Part 8: The Priesthood of the Faithful

The Second Vatican Council specifically directed priests to "instruct their people to offer to God, the Father, the divine victim, in the Sacrifice of the Mass, and to join to it the offerings of their own lives." This suggests that teaching the faithful about their participation in worship is a fundamental priestly duty.

Let's say we come back from Sunday Mass, and someone asks us, "Well, what did you do this morning?" What should we answer?

We have been aware for some time about the shortage of candidates for the ordained (ministerial, hierarchical) priesthood that comes with Holy Orders. With so much attention given to the shortage of candidates for the ministerial priesthood, we have neglected to properly highlight the critical role of the priesthood of the faithful, which is shared by all the baptized, both men *and women.*

These comprise the two kinds of priesthood, with the priesthood of the faithful differing *essentially,* not just in degree, from the ministerial priesthood.[1] In other words, one has to be ordained to the ministerial priesthood. That is the *essential* difference between the two priesthoods. The ordained minister has something those who make up the priesthood of the faithful do not have. He can do what the baptized cannot do. By the power he enjoys from ordination, he teaches and governs the priestly people. In addition, he is empowered to act "in the person of Christ."

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews explains that every ministerial priest is ordained to offer sacrifices on behalf of the whole people to God. When the Eucharist is celebrated, the ministerial priest is acting "in the person of Christ," who makes present in an unbloody way his sacrifice on Calvary. Christ is both the victim and the High Priest who offers this sacrifice on our behalf. By virtue of the royal priesthood of the faithful, the laity join with him in the offering of the Eucharist.

Both participate in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ. It would be a mistake to say only the ministerial priest is properly a priest and the baptized faithful are "similar" to priests. The *faithful are truly priests by Baptism*, but not in the same way as the ministerial priest. The Second Vatican Council states that each, in its proper way, shares in the one priesthood of Christ. Because both ordained and non-ordained share in the one Baptism, the ordained minister *also* has to offer the gift of his life, as do all the baptized.

Where does the concept that all the faithful are priests have its roots in the Old Testament? In the Book of Exodus, God spoke to the Israelites through Moses when they gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses met God at the top of Mt. Siani received the Ten Commandments. "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my possession among all peoples. For all the earth is mine, and you shall be to Me, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19: 5-6)

That is the origin of the expression royal priesthood. God is saying that all of Israel is a kingdom of priests, even though God, through Moses, assigned the tribe of Levi to serve and assist the priests. However, they could not enter the sanctuary or perform sacrifices. Those were explicitly reserved for the house of Aaron within that tribe. So the priesthood was limited to the descendants of Aaron, but God still said, "You are a kingdom of priests, meaning that every Israelite, in some sense, was a priest, not a

[1] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium, Chapter 10*

ministerial priest, but the common or royal priesthood. All the Israelites were called to offer their hearts to God; not all were called to offer the Paschal Lamb. That would be only the sons of Aaron.

God's pronouncement that Israel is to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is now applied to all Christians. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." (1 Peter 2.) In our context, all the baptized are called to offer their hearts to God while only the ordained priests, acting "in the person of Christ," are empowered to offer the Lamb of God at the Eucharist.

How are the faithful to exercise the priesthood of the faithful? The Second Vatican Council stressed the importance of the "full, conscious, and active participation" of the faithful in the liturgy. That participation is not merely external (Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, Readers, acolytes, song leaders, musicians, choirs, ushers, greeters, kneeling, standing, and giving voice to the responses, etc.).

It also involves the interior offering of oneself in union with Christ's offering of himself. "In every Mass, we've got Christ's body on the altar being offered to the Father, and we've got invisibly, our hearts and our spiritual offerings that we offer together with Christ's offering of himself." In Romans 12:1, Paul urges believers "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

That represents a transformation of the Old Testament sacrificial system, where instead of offering animal sacrifices, Christians are called to offer themselves. The key difference is that these are "living sacrifices" rather than dead ones. Paul takes "the language of Jewish sacrifice, the language of the Jewish temple, the language of animal sacrifice, but he's applying it to the individual Christian."

What constitutes spiritual sacrifices? First, the Second Vatican Council teaches that "all their works, prayers, apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation... if carried out in the Spirit... become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Second, the faithful can unite their sufferings with Christ's sacrifice. "We can offer these things up for others. When we do that, we are exercising the common priesthood of the faithful. Third, "The highest sacrifice is the sacrifice of obedience. We can offer God everything we have, but if we are not willing to be obedient, to obey Him, all of that comes to nothing. Finally, we can offer all those small inconveniences as spiritual sacrifices. All of these spiritual sacrifices gain their value through union with Christ's perfect sacrifice, which for us means taking up our crosses. In this way, our sacrifices are united with Christ's perfect sacrifice." By participating in these spiritual sacrifices in union with Christ, Christians fulfill their baptismal calling and participate in Christ's redemptive work in the world.

