

**THE ORDAINED PRIEST AS A
SACRAMENT OF CHRIST,
THE MEDIATOR OF THE
COMMUNITY'S SELF-
OFFERING TO GOD**

Self-offering

Christ our high priest offered himself for us

The Epistle to the Hebrews, and indeed the whole of the New Testament, makes it clear that the sacrifice which Jesus offered to God was the sacrifice of himself. Whatever we may offer, if we do not offer ourselves, it is not an offering of love. There is no substitute for oneself when it comes to communion in love. In the words of Augustine: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.' It is we who long to be in communion with God, and it is for ourselves that God longs. Because Jesus offered himself perfectly, he entered into perfect communion with his Father. In this he showed us the way.

Through his own blood, he entered the sanctuary once for all,
having secured an eternal redemption.

– Hebrews 9:12

Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age,
according to the will of our God and Father.

– Galatians 1:4

For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many.

– Mark 10:45 = Matthew 20:28

God our saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of
the truth. For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and man-
kind, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all.

– 1 Timothy 2:4-5

The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all ...
Jesus Christ ... gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity,
and to purify for himself a people of his own
who are zealous for good deeds.

– Titus 2:11-14

The Son of God who loved me and delivered himself up for me.

– Galatians 2:20

Christ loved the church, and delivered himself up for her.

– Ephesians 5:25

I lay down my life for my sheep ... The Father loves me because I lay down my
life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my
own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this
charge I have received from my Father.

– John 10:15-18

No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

– John 15:13

This is my body which is for you.

– 1 Corinthians 12:24

The Ordained Priest as the sacrament of Christ
the mediator of the community's self-offering

So far we have been looking at the priest as a sacrament of Christ mediating God's word to the community. This word is an invitation for people to offer themselves in loving response and so enter more deeply into communion with God. Christ the priest is the mediator who receives our self-offering and draws us into his intimate love-communion with the Father in the Spirit. The priest is a sacrament also of Christ in this mediatory role which he carries out especially in the liturgy:

Priests are consecrated in order to preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful, as well as to celebrate divine worship, as true priests of the new covenant.

– LG, n.28

Christ calls priests to lead your holy people in love, to nourish them by your word, and to strengthen them through the sacraments.

– from the Preface of the Chrism Mass

Priests are 'Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God'(1Corinthians 4:1). In his encyclical on priestly celibacy, Pope Paul VI expresses well the demands which priestly ministry makes of those called to it:

Acting in the person of Christ, the priest unites himself most intimately with the offering, and places on the altar his entire life, which bears the marks of the holocaust. (n.29)

Paul of Tarsus writes:

Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

– Philippians 2:17

The priest is a sacrament of Christ the sanctifier who makes the community holy. He should, therefore, be one who is able to lead in prayer. He should also be one who is aware of the mystery of God and so of the continuing surprise and creative energy of the divine as incarnated in people. If John can say of those who want to see God: 'All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure'(1John 3:3), a special purity is asked of the one who is graced to be for the community a sacrament of Christ the mediator.

The priest: mediating Jesus' compassion

To be a sacrament of Christ the priest-mediator, the priest too must offer himself to God and to the community entrusted to his care:

The Lord Jesus the Son of God, a man sent by the Father to humankind, dwelt amongst us and willed to be like his brothers and sisters in all things save only sin (See Hebrews 2:17; 4:15). The apostles in their turn imitated him, and saint Paul, the teacher of the Gentiles, the man "set apart for the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1), declares that he became all things to all people that he might save all (see 1Corinthians 9:9-13).

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By their ordination, presbyters are set apart in some way in the midst of the people of God. But this is not in order that they should be separated from the people, but that they should be completely consecrated for the task for which God chooses them ... Their very ministry makes a special claim on them not to conform themselves to this world; still it requires at the same time that they should live among people in this world and that as good shepherds they should know their sheep, and should also seek to lead back those who do not belong to this fold so that they too may hear the voice of Christ and there may be one fold and one shepherd.

