

The Sacerdotal Idea.

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IN the history of religion, there are few ideas which are found to recur more constantly than that of "priesthood." Yet not only are its outward forms many and diverse, but there are also wide divergencies of opinion, even within the Christian Church, as to the essential functions of a "priesthood," or even as to the very meaning of the word "priest." It is therefore a matter of some importance, in order to avoid mutual misunderstanding in present-day controversies, that we should, as far as possible, be clear in our own minds with regard to the significance of "the sacerdotal idea."

But a satisfactory definition of "priesthood" is not easy to find; for we need one that will cover the various types of priests, good as well as bad, pagan as well as Christian—one, moreover, which will take us behind the accidental functions of certain priesthoods (such as the offering of sacrifice, the hearing of confessions, etc.) to the root-idea which underlies all priestly functions.

Now, there is one root-idea which seems to remain constant in every form of priesthood, and it is this: the "priest" is *one who stands in a specially privileged relationship to God*. This idea may be either degraded into a crude superstition, or uplifted into a highly spiritual conception. If the privilege is made to rest upon trivial or non-moral grounds, the resultant idea of priesthood is superstitious; but where the conditions of the privilege are moral and spiritual, we find a noble ideal of priesthood, consisting essentially in "nearness to God."¹

It is clear that from this root-idea of priesthood there would arise naturally the familiar sacerdotal functions, such as the offering of sacrifice, or the revealing of the Divine will. They are just the kind of functions which would of necessity be

¹ Cf. Dimock, "Christian Doctrine of Sacerdotium," Longmans, 1910, p. 7.

assigned to men who are believed to stand in a specially privileged relationship to God.

The origin of the sacerdotal idea is a problem on which experts still continue to differ. In primitive religions the priesthood generally appears to be closely linked either with tribal kingship or with the practice of sorcery and magic ; the evidence, however, is scanty. But we can see that when once the "sacerdotal idea" had taken root, its growth would be fostered by certain instinctive tendencies of the human mind. For instance, there is in most men—especially when young—a real delight in rules or customs which have no rational explanation. The primitive "taboo" persists (under other names) even in advanced civilization. Why it should be so is hard to say ; perhaps because it makes life like a kind of great game, in which it is "great fun" to keep to the rules. But be that as it may, the fact is beyond question that the strict observance of a code of rules, or fervent enthusiasm for a party, or loyal devotion to those in authority, are often *most* intense when they are *least* reasonable. Now it is easy to see that this tendency of the human mind would steadily develop the "sacerdotal idea" ; for when once the belief had taken root that certain men stand in a privileged relationship to God, their class-privilege would be sure to be more and more emphasized, and the priestly "caste" more strictly guarded against intruders—just because it is the unreasoning and unreasonable instinct of human nature so to do.

It is well to lay stress upon this, because it helps to explain why the history of every priesthood seems to be a history of ever-growing arrogance and narrow exclusiveness, till the claims become so preposterous that they are broken by a revolution.

Again, another tendency of human nature which has fostered the sacerdotal idea is the love of shifting religious responsibility on to other people's shoulders. A religion with a strict priesthood is often a very *comfortable* religion for the laity ; and the laity—of a certain type—favour it accordingly.

These instinctive tendencies of human nature have always been amongst the most potent factors in history ; they have

helped in the past to fashion the sacerdotal idea ; they are helping to fashion it in our own day.

But turning now from these *a priori* speculations concerning the origin of the sacerdotal idea to the actual forms in which priesthood has appeared, we find in pre-Christian times an immense variety of types. Egypt, Syria, Greece, Rome—each had its own form of priesthood ; sometimes a hereditary class, at other times composed of more or less isolated individuals ; sometimes a great political force, at other times a negligible factor in the secular policy of the nation ; sometimes a power for good, often the worst enemy of true religion.

