

Re-imagining priesthood

Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ

'People must think of us as Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God. What is expected of stewards is that each one should be found worthy of His trust.' (1 Cor 4:1-2) In light of revelations that have posed huge challenges to both the laity and the priesthood in recent times, how can priests continue to enact this ministry of servitude and stewardship? Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ looks at some of the images we might use as a basis for a renewed understanding of priestly ministry.

In many parts of the Western Church especially, it seems that week after week a scandal involving abuse by clergy or church personnel is reported in the media. Many lay people have gone from a sense of scandal to shock, even numbness and despair about what has been going on. How could religious men and women who entered their Order or Seminary with the highest and very holy reasons end up perpetrating such sinful offences? The offence of one priest or religious can tarnish all priests and religious, and severely tests the trust of the laity in those ordained to care for them.¹

For priests, too, these present circumstances heighten the need for important questions to be asked. The Chicago theologian, Robert Barron acknowledges that:

This is an extremely difficult time for priests. With the revelations of clergy sexual misconduct with children and adolescents and with the resignations of prominent bishops after scandalous violations of the celibacy vow, some priests have gone beyond the point of shock and surprise to a state of numbness. Many wonder whether permanent damage has been done to the priesthood, whether we will ever recover the trust and confidence that have been lost. Some speculate that this is the beginning of the end of the priesthood as we know it.²



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It seems that it is necessary for all of us – priests and those whom they serve – to look again at our image of the priesthood. In what follows, I hope to unfold the contemporary understanding of the priesthood, and look at three ideas that may serve as models for a re-imagining.

'Sacramental persons'

Holy Orders set certain men apart, in the words of the liturgy, for the service of God's people in a special and sacramental way. However, in light of the revelations of recent years that we have acknowledged, the loss of confidence in the priesthood has had an effect not only on the laity but also on the clergy themselves. Robert Barron again:

Too many priests feel at sea without focus and orientation, without spiritual moorings, unable to articulate for themselves who they are and why they remain faithful to their commitments. ...The laity have been enabled and commissioned – brought to much greater involvement. All of this change has been healthy and revitalising for the church, but many priests feel that, in the process, their role has been diminished and their unique contribution undervalued.

However, from my own experience in Australia, these are in fact rather exciting times to be a priest. There is a confluence of so many factors: the statistics of

church attendance, new models of parishes, new styles of priesthood, the rise of lay ministry, the church acknowledging and taking stock of its scandals, and perhaps an upturn of vocations. What St Paul said in 1 Corinthians so long ago still rings very true for us – ‘people must think of us as Christ’s servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God. What is expected of stewards is that each one should be found worthy of His trust.’ (1 Cor 4:1-2)

Andrew Greeley summarises it thus: ‘despite themselves and the crisis in their morale, priests are nonetheless perceived as sacraments of a world that transcends our own. They are the sacramental persons, *par excellence*.’³ That is a hint of where our imaging must find its source, and we can look to the previous pope for encouragement in this task.

John Paul II

Bishop Tim Costelloe notes that the pontificate of John Paul II was marked among other things ‘by a constant concern for the situation of ordained ministry within the Church’. It is as if John Paul II picked up the sentiment that the promotion of the laity in the Second Vatican Council had led to a devaluation of the priesthood. His response to talk about a crisis in the clerical state was prolific: he began the practice of writing an annual ‘letter to priests’ for Holy Thursday; he spoke on the ordained ministry in his series of Wednesday addresses, and in so many homilies; he gave to the Church the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* after the 1990 Synod of Bishops on the priesthood.

John Paul II saw the ordained ministry as constituted by a special relationship to Christ the Priest, a flowering of the more fundamental relationship established in baptism. Like the priesthood of Christ, those in Holy Orders are called to self-sacrifice, an act of self-offering to God on behalf of humanity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of the ministerial priesthood being at the service of the common priesthood of the faithful. All the faithful are baptised as priests, prophets and kings, and ordained ministers are to work to enable the priesthood of all believers to exercise itself in the world, so that the Church, which is the body of Christ, might continue through all its members – lay, consecrated and ordained – to be the presence of Christ for the world.

Some re-imaging that has been occurring since John Paul II’s death, however, has been far removed from his thought. In some quarters there has been something of a resurgence of clericalism, which constitutes taking a dangerous step backwards. Clericalism has done much damage to the Church, placing both heavy demands and unwarranted power in the hands of the ordained, and at the same time relegating the laity to a role of passive and subservient dependence on the clergy, as Bishop Costelloe says. John Paul II is quite clear on this:

The priesthood is not an institution that exists ‘alongside’ the laity or ‘above’ it. The priesthood of bishops and priests, as well as the ministry of deacons, is ‘for’ the laity, and precisely for this reason it possesses a ‘ministerial’ character, that is to say, one of service. Moreover, it highlights the ‘baptismal priesthood’, the priesthood common to all the faithful.⁴