Now, in the Jewish Temple worship or ancient Israelite worship in the Tabernacle, there was no such thing as a living sacrifice, at least when it came to the animals. Sheep, bull, goat, or turtle dove would be put to death, and the dead animal would be offered to God as a sacrifice. For example, a lamb or goat would be burned in its entirety and offered up to God. When it came to Passover, the throat of the Lamb would be slit, and the blood would pour out, and then the Lamb would be placed on the altar as a sacrifice to God. The reason it was done this way was that it was a symbolic self-offering to God of one's own life. It was a way of offering oneself, through signs, symbols, and sacrifices, to God.

So, Paul is taking the language of Jewish sacrifice, the language of the Jewish temple, the language of animal sacrifice, but he's applying it to the individual Christian. "I appeal to you by the mercy of God, present your bodies, not the body of a goat or the body of a bull or the body of a sheep or the body of a dove, but present your bodies as a living sacrifice, not a dead sacrifice, not a bloody sacrifice, but a living sacrifice to God, holy and acceptable, which is your spiritual worship."

The word for holy is rooted in the Greek word hagios, meaning to set apart. An animal was deemed holy, when it was set apart for sacrifice in the temple. Only things set apart for God were offered to God. Paul is telling Christians that, in the New Covenant, they will take on the role that animal sacrifices had in the Old Covenant. Through Baptism, they are empowered to present their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, set apart for Him as their spiritual worship.

That is a new form of worship in which what is being offered to God is the living bodies of believers themselves. Paul tells them not to present the members of their body to sin, thus becoming instruments of wickedness, but to present themselves to God as men and women who have been brought from death to life and present their members (tongue, eyes, hands, etc.) to God as instruments of righteousness. For just as you once presented your members to impurity and greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members to righteousness for sanctification or holiness."

Here, Paul describes the entirety of human life and the moral decisions we make, proposing that we not view them as a list of rules. He's describing the moral battle between sin and righteousness, the moral choices we make between sin and righteousness as a liturgical act, as a sacrificial act. In other words, I'm either going to offer my body to sin, or I'm going to offer myself and my body to God. One of them leads to wickedness, and the other one leads to holiness. So, for Paul, the essence of holiness is setting one's body and oneself apart from sin, just as the animals in the Old Testament were set apart from the world to be offered to God.

Do you see how this Catholic understanding of worship is unique? When we look at the world without the eyes of faith, it may seem that this fallen world is all there is. According to what God has revealed, we are made for the world to come, which makes demands on us even now. It requires our lives to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Paul expects Christians to change the way they think about things. The closest synonym to this change of mind is a word that Jesus used in the gospels: *metanoia*. It's translated as repentance, but it means a change of mind.

The primary thing Paul wants the Romans to do is to change the way they think about sin and the way they think about holiness and to help them understand that the call of the Christian is to live a life of self-offering to God with every moral decision that we make, with every act that we engage in. When we begin to think differently about the world and ourselves, it leads us to change the way we act. This is very important. If you don't change the way people think, you will very likely not change the way they act. The intellect and the will, or the mind and the heart, to use biblical language, are both crucial to the transformation of a Christian into living the Christian life and becoming a living sacrifice acceptable to God.

At the dismissal rite at the conclusion of Mass, the priest will say, "The Mass is ended…" It is equally true to say that the Mass never ends because our minds are constantly being renewed in Christ and our lives changed to resemble his, becoming a living sacrifice acceptable to God.

For Marist laity and religious, we are to think, judge, feel and act like Mary in all things. And that includes thinking, judging, feeling, and acting like her toward her Son. That means our minds are constantly being renewed in Christ and our lives changed to resemble his, becoming a living sacrifice acceptable to God.

Let's say we come back from Sunday Mass, and someone asks us, "Well, what did you do this morning?" What should we answer?

"We offered Jesus to his Father, and we offered ourselves and our whole life and the whole world to the Father with him, and we also offered our sorrow for all the ways that maybe we haven't lived as fully the Christian life as Jesus is calling us, along with what will come, all our joys, difficulties, and struggles. All of that we offered with Jesus."

If you can't remember all of that, say something like, "I offered myself with Jesus to our Heavenly Father." All of the above is contained in those words.[2]

[2] I will stop here and forgo a further discussion about the different parts of the Eucharist Prayer, Holy Communion, and the Dismissal Rite and how each relates to the exercise of the priesthood of the faithful. For a more thorough treatment of this, I encourage you to go to.