

PRIESTLY VIRTUES IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT—II¹

(Translated from the French by B. Dickinson)

ST PAUL'S TEACHING

The Epistle to the Hebrews singles out two virtues proper to the priest of the New Covenant, *compassion* and *fidelity* :

It was fitting, indeed, that God—for whom and by whom all things exist—while guiding a host of his sons to glory, should raise the author of their salvation to the peak of perfection by the path of suffering. In this way the Son who sanctifies and the sons who are sanctified have a common origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them his brethren. . . . Since these children are akin in having flesh and blood, he too came to share this common bond with them. In this way he was able by his death to annihilate the prince of death, that is the devil, and to liberate those multitudes who lived as slaves under the fearful bondage of death all their lives. It was certainly not angels that he came to rescue ; no, he came to rescue the sons of Abraham (Heb. 2:10-16).

We could not give too much consideration to the implications of the primary theological concept in this passage : Christ being perfected by suffering in his mission as Saviour. The purpose of the Incarnation and the form it took would not have been the same if Jesus had been obliged to ransom pure spirits. In this case, by all the evidence, he would have been spared from taking human nature and undergoing death and the passion. But since it is men whom he intends to save and sanctify, he has to share their state. He takes upon him their nature, that is to say he becomes like them, not just in a limited or superficial way but by a real and complete identification with these human beings. Hence they truly become his brethren, notably in suffering and in the doom of death. Now it is precisely because by the incarnation Jesus became capable of feeling pain and of experiencing the pangs of death that he is set up as 'the perfect priest.' He is the ideal saviour, if one may say so, in the sense that he has been fitted to share the same sufferings and trials as those whom he represents before God and to whom he brings pardon and grace. In other words, by the incarnation and the crucifixion the High Priest of the New Covenant, having shared the wretched state of his brethren in human nature, was able to learn compassion. Therein lies his priestly perfection.

'Because of that, he had to make himself like his brethren in

¹ For Part I see *Scripture*, vol. x (1958), pp. 10-17

everything, so that he might become a High Priest who was both merciful and faithful in the service of God, to make atonement for the sins of the people. It is, in fact, because he himself has suffered and been schooled in trials that he is able to help those who are suffering' (Heb. 2:17-18). The adjective 'merciful' is found only here and in Matt. 5:7 in the whole of the New Testament. It does not mean mercy in the strict sense of forgiving the guilty, so much as compassion in the face of others' misery. It is a real revelation! For Philo forbade the High Priest to weep at the death of his parents, the better to prove by this insensibility that he belonged exclusively to God. The Epistle to the Hebrews, on the contrary, envisages compassion as the first of priestly virtues; it is even the explanation it gives for the mystery of *Why God became man and suffered!*

The Epistle presses the point home. It is precisely because Christ has suffered that he can bring help to men. The verb *paschō* in the perfect indicates not so much the historic fact of the passion as the permanent characteristic it has left in Christ, together with its enduring validity and effectiveness. First and foremost it indicates the ever-present mercy which suffering arouses in the High Priest. For he, one might translate, is 'a perpetual sufferer.' The nature of this ordeal is pin-pointed by the aorist participle *peirastheis*. It was a temptation. It refers to the ordeal of the cross and the temptation to escape it at Gethsemane (Heb. 5:7; cf. Mark 14:16). Having experienced human weakness in the face of death, knowing the violence of moral fear and of bodily pain, our saving hero is ever ready literally to 'run to the help' of those who cry out to him when they are in the throes and are tempted to give way. In fact, our High Priest has not only suffered for us, but like us. But sharing the same ordeals makes one compassionate and devoted to companions in misfortune.

This subject is so important, and this qualification for the priest of the New Testament so unexpected that our author returns to it in a new section, 4:14-5:10: 'Since we have in Jesus, the Son of God, a great High Priest who is perfect, who has penetrated into heaven, let us stand fast in professing our faith. For ours is not a High Priest who is incapable of feeling for us in our weaknesses; no, to be like us he suffered every weakness, except sin. Let us draw near to the throne of grace, therefore, with confidence' (4:14-15).