And in the words of St John Vianney, the patron saint of Priests:

The priest is not a priest for himself; he does not give himself absolution; he does not administer the sacraments to himself. He is not for himself, he is for you.....The priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus.⁵

Re-imaging

Robert Barron states that ‘what could kill us as a Church is losing the sense of Mystery. What could contribute mightily to that loss is the weakening and dissipation of the priesthood. The time has come not for dismantling the priesthood but for building it up.’ He says that one of the greatest post-conciliar mistakes was to turn the priest into a psychologist, sociologist, social worker, counsellor – anything but a uniquely religious leader. He argues that we should look again at the notion of ontological change that occurs at ordination: priests are made different, while at the same time eschewing applications that make it elitist and exclusive. Situating the priesthood within the context of baptismal ministry helps lessen that danger.

I will look now at three images of the priest, though none are ideal formulations: that of the wounded healer, the bearer of mystery and prophets of the Church.

The Wounded Healer

People are familiar with the notion of Wounded Healer from the writings of Henri Nouwen. In fact, it originated before Nouwen, in Karl Rahner's 1968 work, *Servants of the Lord*, in which he had a section entitled 'The Man with the Pierced Heart'. ('Wounded Healer' is an easier phrase to handle.) Rahner wrote:

...tomorrow's priest will be the man with the pierced heart, from which alone he draws strength for his mission. With the pierced heart, pierced through by the godlessness of life, pierced through by the folly of love, pierced through by lack of success, pierced through by the experience of his own wretchedness and profound unreliability.....he is a man with the pierced heart because he is to lead men to the very core of their existence, to their inmost heart, because he can only do so if he has found his own heart; because he and others can only find this central existence, the heart, if they accept its being pierced, pierced by the incomprehensibility of love that is pleased to conquer only in death.

When I read that back in 1968, I thought Rahner was way off the planet, wallowing in teutonic lugubriousness. But he was talking of the priest of tomorrow, and as he wrote that more than forty years ago, presumably that tomorrow has arrived.

I can acknowledge much truth in this talk of the wounded healer, but I am not sure what to do with it, except to place myself at the back of the temple rather than up the front with the Pharisee. Michael Buckley, an influential spiritual writer in the United States, wrote an article that commences 'Are you weak enough to be a priest?', in which he goes on to talk about Jesus and body image.⁶ Psychologists tell us that we evaluate ourselves in terms of our spontaneous body images, that what we sense about our bodies is what we sense and feel about ourselves. Jesus perceives a body that was broken for us, blood that was shed for us. He understands Himself as a sacrificed self, effective only through His destruction, giving life and freedom only because He Himself has moved through death and terror and achieved new life. Buckley makes a very intriguing comparison between Socrates and Christ, a judgment between divine and human excellence:

Socrates went to his death with calmness and poise. He accepted the judgment of the court, discoursed on the alternatives suggested by death and on the dialectical indications of immortality, found no cause for fear, drank the poison and died. Jesus was almost hysterical with terror and fear; ...Finally He established control over Himself and moved into His death in silence and lonely isolation, even into the terrible interior suffering of the hidden Divinity, the absence of God.... Socrates – one of the greatest and most heroic men who have ever existed, a paradigm of what humanity can achieve within the individual – was a philosopher.... Jesus of Nazareth was a priest – ambiguous, suffering, mysterious, and salvific.

It seems to me that if we adopt or accept any model of priesthood, then the notion of the wounded healer is essential if spiritual pride is not to destroy us.

Bearer of Mystery

In his work, *Priest as Bearer of the Mystery*,⁷ Robert Barron promoted a view of reality, of the presence of God as the source of all being in all things. In this, the priest is taken up by the power of Christ's passionate, unconditional love, and leads the people of God into an ever more intimate contact with it; the priest is the one who performs the sacrifice, linking heaven and earth.

There is a raft of other writers on the same theme. Rahner again:

Some people live with the comprehension that they do not belong to themselves, that they are consecrated to the Mystery to whom they have said yes with all their being. They live in a way that awakens the experience of God in others. They awaken in others the question of Eternal Life. These people seem to dwell completely in God's explicit nearness and announce that, if only by their poise and bearing.

The Baltimore priest, Joseph Gallagher writes that 'we're meant to heal souls and speak of mysteries that are too good to be true, to awaken minds and imaginations to the new order and new being that is God's gift to all.'⁸ John Paul II says that the priest is called through his witness 'to prolong the presence of Christ' among those whom he serves.

This notion of the priest as one called to be a bearer of the Mystery, is a very challenging image. It summons us from wherever we are to go deeper, to discover the heart of God within our own hearts. Rowan Williams once wrote that a vocation is what we have when all the games have ended. Those in Holy Orders can play any games, and the games can carry us on, for many years; but when they have ended, are we bearers of the Mystery?

