifying the world through the holy lives that we live, lives that he makes possible by sharing his Spirit with us.

This is the context in which we are to find the special way of exercising baptismal priesthood that is lived by the ordained, and it is to this that we now turn.