Our profession of faith centres on Jesus as the sovereign Pontiff of God's people. The faithful in the new Covenant have been given an authorised mediator. Their Pontiff stands at God's right hand, crowned with honour and glory, so placed that his intercession is effective. Now our confidence in his help has a unique foundation from the fact that this priest is one of us by his human nature and because he knows

by experience what our weakness is. *Sympatheō*, literally 'to suffer with another,' can mean 'to share his sufferings' or 'to experience the same feelings' as the other. God, for example, as our Father, 'sympathises' with men, in the sense in which love, and even a sharing of nature, gives the power to understand and share another's affections. But sympathy also springs from a shared experience: anyone who has undergone a certain kind of suffering or tasted a certain kind of joy has a spontaneous fellow-feeling for anyone else who has done so. It was for this very reason that the Son of God sought to experience our weaknesses in his human nature. His 'weakness' is pre-eminently that of human nature subject to weariness, sorrow and death. It encompasses all the deficiencies and limitations of a created being, its natural frailty, its disconcerting mutability; everything, in fact, which in the moral order comes under the capacity of being 'tempted.'

The Bible uses the word 'trials' for the means by which God sounds man's reins and heart and makes proof of his fidelity, but which may also put him in danger. Hence the ecclesiastical sense of the word 'temptation' and the humble plea in the *Our Father*: 'Lead us not into temptation' . . . which could be fatal to us, given our weakness. Temptation (*peirasmos*) is a fundamental factor in man's religious life, a 'trial' of his faith and his love. Now Christ, Son of God though he was, had temptations. He too was put to the trial, not only in the desert and at Gethsemane—when he had to be strengthened by an angel that he might continue the struggle (*agōnia*)—but throughout his whole life, during which, apart from the material difficulties of hunger and thirst and fatigue, he endured condemnation by the Synagogue, the hatred of the Pharisees, desertion by his first converts, the fruitlessness of his preaching. He himself could describe his whole life as overshadowed by the stigma of 'temptation,' in which his Apostles were included: 'You are the ones who have remained faithfully by my side in my trials' (Luke 22:28). If the Saviour and the saved belong to the same race and enjoy the same grace (Heb. 2:11), they also share the same tribulations; their union and their family likeness are perfect.

This conformity of the Son of God to our state and our misery is so marked that the writer has to add a saving note: 'Except for sin.' This means not only that Christ at his weakest did not yield to temptation, but also that he never knew those enticements to evil or inclinations to sin which come from a corrupt nature. But this inherent innocence in no way lessens our Lord's abiding compassion. On the contrary, we know what a wealth of tenderness and forgiveness the Saints extend to sinners; whereas sinners themselves often

adopt a rigorous and harsh attitude towards the faults of their neighbours. The fact is that every sin shuts up the heart upon itself and lessens its sympathy for others. True love does the opposite, it opens wide the soul and makes it welcome all human wretchedness. In this way Christ's holiness enlarged the power of his mercy and his devotedness to 'poor sinners.'

Such is the exact measure of the greatness and misery of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Following the pattern of the supreme High Priest, every priest—set apart and dedicated to God's service—shares the weakness of those whom he has to save. If God did not appoint angels but men to intercede on behalf of sinners, it is because these mediators had to know by experience the depths of misery in the human heart and had to be capable of 'fellow-feeling.' It follows that a priest who is 'un-feeling,' without the gift of sympathy, unable to be moved, has not the spirit of his priesthood. On the other hand, how closely St Paul became a faithful reproduction of his model: 'Who is weak, without my sharing his weakness? Who is tempted, without the same fire burning me and setting me on fire?' (2 Cor. 11:29).

Faithfulness Faithfulness is the quality required from all those who are entrusted with a responsible task (Neh. 13:13) or a mission, as were Abraham (Neh. 9:8), Moses (Heb. 3:2, 5), St Paul (1 Tim. 1:12); likewise from those appointed as steward or administrator (Luke 14:42; 16:10; 1 Cor. 4:2). Under the command and at the disposal of a Master, their duty is to conform to his will at every point. They are to combine therefore precision and perseverance in the fulfilment of their task in the most practical sense. These were the qualities Yahweh sought in Sadoc: 'I shall raise up to myself a faithful priest who will act according to my heart and soul' (1 Sam. 2:35). Now the High Priest of the new Covenant shows outstanding faithfulness both in his intercession before God and in his devotedness to men (Heb. 3:2-6). Did he not himself bear witness on the cross that he had carried out completely the work which the Father had entrusted to him? He would not give up his last breath until he had proclaimed: 'All is accomplished.' Therefore his priests will be expected to imitate his fidelity. As servants who are vigilant and zealous in fulfilling their ministry, they will never be dilettante dreamers or idle amateurs. Their meat must be 'to do the will of Him that sent them and to bring his work to its conclusion' (John 4:34), to sacrifice themselves unto death in this obedience: 'Consecrate them in faithfulness' (John 17:17).