Priests need to have the mystery of the Eucharist as the prism through which all reality is viewed. In the Eucharist, the priest is constantly re-presenting himself and the people to the mystery of Calvary and Easter, re-presenting to the sacrament of salvation that transforms the world. There is an outlook to which a Bearer of Mystery would aspire, such as the outlook contained in the description given by Teilhard de Chardin in his *Mass on the World*, the reflections he made when he found himself in China in the 1920s without bread or wine. He made his Eucharistic prayer of a 'hymn to the universe':

All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase: all those that will diminish: all those too that will die: all of them, Lord, I try to gather into my arms, so as to hold them out to You in offering. This is the material of my sacrifice; the only material that You desire...over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day say again the words: This is My Body. And over every death-force, which waits in readiness to corrode, to wither, to cut down, speak again Your commanding words which express the Supreme Mystery of faith: This is My Blood.

Prophets of the Church

The third image is that of priests as prophets of the Church. The Compendium of the Catechism states (para 321) that the two sacraments of Holy Orders and Matrimony 'confer a special grace for a particular mission in the church to serve and build up the people of God.' Without the activity of zealous bishops, deacons and priests, the history books are full of examples of whole populations of Christians drifting into indifference. To build up the Church one must be a giver of vision.

In an age when the credibility of the Church has been seriously tarnished, and when there seems to be a retreat into forms and styles from which we believed we had moved ourselves, the role of priests as prophets, speaking on behalf of the Church is of special significance. The prime role of the prophet in these circumstances is educational, to move with the Spirit and reinforce and enhance the vision of the faithful. It is one of the most exciting challenges for the ordained ministry, to help the Church live its vocation as a priestly people – the whole Church. In that article of forty-plus years ago, Rahner asked, 'what will a priest of tomorrow be like and look like if he is to prove in some sense worthy of his mission?' He makes the response that the priest will not be simply the official of a religious institution, and makes the challenging comment: 'Instead of his bearing witness through the church, the church will rather bear witness through him.'

As prophets of the Church, priests must also have a love for the Church. Despite the scandals, despite the certain exclusivism, despite all sorts of things, the Church remains a community with characteristics that cannot be replaced elsewhere. We have to sell a vision of the Church to our people, so that they know that it is their community, not simply a strange society. It must be seen to be a home, the community where they belong, the one which gives meaning to their aspirations. And the Church, transcending all its limitations, remains a place of the Word, because that is where the Scriptures were formed, and out of those Scriptures comes the vision that we try to preach. The Church is also the servant of the weak, and throughout its history has shown a special care for those at the edges, in the great history of the religious orders, and the response of the church to human suffering. It is the home of the saints; not exclusively so, of course, but nevertheless in times of its greatest scandals it has produced people outstanding in holiness. Fundamentally, however, the Church is for us the Giver of the Bread of Life. We cannot receive the Bread of Life elsewhere. We have to communicate this notion of the Church as the community enhanced by those attitudes, so that people will feel drawn to the Father through their membership of this community.

Images of Christ in the world

Let us finally look at the vision in 2 Corinthians of how a priest might set the faithful alight: 'And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit.' We grow into being the images of Christ in the world. Priests are not to be summarised or defined simply by what they do, as worker, preacher, minister, counselor; the priest is to be defined not by what he does, but by who he has become, by virtue of that ordination.

The support of their brother priests is essential for those trying to live out these new images. When the four men lowered their paralysed friend down before the Lord, Jesus was impressed: 'seeing *their* faith, He said unto him...' (Mark 2:1-12) And the prayer made by all the people at the ordination of a priest, deacon or bishop, conveys the support of the community which keeps us true to our vocation:

Bless these chosen ones
Bless these chosen ones and make them holy
Bless these chosen ones, make them holy, and
consecrate them for their sacred duties.

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Adapted from an address to the Clergy Life and Ministry Conference in Sydney, July 2009.

¹ The Irish Jesuit, Fergus O'Donoghue wrote in *The Tablet* recently, '.....in the aftermath of the Ryan Report, Irish priests and religious are being excoriated; Irish Catholicism is being condemned as fundamentally flawed. The excessive respect that we Irish priests and religious used to receive has been turned on its head.'

² Barron, R. 'Priest as Bearer of the Mystery', *Church*, Summer 1994, pp. 10-13.

³ Greeley, Andrew, *The Catholic Myth* (Touchstone, 1997)

⁴ Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, 1990, Paragraph 3

⁵ *The Little Catechism of the Curé of Ars*

⁶ Michael Buckley SJ, 'Because beset by weakness...', http://nysj.org/s/316/images/editor_documents/content/AscensionJesus%20is%20no%20longer%20limited%20by%20time%20and%20space.%20The%20A/Weak%20Enough.pdf

⁷ Another, later book, Michael Heir's *The Lost Art of Walking on Water – Reimagining the Priesthood* (2004) also speaks of priests as Bearers of Mystery,

⁸ Joseph Gallagher, *The Pain and the Privilege: Diary of a City Priest* (Image Books, 1983)