– PO, n.3

He will need to open his heart to the risen Christ and receive a share in Jesus' compassion. In the Gospels many scenes remind us of how deeply moved Jesus was by the suffering of others. We think of Jesus and the leper (Mark 1:40-45); of his response to the needy crowd (Mark 6:34); and of his feeling for the widow of Nain (Luke 7:15). Compassion features also in the parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20). When speaking of the kind of perfection which God enjoys and so the kind of perfection which is to be our goal, Luke speaks of it in terms of compassion, using a word which in the Greek versions of the Old Testament is used to translate the Hebrew word for compassion which is related to the word for the womb. God feels for us the way a mother feels for the child in her womb: 'Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:36; see Matthew 5:48).

Jesus' compassion was all the more acute because of his innocence. Sin dulls our perceptions and our sensitivity. Does a person who is always giving way to self-interest really understand selfishness? Does a person who frequently acts violently really have a feeling for the true nature of violence? Does a proud person appreciate the sinfulness of pride? Is it not true that in some ways it is only the very gentle person who is sensitised to the horror of violence? It is only the genuinely humble person who sees pride for what it is. In the same way it is the saint who knows the awful reality of sin.

Jesus' sinlessness meant that his sensitivity to evil was never dulled. His beautiful and faithful humanity meant that he never lost his sensitivity to the ways in which we hurt each other. Precisely because sin had never dulled his conscience, Jesus saw sin and its effects on people with lucid clarity and must have been pained as only the innocent are pained by what sin does to us. He responded to evil with the response that is possible only to a mature person who has retained the innocence of childhood, and so has not learnt to rationalise, to pretend, to cover up, to run away, to protect himself from the awful clarity that belongs only to the innocent. The New Testament exhorts Jesus' disciples to show his compassion. Let us listen to Paul.

Though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ we were gentle among you, like a *mother* feeding and cherishing her own children. Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

For, my brothers and sisters, you remember our labour and toil; we worked night

and day that we might not burden any of you while we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behaviour to you believers; for you know how, like a *father* with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

– 1Thessalonians 2:7-12

My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you.

– Galatians 4:19

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering in doing good, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and control of self.

– Galatians 5:22-23

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

– 1Corinthians 9:22

He said to me: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities; for when I am weak then I am strong.

– 2Corinthians 12:9-10

If there is any appeal in Christ, any encouragement of love, any communion in the Spirit, any affection and feelings of compassion, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being united in soul and being of one mind. Do nothing out of a sectarian spirit. Do not take pride in what is of no importance, but in humility consider others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look, not only to his or her own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.

– Philipians 2:1-5

Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freedman, but Christ is all and in all. Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, feelings of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and long suffering in doing good. Bear with one another, and if one has a complaint against another, forgive one another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you too must *forgive*. And over all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

– Colossians 3:11-15

The word ‘forgive’ in the above passage translates the Greek *charizomai*, a word built

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up from *charis*, and meaning to allow the grace of God to flow through us and over the offending person. Paul is asking the community in Colossae to keep giving themselves (their graced selves) to others even when they are being hurt (compare the English 'forgive' and 'par-don'). For forgiveness to be realised, the offending person must, of course, be willing to accept the proffered love, otherwise it remains hanging there unaccepted, and so the goal of reconciliation is not achieved. But we are asked by Christ to keep loving; that is to say we must want forgiveness to take place, and be ready to do all we can to achieve reconciliation.

The priest: mediating Jesus' humility

To be a sacrament of Christ the priest reaching out to the poor and the broken and inviting them to respond to Jesus' loving invitation to share his communion with God, the priest should share in Jesus' humility. Humility is the best seed-bed for compassion. In his Letter to the community at Philippi, Paul writes:

Have this mind among yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.
Though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider equality with God to be grounds for grasping
(or, perhaps 'for clinging to things for his own benefit')
but he poured himself out taking the form of a slave.
Being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human appearance,
He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

– Philippians 2:6-8

Anthony Bloom reminds us:

The word humility comes from 'humus' - fertile soil ... capable of making good use of the rubbish we tip into it, capable of transforming our refuse into wealth, of accepting every seed, giving it body, life, growth, to become fully itself without denaturing it ... Like the rich silent, creative earth, we should offer ourselves to the Other.