It is in this spirit that, for example, they will hasten to the bedside

of a sick man at the first call, to pray for him (James 5:14) and will keep most vigilant watch over the flock for whom they are responsible before God. In Heb. 13:17 we see the leaders of the community keeping anxious vigil for the good of souls. The verb *agrupneō*, 'to stay awake, to suffer from insomnia,' well describes the depth of this apostolic care—it involves losing sleep! No-one felt this solicitude more keenly than St Paul who, after recalling the scourgings, imprisonments, shipwrecks—all the severest trials he had undergone in his endeavours to preach the Gospel—adds as the supreme burden: 'This strain which daily weighs upon me: anxiety for all the churches' (2 Cor. 11:28).

The grace of the priesthood In the pastoral Epistles the priesthood is considered as a charism. Granted by God, it is transmitted by the imposition of hands from the presbyters and bestows all the graces that the minister of the Church needs for his personal life and for his ministry.

On several occasions St Paul exhorts Timothy not to neglect 'the gift of God which is in thee' (1 Tim. 4:14), since its original creation at his ordination. This grace, then, is both immanent and permanent. It is exercised in external signs: prayers, prophecies, etc., and is efficacious; so that to hoard it fruitlessly would be to incur a grave sin of omission: 'The man who receives grace must not neglect it, but is bound to bear fruit from it. The servant who hides his lord's money in the earth is punished for negligence.' When one is enriched with grace by God and deputed to represent him before men, indolence is sinful. The more talents we have been given, the greater our obligation to draw profit from them (cf. Luke 12:48). Our Lord expressly declared to his Apostles that he had chosen them and established them that they might bring forth much fruit (cf. John 15:8, 10). St Paul singles out the grace of the priesthood itself as the power that should be set to work to produce this fruit by whole-hearted fidelity.

'I remind you again: Rouse up the gift of God which was put into you when I laid hands on you' (2 Tim. 1:6). The Greek verb *anazōpurein* is sometimes translated 're-animate,' as Jacob was re-animated when he heard the good news about Joseph (Gen. 45:27), or 'revive,' as when the Sunamite's child was brought to life by Eliseus (2 Kings 8:1, 5); but it means literally 'inflammé' (1 Macc. 13:7), 're-ignite,' 'fan into flame.' It is frequently used in the metaphorical sense of stirring up or re-starting; and this seems to be the shade of meaning intended here, where it is not a question of re-lighting a fire that has gone out, but rather of using the bellows to make the hearth

blaze out with bright flames. We must not merely refrain from extinguishing the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19), but must even stir it up to increase its manifestations. This metaphor of fire applied to the action of the Holy Ghost (cf. Acts 2:3) in the sacrament of Holy Orders is as apt as that of water to signify His activity in the sacrament of Baptism (Tit. 3:6). It is no longer a question of purification, but of the light of faith and the burning zeal of charity. The priestly ministry, like that of John the Baptist, is to be a burning and a shining light (cf. John 5:35).

Furthermore St Paul defines what he means by this gift: 'Revive the gift of God that is in you . . . For it is not a cowardly spirit that God has given us, but a strong spirit of charity and solid good sense' (1 Tim. 1:6-7). For the Apostle, *courage and energy, boldness and strength* are the prime qualities in a priest. This is because on the one hand they are a direct sharing in that 'power' which sums up the action of the Holy Ghost (1 Thess. 1:5; Gal. 3:5); on the other hand because he sees the ministry as uphill work and even as a battle. Weaklings could never take part in it. Hence: 'Jesus Christ made me strong when he set me up in the priesthood' (cf. 1 Tim. 1:12); 'Take strength from the grace which dwells in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 2:1); 'This charge, then, I give into thy hands, my son Timothy, in virtue of the prophecies that singled thee out, long ago, to support thee in fighting the good fight' (1 Tim. 1:18). This metaphor brings out the seriousness, the obligations, the trials and the difficulty of the apostolate in which, for soldiers in the field as St John Chrysostom says, the struggle with the enemy, the night-watches, 'fatigues' and work is continuous. But our fight is in the service of the noblest of causes and will end in victory, so long as the priest mistrusts his own strength and 'leans' on the grace of his priesthood, that is to say on the Holy Ghost, who continually works and lives in him. 'Human indeed we are, but it is in no human strength that we fight our battles. The weapons we fight with are not human weapons; they are divinely powerful, ready to pull down strongholds. Yes, we can pull down the conceits of men, every barrier of pride which sets itself up against the true knowledge of God; we make every mind surrender to Christ's command' (2 Cor. 10:3-5), like a garrison that capitulates but finds salvation in surrender, because it is truth which gives freedom (John 8:32).