Broadly, the history of primitive priesthoods seems generally to pass through certain well-defined stages :

(1) A period when there is *no organized priesthood*, but when sacerdotal functions are performed normally by the heads of tribes, or spasmodically by individuals who are little more than magicians or soothsayers ;

(2) *An organized priesthood*, becoming more and more “fenced off” from the nation at large by caste-privileges and regulations, often of no moral value ;

(3) The strict privileges of the old organized priesthood invaded by *an irregular ministry*, often not claiming the *title* of “priests,” but practically exercising priestly functions.

These stages may roughly be illustrated from the Old Testament. Leaving aside details which depend upon complex questions of criticism, we can trace three periods in the history of priesthood in the Old Testament : (1) The early period, when there are no signs of a regular class-priesthood, but the patriarchs offer sacrifice themselves ; (2) the period of the early monarchy, when the priesthood (*e.g.*, of Eli) is closely linked with sooth-saying and the consulting of oracles ; (3) the fully-developed Levitical priesthood ; (4) the various rivals of the priesthood, who gave religious teaching apart from, sometimes in opposition to, the regular priesthood. Such were some of the prophets (*e.g.*, Micah, Amos) ; and at a later period, the Pharisees, who in many ways exercised a more “priestly” influence over the

Jewish populace in our Lord's day than did the nominally sacerdotal Sadducees.

The general impression that we gain from the Old Testament is that at different stages of history different forms and types of priesthood were best in accord with God's Will. No one form, no one method of succession, is appointed to last throughout all the ages. Often, indeed, the opponents of the official priesthood were "nearer to God" than the lawful inheritors of the priestly office. And the synagogue-worship dispensed with the need of any priesthood at all.

In almost every priesthood, we find two main types of sacerdotal functions—functions which naturally belong to one who stands in a specially privileged relation to God. The one type of function is directed God-ward, the other man-ward.

The former type may be called *sacrificial*; it includes all acts by which the priest, in virtue of his privileged position, speaks *to God for man*, and conveys to God man's gifts. Of such acts, the offering of sacrifice is the chief.

The second type of priestly function may, perhaps, best be called *sacramental*, by which term we denote the acts by which the priest, in virtue of his privileged position, speaks *from God to man*, and conveys to man God's grace. Under this heading we place such acts as absolution, consecration, and (in a sense) preaching.

Let us first consider the sacrificial functions of the priest. The origin of sacrifice need not here detain us. Many scholars (*e.g.*, W. R. Smith) hold that it sprang from the primitive tribal meal, in which the god and his worshippers were regarded as joint-partakers, part being set aside as food for the god. But in any case, by the time that sacrifice had come to be specially associated with a priesthood, the dominant idea of sacrifice was that of a *gift offered to God*—the same meaning which has now become normally attached to the word "sacrifice," and the only meaning which concerns our present purpose.

Now, it is important to realize the wide difference which separates various types of sacrifice one from another.

First, let us note the difference between *propitiatory* and *non-propitiatory* sacrifices. These are separated by a fundamental difference of *motive*. The motive of the propitiatory sacrifice is to win God's favour or avert His displeasure; in other words, it is more or less a self-centred motive, though not necessarily, selfish, in the *bad* sense—*i.e.*, "that which would interfere with the happiness of others." In the Old Testament the burnt-offering, the sin-offering, etc., belonged to the type of propitiatory sacrifices; those who offered hoped by their means to *gain* something from God for themselves.

But the *non-propitiatory* sacrifice springs from a quite different motive. It is like the gift which a child offers to its father out of pure gratitude and gladness—not with any view to gaining a reward thereby, but simply to express devotion and affection. The peace-offering of the Old Testament belonged to this type of sacrifice; it was not designed to win God's favour, but to show gratitude towards Him.

It is clear that the difference between a propitiatory sacrifice and a non-propitiatory thank-offering, even though they may at times be similar in outward form, is essential and fundamental.

