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## THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE LAITY.

BY THE REV. E. HIRST, M.A., Vicar of St. Paul's, Stockport.

IN these days, the Church of England is making more and more use of the layman in her administration and organisation. Within the Parish, the Parochial Church Council represents a large and varied field of activity for the energetic and thoughtful layman. In the wider work of the Church, we see that clergy and laity sit together in the Ruri-Decanal Conference, sharing the work of the Deanery. They confer together in the Diocesan Conference and in the committees set up by that body. The House of Laity plays a vitally important part in the Church Assembly. Further, a recent measure gives the laity a voice in the choice of incumbent for their parish, and in cases where a disagreement arises, a Board of Assessors to settle the problem is constituted in each diocese, on which a proportion of laymen is elected. Although this giving of a larger place to the laity is of more recent development, it is no innovation, for the place of the laity was not lost sight of in the old days. In Church matters, Convocation voiced the opinions of the clergy, and Parliament the thought of the laity. This is still so, and it is well that the position should be maintained. The Enabling Act recognises the final voice of Parliament in many matters. If the position of the laity is so important, we ought to enquire into the subject I am venturing to bring before you, for in going back to the New Testament, its importance is plainly to be seen.

In the Gospels, our Blessed Lord is shown as inaugurating the Kingdom of God on earth. But what do we mean by the Kingdom of God? In definition, Professor Sanday quotes Dr. Hort, who said that it is "The world of invisible laws, by which God is ruling and blessing His creatures." He then goes on to say, "The 'laws' in question are a 'world,' inasmuch as they have a connection and coherence of their own; they form a system, a cosmos within the cosmos; they come direct from 'heaven,' or from God; and they are 'invisible' in their origin, though they may work their way to visibility" (*Outlines of the Life of Christ*, p. 79). Of this same matter, Canon Ryder says "The Kingdom of God is a reign rather than a realm. It is a state of things in which the will of God reigns supreme. It is an order of things which, from being inward and spiritual, tends to become outward and social, until at length it shall take possession of the entire domain in human life, and appear as a distinct epoch in history" (*Priesthood of the Laity*, p. 41). The Kingdom, then, is an inward reality which expresses itself by means of an outward and visible body, which is the Church, the company of the Baptised. "For in one Spirit were we all baptised into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit."—I Cor.

xii. 13. Our Prayer Book speaks of us as members of that body. In the prayer of Thanksgiving in the Communion Service we say that God assures us that "we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of His dear Son." The Bidding Prayer begins, "Ye shall pray for Christ's Holy Catholic Church, that is, for the whole congregation of Christian people dispersed throughout the world, and especially for the Church of England." We see that the Church is an inward reality with an outward expression. Inward, in so far as God inspires us from within, for we are to live "in the heavenly places" (Eph. ii. 6) where Christ is; and outward, in that we, together with those who with us seek to live in Christ, must express that inward reality to the world outside. Here is the sure foundation of our unity as believers in our Saviour. "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all" (Eph. iv. 4-6).

Whilst we are thinking of Christian unity in our Lord, let us look at one or two salient passages with a bearing on this subject. In St. Matthew xvi. 18 we have Christ's words to St. Peter. "Thou art Peter (*Πέτρος*), and upon this rock (*Πέτρα*) I will build my Church." Here, the rock (*Πέτρα*) is a man making confession of Christ as the Son of God. St. Peter's reply was evidently made on behalf of the disciples, for it was in answer to Christ's asking "Whom say ye that I am?" This foundation of belief in Christ as the Messiah is central in our Faith. It is the rock on which our Faith is built. All persons who truly make this confession are "living stones," as we have it in 1 Peter ii. 5. "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." If we turn to St. Matthew xviii. 18, we notice that it was to *all* the disciples who came to Him with the question as to who should be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven that He said, "What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." "What was spoken to Peter alone is now spoken to all the disciples, representing the Church" (A. Carr on Matthew xviii. 18. Camb. G.T.). St. John xx. 19-23 and St. Luke xxiv. 33, show equally that Christ gave His great commission to the whole body, and not the apostles alone. We have the same fact before us in Revelation i. 6 where the writer says that He "made us to be a Kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father."