Charity Together with this power, the priest received on the day of his ordination 'a spirit of charity' in the service of his neighbour. This is to be the key inspiration of his ministry, whatever form that may take. 'As for thee, O man of God, aim at charity' (1 Tim. 6:11;

2 Tim. 2:22). 'Be a model to the faithful, in word and deed, by your charity and faith' (1 Tim. 4:12). The priest should appear as a revelation of divine love. In his own person he teaches souls what it is to love. Has he to rule and command? In this his fundamental intention must always be to promote an increase of charity in the Church: 'The aim of all commandments is charity' (1 Tim. 1:5). This assumes that the priest lives intensely by this love, and St Paul is surely revealing the innermost depths of his apostolic heart when he confesses: '*Caritas Christi urget nos*' (2 Cor. 5:4). This might well be translated, 'The love which Christ has for us and we for him locks us in its embrace.' It is a holdfast, a pressure which is also a spur. It exerts a kind of internal violence which will not allow the apostle to be self-reflexive or to consider his own tastes and comfort, still less to remain inert. It is an overmastering power that drives him to sacrifice himself without measure, to make himself all things to all men. As Christ's deputy, his plans, his words, his actions, his fears and hopes and joys are governed by an ardent charity that does not seek his own interest but solely the good of his neighbour.

Prudence also is clearly indispensable to the head of a community. St Paul thinks of it as the spirit of moderation or of self-discipline (cf. 1 Tim. 1:7), which combines with charity to control the exercise of authority. It is as foreign to harshness as it is to weakness, avoiding equally bitter bigotry and reckless enthusiasm. Prudence enjoys clear-sighted judgment—'the Lord will give you understanding in all things' (2 Tim. 2:7)—and takes into account the differences between individual subjects, in age, sex or social standing (1 Tim. 5:1-3; Tit. 2:1-10). It gives its decisions firmly and clearly and always knows how to make itself respected (1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:15).

According to 1 Tim. 3:2 this spirit of moderation and thoughtfulness is a criterion for a vocation. Without good sense and sound judgement a man should not be admitted to Orders. The priest has to stand out from the crowd by the rightness of his ideas combined with well-balanced behaviour and marked self-control. For this reason prudence must be partnered by *temperance*, which in the first place requires an equable temperament. With a horror of violence or of raising a storm by his intervention, the pastor of souls should never display bad temper. Considerate and polite, he takes no notice of hostile or hurtful remarks. In his role of peacemaker his business is to reconcile enmity: 'a servant of God must not give battle; but be gentle towards all' (2 Tim. 2:24). Faced with enemies, his meekness is literally disarming.

The *purity* of his life is bound up with the good name of the Church: 'We commend ourselves as God's ministers . . . by purity'

(2 Cor. 6:6). Men who have been married more than once are not to be admitted to the priesthood (1 Tim. 3:2). The Christian who, having lost his wife, has not re-married, has given proof of sufficient control of his heart and senses and of his appreciation of the religious freedom of his state, 'how he may best attend on the Lord without distraction' (1 Cor. 7:35). He has shown himself capable of dedicating himself without hindrance to the service of all. It is a case, then, of a religious consecration: 'Keep thyself chaste' (1 Tim. 5:22), without defilement, like a temple consecrated to God. It was in this spirit that the first clerics began very soon and spontaneously to vow themselves to celibacy: 'How many in holy orders remain continent and have chosen God as the spouse of their souls' (Tertullian, *Exhortation to chastity*, 12).

Preaching the word Christ came to preach (Mark 1:35) and people expected him to teach them all things (John 4:25). The Apostles gave themselves up to 'the service of the word' (Acts 6:4), since 'faith comes by hearing' (Rom. 10:14-17; cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-20). If this preaching promulgates the mystery of salvation (1 Tim. 3:16; Tit. 1:3), then the preachers are exercising a truly priestly function: they are transmitting sacred realities. For this purpose they have received the spirit of truth (John 15:26; cf. Acts 1:8; 1 Peter 1:12) and their aim is to offer those they have converted as a holy oblation to God (Rom. 12:1; 15:15-16; Phil. 2:17; 4:18).