Another important distinction is between *spiritual* and *material* sacrifices. The line of cleavage between these two is not so clear-cut as in the last case, for the two types "shade off" the one into the other; but none the less it is a real and important distinction, relating in this case to the nature of the thing offered. In the one type, the thing offered is something *material*, and *external* to the offerer—his jewel, his animal, even his child; in the other type, it is something *spiritual* and *internal*—his heart and will and life; not part of his property, but part of himself.

In the history of religion there are few more important chapters than those which tell of the struggle between these two ideals of sacrifice, and of the growing supremacy of the spiritual ideal. In the Old Testament, for instance, the controversy between priest and prophet largely hangs upon the

contrast between the *ceremonial* and the *spiritual* types of sacrifice. We can readily recall the classic passage of Micah, where the ideal of a material, external sacrifice is first pushed to its extreme limit—viz., the sacrifice of the first-born son, the most precious and costliest of all gifts—and then deliberately set aside in favour of the ideal of spiritual sacrifice :

“Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Mic. vi. 6-8).

A similar strife between the two ideals is visible in most religions; and normally we find the official priesthood laying stress upon the value of *material* sacrifices, and accusing their opponents of withholding from God the honour due unto Him; while the latter reply that they are not withholding sacrifice, but rather offering a more acceptable type of sacrifice: “The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.”

It is important to realize the differences between these various types of sacrifice, so that we may remember, when we speak of a “sacrificing priesthood,” that the term may be used to connote widely different ideas. And many a weary controversy would have been avoided if only care had been taken to explain which idea of sacrifice was in the mind of the disputant.

We may now pass on to the “sacramental” functions of the priest. The offering of sacrifice, though undoubtedly the most important and characteristic function of a priesthood, is yet only one aspect of its work. For a man who stands in a privileged relation to God is naturally regarded as possessing special authority to reveal the will of God to his fellow-men. So in

most priesthoods we find such functions as the pronouncing of oracular messages, absolutions, formulas of consecration, and even preaching; in all of which acts the priest is regarded as God's mouthpiece, speaking from God to man, conveying to man God's message and God's grace.

Here, again, we find these "sacramental" functions falling roughly into two classes. In the one class, the grace is held to be conveyed by means of an action which of itself possesses no moral value—as when the recitation of a formula or the performance of a gesture is held to be essential to a "valid" sacrament. In the other class, grace is supposed to be conveyed primarily by the contact of spirit with spirit, though a material medium of communication is normally necessary under the conditions of our present life. Familiar instances of the former class of sacramental acts are found in popular ideas of absolution or the consecration of material things, where the word spoken or the act performed effects the desired result apart from the personality of the agent. Among the second class we may place preaching and prophesying, and even (in a broad sense) the circulation of religious literature; for in all of these, though a material means of communication is needed (*e.g.*, the voice, the printed page), the *real channel* by which the Divine message and grace is transmitted to men is the *personality* of the priest or prophet, who, because he is in touch with God, is able to receive God's message and pass it on to others.

It is to be noted that there is no real antagonism between the priestly and prophetic offices. The office of the prophet is to *declare God's will to man*, and the sacramental function of the priesthood, in its highest and most spiritual form, is surely none other.

But as with sacrifice, so with sacrament, we find the influence of the official priesthood generally on the side of the material conception, while their opponents support the more spiritual ideal. For instance, in the writings of the sixteenth-century Reformers in Europe, we meet with constant protests against the consecration or blessing of material objects, and suggestions

that such prayers should be directed only with a view to the blessing of the worshippers, as spiritual beings.

We have outlined above the main features of the sacerdotal idea, and the various functions of the priesthood. It remains to see how far the sacerdotal idea is applicable to the Person and Work of our Lord, and to ourselves as Christians.