– Courage to pray, 11

Listen, too, to Teresa of Avila:

Humility is nothing else than walking in the truth.

– Interior Castle, VI,10

Jesus invites us to share this profound and attractive quality of his heart:

Come to me ... learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.

– Matthew 11:28-29

Paul repeats Jesus' exhortation:

In *humility* regard others as better than yourselves ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

– Philippians 2:3,5; see Acts 20:19

‘I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all *humility* and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

– Ephesians 4:1-3

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, *humility*, meekness, and patience.

– Colossians 3:12

The Church exhorts priests to exercise their ministry with hearts open to Jesus’ humility:

The divine task for the fulfilment of which they have been set apart by the Holy Spirit transcends all human strength and human wisdom; for ‘God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong’ (1Corinthians 1:27). Therefore the true minister of Christ is conscious of his own weakness and labours in humility. He tests what is well-pleasing to God and, bound as it were in the Spirit, he is guided in all things by the will of him who wishes all to be saved. He is able to discover and carry out that will in the course of his daily routine by humbly placing himself at the service of all those who are entrusted to his care by God in the office that has been committed to him and the variety of events that make up his life ... By this humility and by responsible and willing obedience, priests conform themselves to Christ. They reproduce the sentiments of Jesus Christ who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and became obedient unto death.

– PO n.15

We must beware of intellectual pride:

There is no poison in the world which is so fatal to perfection as having a too high opinion of oneself.

– Teresa, *Way*, 12)

A humble person does not dare deal with God independently, nor can he be completely satisfied without human counsel and direction. God is desirous of this, for to declare and strengthen truth on the basis of natural reason, he draws near to those who come together in order to know it.

– John of the Cross, *Ascent* II, 22,11

Even worse than intellectual pride is pride in what a person considers to be his or her ‘spiritual achievements’. Thanks to the wonderful gifts God has given us through our family, our education, the opportunities that have come our way, and especially the people who have loved us, our lives have been enriched in so many ways. God’s grace gives us a certain refinement and attraction and deepens our capacity to give and receive love. If you would care to recall some very special moments of grace you will remember that you received them with humility and gratitude. When the moment of grace passed its effects remained and we found ourselves immensely enriched. Father Marie-Eugène OCD, reminds us that it is then that temptation comes. He writes:

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Temptation comes, subtle and unawares. It comes almost necessarily, so tenacious is pride. The soul uses these spiritual riches to exalt self and to attract notice, to serve a need for affection or for domination, or simply to make its personal ideas triumph. One's personality, idolatrous of itself, is substituted for God; and what is received to be used as an instrument and a means, it uses to impose itself.

– *I want to see God*, page 399

All of this highlights the necessity of self knowledge. The fourteenth century Rhineland mystic, John Tauler, writes:

Above all we must enter our own nothingness. If we were to reach the very pinnacle of all perfection, then it would be even more important that we should sink into the deepest ground, to the very roots of humility. For as the height of a tree depends on the depth of its roots, in the same way the heights we attain in this life are only as great as our humility is deep.

– Sermon 48

However necessary self knowledge is, it does not necessarily lead to humility. If we focus only on ourselves we are just as likely to end in discouragement, or even despair. A purer and deeper humility comes from contemplation of God. In the light of God's gracious love, our least imperfection shows up. However, we experience joy at the truth of who we really are, for, with all our limitations and sins, we know that we are loved by God. Here we learn that of ourselves we are nothing, but we learn this while knowing with a knowledge born of faith that we are not 'of ourselves', but are truly held in existence and constantly graced by a God who loves us unconditionally. In her *Way of Perfection*, Teresa of Avila writes:

Humility, however deep it be, neither disquiets nor disturbs the soul; it is accompanied by peace, joy and tranquillity. Although we are distressed by our sinfulness, this distress is accompanied by an interior peace and joy of which we should not like to be deprived. Far from disturbing or depressing the soul, it enlarges it and makes it fit to serve God better.