Seeing that we are all one in Christ and all alike priests, how, then, comes the distinction between clergy and laity? What is a layman? We often think of a layman as one who is not a clergyman. Regarding the professions, we speak of a layman as one who is not professionally devoted to a particular pursuit. In the Christian Church "Layman" is not merely a negative term, but it is one of the highest dignity and importance. The word "laity," the collective term for all laymen, comes from the Greek *λαϊκός* which goes back to the word *λαός*—people. This word is important, in

that it is the word used in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) for the Hebrew "am" which is used to designate the Israelites as The Chosen people of God. We may take one instance out of many. "Thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the peoples that are upon the face of the earth" (Deut. vii. 6). That means a people consecrated to God to be holy as He is holy. St. Paul takes this thought and applies it to Christians as the chosen and special property of Christ. In Titus ii. 14 he says that Christ "gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good works." The house of Israel was the *λαός* of God—His chosen people, and the Christian Church, in which the purpose of God finds fulfilment, is the *λαός* of Christ. Christians are "heirs according to promise" (Gal. iii. 29). This fact of being Christ's own possession gives dignity to the lives of all Christians, even the humblest. Dr. Dawson Walker emphasises this point. "It had been the privilege and the obligation of Israel, just because they were a 'people for His own possession' to keep God's law and exhibit His righteousness to the world. On the Christian, too, as redeemed and cleansed, lies the obligation to pursue with eager enthusiasm and exhibit in life the 'good works,' which God afore prepared that we should walk in them" (*Commentary on Titus*, p. 266). Layman, then, in its Christian sense is not merely a negative term for one who is not a clergyman. It is a positive term. It indicates one who is a member of the chosen people of Christ, the ideal Israel of God. It is an inspired word. "It is a word of most positive spiritual privilege. It implies the possession of the glory of covenanted access to God and intimacy with God" (Ryder, *The Priesthood of the Laity*, p. 48). This was realised when The Holy Spirit was given to the whole company of believers, for St. Peter claimed it as the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy (Acts ii. 16-21; Joel ii. 28-32). The thought of the laity as the chosen people of Christ further emphasises that aspect of oneness in Christ which all experience in union with Him. As a result, we are bound to realise that the work of Christ is the work of the whole body to which Christ gave His great commission of privilege, duty and authority, and His great endowment of power to carry it out.

Having considered the unity and equality of believers in Christ, we must now proceed to examine the distinctions found within the Body, especially that part of the Church Catholic to which we belong. The office of priest in our Church urges the questions "What is a priest?" and "What is priesthood?" At the outset, let us notice one fact. The Comparative Study of Religion shows us that one characteristic of human nature is the tendency for man to let another person perform his religious devotions for him. We see this wherever we turn, and on every hand. At this point, the priest comes in. He is the mediator through whom man can approach God. We see this in Jewish and Pagan priesthoods alike,

but not so in the Christian Ministry. Let us take three words which express the same thought. They are "Kohen," in Hebrew, "ἱερεὺς," in Greek, and "sacerdos," in Latin. These names denote one whose stated business it is to perform certain Godward acts for the individual or for the community, be they ritual or sacrificial. These priestly acts are regarded as accepted by God on behalf of the individual or the community. When we turn to the New Testament, we notice that not once is the name ἱερεὺς used to denote the Christian Minister. Christ alone is spoken of in such terms, and then as a "μέγας ἱερεὺς"—"a great priest over the house of God" (Heb. x. 21, R.V.). At other times, His office is shown as that of High Priest. Further, this office is said to be "undelimited" and "intransmissible" (Heb. vii. 24, R.V. margin) (see Griffith Thomas, *Principles of Theology*, p. 316). When this term ἱερεὺς is used of members of the Christian Church, it is used in the plural. "He made us to be a Kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father" (Rev. i. 6). In harmony with this we have the term "priesthood" used collectively, as in 1 Peter ii. 5-9. "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (cf. Rev. v. 9, i. 6, xx. 6). It is as Dr. Griffith Thomas wrote, "The truth, therefore, is that Christianity *is*, not *has*, a priesthood" (*The Principles of Theology*, p. 316). Priestly functions in the offering of propitiatory sacrifices find no place in the scheme of the Christian Ministry. In Himself, Christ has summed up all priesthood, vicarious and propitiatory sacrifice, in His sacrifice offered once for all. The Epistle to the Hebrews shows the inadequacy of the Old Testament priesthood in mediation and atoning rites, and builds upon the High Priesthood of Christ who led His people to God and took them into spiritual nearness to the Father. We see at once by this argument that there is no room for a special sacrificing priesthood in the Christian Church.