The sacerdotal idea, as we have defined it above, is clearly applicable in a unique manner to the Person and Work of our Lord, as set forth in the Catholic Faith. If our Lord be "very God of very God," He certainly holds a uniquely privileged relationship to God; while through the Incarnation He is no less closely related to the human race. And because He is "as human as ourselves, and as Divine as God Almighty," He is able perfectly to perform both the sacrificial and the sacramental functions of the true priest. His Sacrifice of Himself belongs to the *propitiatory* type of sacrifice; but it is altogether free from what may be described as the "selfish" element in propitiatory sacrifice, because the benefits obtained thereby are not bestowed upon the offerer Himself, but upon others, for whose sake He died. And the Sacrifice of Calvary clearly belongs to the *spiritual*, rather than to the material type of sacrifice. It was not the Death, viewed as a material offering, but the Death as the climax and crown of the self-sacrifice of the whole Life, which possesses the unique propitiatory value.

Our Lord is also the perfect example of a priest in His "sacramental" functions. By Him grace is conveyed from God to man, through the healing touch, the spoken word, or the written message inspired by His Spirit. And in His "sacramental" actions the personality of both giver and receiver are indispensable — on the one hand, the Divine will to give, and, on the the other hand, the human faith to receive. The *personal* touch of Christ must normally be met by the *personal* response of the believer, if the sacramental act is to be effectual. But whilst the necessity of the personal element seems clear, there still remains the question whether the grace thus passing

from God to man needs certain fixed material channels as the medium of communication between the Divine and the human personalities. This is, in effect, the view maintained by most of those who teach that a certain formula of words, or a certain ceremonial action, is so essential for a "valid" sacrament, that if these are omitted, the conveyance of grace is no longer assured.

Others maintain that whatever might be said on *a priori* grounds for this theory, it is disproved by the appeal to Christian experience; for oftentimes those who have been most uncompromising in their rejection of the outward forms of sacraments—*e.g.*, the Quakers—have shown forth in their lives the most abundant signs of grace.

The issues at stake between those who hold and those who reject this "sacramental theory" of the conveyance of grace from our Lord to His followers are far-reaching indeed; for the controversy between Catholic and Protestant concerning sacraments and the priests who minister them points to a deep cleavage between two different conceptions of the way in which God normally deals with men. And that is a grave matter on which to differ.

It remains for us to think of the sacerdotal idea as applied to the Church. We have seen that the sacerdotal idea, at its best, is fully applicable to the Person and Work of our Lord. How far is it applicable also to His followers?

A study of the New Testament shows that sacerdotal and sacrificial terms are applied in more than one passage to the Christian *community*—*e.g.* :

1. "Ye are an elect race, a royal *priesthood* (*ἱεράτευμα*) a holy nation" (1 Pet. ii. 9).
2. "He (Christ) made us to be a kingdom, to be *priests* (*ἱερείς*) unto His God and Father" (Rev. i. 6; *cf.* Rev. v. 10, xx. 6).
3. "Through Him (Christ) let us offer up a *sacrifice* (*θυσία*) of praise to God continually—that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to His name. But to do good and to distribute forget not; for with such *sacrifices* God is well pleased" (Heb. xiii. 15).

4. The contribution sent by the Philippians to St. Paul is described by him as "an odour of sweet smell (*ὄσμη εὐωδίας*), a *sacrifice* (*θυσία*) acceptable, well-pleasing to God" (Phil. iv. 18).

5. St. Paul describes himself as "a minister (*λειτουργός*) of Christ Jesus unto the Gentiles, *offering in sacrifice* (*ιερουργῶν*) the Gospel of God, that the offering up (*προσφορά*) of the Gentiles might be made acceptable."

6. "Present your bodies a living *sacrifice*" (*θυσία*) (Rom. xv. 16, xii. 1).