In the pastoral Epistles, St Paul insists most particularly on the necessity of this doctrinal instruction. When he introduces Timothy and Titus into the hierarchy of the Church it is primarily for the work of preaching: 'You must speak' (Tit. 2:15); 'Preach the word' (2 Tim. 4:2); 'Attend to reading, to exhortation, to teaching' (1 Tim. 4:13). In his turn Timothy will lay hands on new ministers who are capable of instructing the faithful: 'What you have learned from me or from many who can witness to it, give to the keeping of men thou canst trust; men who will know how to teach it to others' (2 Tim. 2:2; cf. 1 Tim. 5:22). It is not necessary for the preacher to be naturally eloquent, still less for him to have degrees. But he must possess a minimum of intellectual capacity and an interest in things of the mind, with an understanding that is alive to doctrinal problems and capable of forming a personal opinion. He must be able to make a decision on disputed points, to define and promulgate the truth, to refute error and, should occasion arise, to refute those who deny the truth (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:24). In effect, since 'God wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:4; cf. Tit. 1:1), so the candidate for the priesthood should

be ready to put forward 'the word of God' (Tit. 2:5; 2 Tim. 2:9; 4:2) or 'the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15), 'the sound principles of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Tim. 6:3; Tit. 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:13), 'the words of faith' (1 Tim. 4:6). He should be prompt to reiterate the traditional teaching (2 Tim. 2:14) and to give unshakable witness (Tit. 3:8). Just as 'Christ has given light to life' (2 Tim. 1:10), so the priest throws light on the doctrine of salvation and makes it shine out. This is one of the points by which the priest's fidelity to his vocation is best realised: 'By instructing thy brethren thou wilt show thyself a true servant of Jesus Christ, thriving on the principles of that faith whose wholesome doctrine thou hast followed' (1 Tim. 4:6).

We can see that preaching means the handing on of a tradition, of a teaching already determined; but first of all it involves the explanation of sacred Scripture. 'It is for thee to hold fast by the doctrine handed on to thee, the charge committed to thee; thou knowest well from whom that commission came; thou canst remember the holy learning thou hast been taught from childhood upwards. This will train thee up for salvation, through the faith which rests in Christ Jesus. Everything in the Scripture has been divinely inspired, and has its uses: to instruct us, to expose our errors, to correct our faults, to educate us in holy living; so God's servant will become a master of his craft, and each noble task that comes will find him ready for it' (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

The Bible, the foundation of the faith, is the source-book for preaching and even for the whole ministry: 'All the words written long ago were written for our instruction; we were to derive hope from that message of endurance and courage which the Scriptures bring us' (Rom. 15:4). These sacred documents, in fact, are inspired by God, whence comes their universal efficaciousness. They have the abiding power of communicating God's wisdom, that is to say of nourishing and educating Christian life. If the priest—another Christ—is the instrument for saving the world, then by definition he must be the man of the Bible and thereby 'equipped for every good work.' He has, so to speak, only to act as a sounding-board for this divine word, to proclaim it like a herald, so that it may come to the knowledge of each generation of mankind.

For this purpose he studies it, makes it part of himself, explains its meaning and uses it for all occasions. He uses it both for teaching in church and in private conversations in which he consoles the afflicted, encourages the faint-hearted and spurs devout souls towards perfection. But his first duty is to 'dispense correctly the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15). He has no right to substitute his own ideas for the divine thought enshrined in the texts. If he has to explain and adapt

them to everyone's understanding, he must take care while doing so to safeguard 'sound doctrine in the life of faith' (Tit. 1:13). This means that, as 'teacher in faith and truth' (1 Tim. 2:7), the priest should maintain strict orthodoxy (1 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 1:5) and his integrity should be above suspicion. Is he not the mouthpiece of a Church which is the pillar and support of truth? (1 Tim. 3:15). He will therefore be concerned to 'shun foolish novelties and stand fast in the doctrine thou hast learned' (1 Tim. 4:6-15; 6:20; 2 Tim. 3:14), to preserve the 'sound deposit' (2 Tim. 1:14).

This preservation of pure faith against all contamination from error will be all the more called for as we draw nearer to the final period of time, which will be characterised by the reign of falsehood: 'The time will surely come, when men will grow tired of sound doctrine, always itching to hear something fresh; and so they will provide themselves with a continuous succession of new teachers, as the whim takes them, turning a deaf ear to the truth, bestowing their attention on fables instead' (2 Tim. 4:3-4). For minds that are infected with an itch for novelties the traditional truth seems insipid, as manna did of old to the children of Israel, and they are only too ready to make shipwreck of the faith (1 Tim. 1:19).

Whether in dispensing grace or in preaching the faith, the priest-apostle, according to the New Testament, comes forth as God's ambassador, a saviour from sin and error, another Christ. That is why he must reproduce in himself the features of the incarnate Word. 'As thou hast sent me into the world, I in my turn have sent them into the world; and I dedicate myself for their sakes, that they too may be dedicated through the truth' (John 17:18-19).

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