What, then, is the meaning of our word "priest"? It is a shortened form of the Greek term πρεσβύτερος, our word presbyter. The Papyri shows us that this term was used to designate a number of offices other than that of "Elder," or even "an old man," its original meaning. In one place it is used for a civil office, in another for one holding an office like that of a mayor. We again find it used for heathen priest and Christian Minister alike. The English word "priest" has to do duty for both ἱερεὺς—sacrificing priest, and πρεσβύτερος—elder. Sacerdotal ideas and sacrificial duties as confined to the office of priest are absent from the Christian use of πρεσβύτερος. This is quite plain in our Prayer Book where the "priest" who pronounces the absolution is referred to in the form of absolution in the Daily Office as "minister." In other offices, "priest," "curate"—(the person having "cure of souls") and "minister" are used interchangeably as in the Marriage Service and in the Administration of The Lord's Supper. Priest, then, is the title used to denote the minister who presides over and instructs the Christian Congregation. It is not without importance that Dean

Stanley points out that Christian worship developed not on the lines of Jewish or pagan temples, but on those of the Synagogue, where an elder presided. Equally important, as he points out, is the fact that Christian places of worship developed on the lines of the Roman Basilica, where public business was transacted and justice administered, and not after the type of a heathen temple where the priest ministered in a place withdrawn or hidden from the people, nor yet after the type of the Temple in Jerusalem where separate places were allotted to Gentiles, Jews, Levites and Priests. Here, too, was the Holy Place for priests and the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest entered, and that but once a year. In the Basilica, the minister sat amidst the people like the Prætor of old, and from that place could "rebuke, exhort, or command with an authority not less convincing because it was moral and not legal" (*Christian Institution*, p. 228). The priestly office belongs to the whole company. In our Prayer Book we express it as such in the "Amen" at the close of the Absolutions, and in the Prayer of Consecration in the Holy Communion. We follow the line of the Ancient Liturgies which "so often assert that the laity offer the Christian sacrifice of prayer and praise equally with the officiating minister, though he is or may be the instrument by which they offer it; for it would ordinarily be inconvenient for all to speak at once in Christian worship. This fact is the rationale of the 'Amen' or 'so be it,' by which the laity audibly 'seal' the prayers and praises" (A. J. McClean, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*). As a consequence, in public worship and especially in the Holy Communion "the Congregation is not composed of spectators but of participants in the Office" (Ryder, p. 181). The Christian Ministry, then, must never be considered as an abstraction. It is always a part of, and not apart from, the Church. Of this it has been well said, "While there is a general service of the entire Church there is also a specific ministry for the purpose of order and progress, but in all this the minister is a medium, not a mediator; a mouth-piece, not a substitute; a leader, not a director" (Griffith Thomas, p. 321).

Seeing that the Church is a priesthood, a priestly body, how is this expressed in sacrifice? If by that question we mean vicarious sacrifice, the answer must be, certainly not in the Holy Communion. This is a sacrament of life. It is neither a new nor even a repeated vicarious death (Heb. x. 10). Christ died "once for all," and in the Eucharist He is not sacrificed afresh, for the offering there made is that of "a living Sacrifice" (Rom. xii. 1). The offerer brings himself as an oblation—"a living sacrifice" to God. Professor Burkitt emphasised this in his address to the Conference of Modern Churchmen (1932). Speaking on "The Reformation and Divine Worship," and instancing Cranmer's views, he said, "The only proper Christian Sacrifice to be offered to God was indeed the Body of Christ, but the Christians were Christ's Body: the Christian offering was to be not transformed bread and wine but living Christians." In the Holy Communion there is another sacrifice