It will be noticed that while in these passages sacrificial language is applied without hesitation to the Christian life and its duties, they have reference only to certain types of sacrifice: (1) praise; (2) almsgiving; (3) the personal life of the sacrificer; (4) the lives of those converted through his ministry. It will also be noticed that these are all *thank-offerings*, not *propitiatory* sacrifices; and all *spiritual*, rather than *material*. They are all thank-offerings, because the thought of a propitiatory sacrifice has been excluded for the Christian, in the light of the Atonement. "He that spared not His only Son, but delivered Him up for us all, shall He not also with Him freely give us all things?" The Christian sacrifices are like children's gifts to a father, designed to please, not to appease; and to describe such gifts as "propitiatory" would be a misuse of terms. And further, the Christian sacrifices are essentially *spiritual*. Songs of praise are pleasing to God, not in themselves, but as signs of thankfulness; almsgiving is an acceptable sacrifice because it is the fruit of brotherly love; personal consecration is unquestionably a spiritual sacrifice.

We conclude, then, that we may apply sacrificial terms to the Christian Church and her members, provided that the sacrifices are defined as non-propitiatory thank-offerings, spiritual and not material in their character.

With regard to the "sacramental" functions of the priesthood, it is surely true that *every* Christian who influences his brother for good, or who tells to others the good news of salvation, is speaking from God to man, and so is performing true priestly

functions of this type. The "Missionary Commission" to evangelize the world definitely imposes such functions upon all Christ's followers. Every Christian sermon, every Christian book, has its priestly character, for it is (or ought to be) a message from God to man through the lips or the pen of one who by his conversion is specially privileged thus to speak. No true Christian lives to himself alone; and so, in one sense, he *does* by his influence mediate between God and his fellow-men, although not in such a way as to annul the individual responsibility of others. Here, again, we need to be on our guard against a double danger: on the one hand, we may drift into a crude conception of vicarious priesthood, which easily leads to the very worst type of sacerdotalism; on the other hand, we may be tempted to forget, or even to deny, the genuinely priestly character of all true Christian influence. The true course is, not to indulge in sweeping denials, but to see that our ideal of the Christian priesthood is built upon the broad and spiritual lines which we find set forth in the New Testament.

If, then, there is a Christian priesthood, to whom does it belong? Few would contend that it belongs in any *exclusive* sense to the ordained ministry. "The priesthood of the ministry is nothing distinct in kind from the priesthood of the Church. The ordained priests are priestly only because it is the Church's prerogative to be priestly."¹

Certainly the New Testament writers never attribute sacerdotal functions to the ministry as a class, nor do they even suggest that priesthood belongs to the Christian minister (as such) in any degree more than to the Christian layman. It is true that anyone who is engaged in pastoral and evangelistic work has peculiar opportunities of influencing others, and so of exercising what we have called the sacramental functions of the Christian priest. St. Paul was (in this sense) a priest of no ordinary kind, and he uses sacerdotal language to describe his evangelistic labours (Rom. xv. 16). But pastoral work and mission-preaching are not (at least under the Anglican system)

¹ R. C. Moberly, "Ministerial Priesthood," 1910 edition, p. 258.

confined exclusively to the ordained ministry. The latter may indeed be regarded as specially priestly in virtue of their pastoral labours; but it is another matter to regard them as specially priestly simply because of their admission to a certain Order in the ministry.¹

It is sometimes said that the clergy are in a special sense priests because they are the representatives or delegates of the whole Church. Now here it is well to ask whether it is meant that the clergy are the Church's delegates before *man*, or before *God*? In the former sense, there is clearly a measure of truth in the statement. As the leaders of public worship, the clergy do ceremonially represent the whole Church before the world; and therefore in the clergy the priestliness of the Church ought to be specially recognizable. Yet even here it is needful to guard against the tendency which would make public worship and religious ordinances the chief sphere of the Church's priestly activities. If the ordained minister is priestly because he is the Church's representative before the world in the rites and ceremonies of the sanctuary, so also is the Christian layman priestly, because he is the Church's representative in his business or profession.

But are the clergy representatives or delegates of the Church *before God*? It seems difficult to admit this without infringing in a dangerous manner upon the responsibility of the individual before God. Christian priesthood, if interpreted in the wide and spiritual manner which we have advocated above, is surely too sacred, too intimately personal a privilege and responsibility, to be *delegated* to any other soul. No one but ourselves can offer to God the thank-offerings which we owe to Him; no one can discharge on our behalf the privilege, which He has given to us, of speaking (by word or example) in His name to others.

"O, none may reach by hired speech
Of neighbour, priest, or kin,
Through borrowed deed to God's good meed,
Which lies so fair within."

¹ For the significance of the use of the word "priest" in the Anglican Prayer-Book to denote an Order in the Christian Ministry, see Dimock, "Christian Doctrine of Sacerdotium," pp. 77-92.

It is true that we can sometimes so identify ourselves with another's life and outlook, that we may (in a sense) suffer and rejoice with him. This is a privilege of all (whether clergy or laity) who are "members of Christ" and "members one of another"; and if *this* be styled a "representative" or "vicarious" priesthood, we need not demur to the terms. But the terms need to be carefully guarded, for they readily lend themselves to the idea that the ordained ministry can relieve the laity of some of their responsibility in religious matters, or that a layman needs the good offices of a priest to mediate between himself and the Most High. It is absolutely vital to the first principles of Christianity to maintain the direct personal responsibility of each Christian to God, and the privilege of every believer to enjoy free access to the Father through Christ—a freedom of access which no human priest can grant, and no human priest can withhold. If we allow this responsibility and this privilege to be obscured, we are lowering the Christian ideal of "our Father in heaven."

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We in the English Church are confronted at the present time with a marked revival of the sacerdotal idea in our midst. It is being applied mainly—often exclusively—to the two higher Orders of the Christian ministry. We are told that they, and they only, have received authority to offer before God the Sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist. This sacrifice (it is maintained) is not merely a spiritual sacrifice of the heart, nor purely a thank-offering; but it has a propitiatory value, ultimately derived, no doubt, from the Cross, but inherent in the ceremonial presentation of duly consecrated bread and wine upon an altar. It is further maintained that the Christian ministry has received an exclusive power to convey to the laity grace through the sacraments or through priestly absolution, and to withhold such grace by refusing to perform these functions; for the sacrament or absolution is "invalid" unless the rites have been duly performed and the formulæ correctly recited by a "priest," whose ordination can be shown to be "valid" by similar external proofs.

May we not rightly regard a "sacerdotalism" of this kind as utterly opposed to the teaching of the New Testament, and as a dangerous reaction from higher and more spiritual ideals towards the crude conceptions of magic and superstition? If so, it is our duty to oppose it without fear or hesitation. But the true remedy for this one-sided sacerdotalism is not to shrink from all use of sacerdotal phraseology, but rather to discriminate between true and false conceptions of sacrifice and sacrament, and to uphold the New Testament doctrine of the Christian priesthood—a priesthood in which every child of God may claim the fullest privileges by faith in Christ, and in which each priest offers himself as a living sacrifice, and uses his whole life's work and influence as a sacrament of the grace of God.



Studies in Texts :

SUGGESTIONS FOR SERMONS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE.

BY THE REV. HARRINGTON C. LEES, M.A.

III.—THE ETERNAL NAIL-PRINTS.

Text :—"Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."—1 Cor. ii. 2.

[Book of the Month : "ST. PAUL"¹=P. Other references : J. G. Simpson's "Christus Crucifixus" = C.C.; Denney's "Death of Christ" = D.C.; Stalker's "Atonement" = A.; Orr's "Resurrection of Jesus" = R.; Figgis's "Civilization at Cross Roads" = C.R.]

"THE Greek perfect participle might be rendered, 'He who *is* the crucified' (*cf.* 1 Cor. i. 23; Gal. iii. 1); goes a great way farther than the aorist, 'He who *was* the crucified'" (P. 173). Paul never applies the latter. "Tense indicates an influence continued into the present": "the Crucified a reality, can be experienced every day" (P. 174).

¹ "St. Paul: a Study in Social and Religious History." By Adolf Deissmann, D.Th., D.D., etc.