of life, that of "praise and thanksgiving" (first alternative prayer of Thanksgiving) for life in Christ, because the Christian has died to sin and risen to righteousness. This offering of a life devoted to God is evidently in St. Paul's mind when he declared a longing to bring the Gentiles offering themselves to Christ as a result of his ministry of the Word of the Gospel. "I write the more boldly unto you in some measure, as putting you again in remembrance, because of the grace that was given me of God, that I should be a minister of Christ Jesus unto the Gentiles, ministering the Gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be made acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost" (Rom. xv. 15, 16). A living sacrifice indeed! This offering of a living sacrifice of ourselves as members of Christ's mystical body is the priestly act of the priestly people. "This is the sacrificial side of the Eucharist in the Anglican Liturgy. . . . This is a priestly act of the whole body under Christ, the High Priest of our profession, led by the Church's appointed representatives in the official priesthood" (A. C. A. Hall, *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 9, p. 253). These priestly acts are based on Christ's finished work for mankind, for in Him we are "an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may shew forth the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light: which in time past were no people, but now are the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter ii. 9, 10).

Does this render a ministry unnecessary or diminish anything from its importance? No, certainly not! In the early Church, there were different forms of ministries, all given by the same Spirit. May we take one instance of their enumeration? "He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph. iv. 11, 12). "Yet there is a clear distinction between special ministries within the Church and the general service of the whole Church; the differences in the New Testament are of gifts and functions, not of office and order" (Griffith Thomas, *Principles of Theology*, p. 314). Men were set apart by the whole body to exercise a ministry for the whole body, as were the Seven, often called Deacons (Acts vi. 1-6). Locally, Elders were appointed and set apart to preside over the missionary Churches founded by St. Paul (Acts xiv. 23). Timothy was publicly appointed to his divine task, "with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery" (1 Tim. iv. 14). Their commission was given to these ministers, from the Church, through the existing ministry. In these appointments we see that "Spiritual qualification comes first and ecclesiastical commission follows" (*Principles of Theology*, p. 315). Further, a definite ministry is necessary for the preservation of law and order, and so in process of time the ministry of Bishop, Priest and Deacon, as we know it, came into being, and the Episcopal system as we have it in our loved Church of England became the rule, as it was found

to be the best method of government and administration. Our ministry has great dignity and responsibility. Dignity, in its representative character, and responsibility, in expressing the corporate worship and acts of the whole Body. Anyone who reads our Ordination service will see the weightiness of the charge to the minister. He is to "seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for His children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ for ever." His task is largely twofold, that of evangelisation and edification, the building up of the faithful, in Christ. But besides the ministry of the Word, there is that of the Sacraments. In the priestly acts of the people, the minister is the representative of the people. His acts are the acts of the people, expressed by him on their behalf. Here again we see the dignity of the calling, and the responsibility involved.

How shall we sum up all this? We see the great love of God in His calling of us to Himself through the blood of Christ. We are not left outside the Sanctuary. The Veil of the Temple has been rent, and with boldness we can enter into the nearest presence of our loving Father through Christ who has opened the way. What a wonderful calling is ours to live as the Children of God! We are united to Him in our Elder Brother the High Priest, the Son of God (Eph. v. 26; Titus iii. 5; Heb. x. 22). Further, we realise our own priesthood in Christ begun in our Baptism, and fulfilled by the offering of ourselves as living, reasonable, and spiritual sacrifices to God. Further, "the Church must be animated by the thought that she is elect not for her own sake, but for the world, that her life must be a life of priesthood in the name of the heavenly Father for the spreading of that kingdom which, bringing men to Christ, brings them into that ideal sphere of the holy, the beautiful, and the loving which as yet has only consummated in the Great High Priest in heaven" (Ryder, pp. 242-3).

We can rejoice in our unity in Christ, and in the unity of our calling to service for Him in the salvation of mankind. Never let us forget our priesthood, and that our commission is to represent our Lord to the world. We must give ourselves to Him as His instruments, that through us He may act in the completion of that task of making known to the world the fact of His redemption of mankind.