

# A THING ABOUT

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## Priesthood

We use the word three ways: its prime sense is *to define a function*, as when we talk about the sacrificial quality of Jesus' dying for us. Secondly, we speak of it as *a way of life* which demands something of us all - those who belong to "the priesthood of all believers"; and thirdly as *a group of people* within the Church who seek to minister to it as ordained priests.

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Priesthood is not an optional quality in any Christian. We say that *Jesus is our High Priest*, as if the rest of us are merely passive recipients of his act of redemption: we are the paralysed men, the lost sheep, the leper, Lazarus in his tomb. But we also say that we are *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation that God has called out of darkness to live in light*, and Paul calls us to *offer our living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God*. This is very far from passivity, and it is a call addressed to the ordinary Christian. What about Jesus himself?

**Jewish Priesthood** the observant Jew knew all about offering sacrifice, and most would do this several times in the Temple at Jerusalem. It would involve buying an animal sound in wind and limb, taking it to any of the priests, and seeing it slaughtered. In the first century there appear to have been 20,000 priests and Levites around Jerusalem. They were divided into 24 "courses", each of which served one week roughly twice a year. Each course was further subdivided by "father's houses" which served one day at a time. It is thought they worked also in two shifts, with a break after the period of morning-sacrifice. Sacrificing was a privilege - service of God - and a benefit, since the priest kept some of the meat. Possibly there may have been between 700 - 800 priests sacrificing at the same time in all the courts of the Temple during the Passover slaughter of lambs (a three-hour period, during which Jesus is described by John as hanging alive on the Cross). The work of these priests was a combination of liturgical worship (some) and expert butchery (predominantly). They heard confessions, inspected and accepted sacrifices, slaughtered and flayed animals and birds, and cut them up for distribution. They sprinkled and poured blood on and around the altar. They put the principal fatty pieces of the animals on the altar: blood and fat belonged to God. In many cases priests ate most of the meat, though in shared ("communion") sacrifices, the worshipper took some of it home.

**Sacrifice** The point about burnt-offerings is that they symbolize a *total* devoting to God of the worshipper's life. The complete abnegation of the gift represents total honouring of God's prerogative. Such a holocaust means nothing - as the prophets constantly pointed out - without the right relationship between the worshipper and God, and others. But the sealing of a covenant, the taking of a vow, the entering of a new course of life are regularly signified by the offering of sacrificial victims and their total burning.

**Christian Priesthood** All of this seems very exotic. But its very depth should make us aware of something the Church wants us to understand *very close to home*. We Catholics particularly take the notion of priesthood to heart. We do not "look on from afar" as the High Priest offers his unique sacrifice for us. We are called to incarnate in ourselves the sacrificial impulse which led him to lay down his life for his friends. In Mt, Mk & Lk Jesus foretold his death only within the close circle of the Twelve. But he turned to *everyone* to say: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, he must deny himself, take up his Cross, and follow me." Far from being a "passive" acceptance of the priesthood of Christ, this seems to imply a growing, daily search for the opportunity to pour out our lives in selflessness: this deed is called "consecration". Taking part in the Eucharist, which re-presents the one sacrifice of Jesus, feeds in us the desire to live out

this pattern of life, to belong to the family of God in wholeness, body and spirit. It is the act of Christ to carry with him the whole reality in which he lives: he gathers with him the sum of creation, and delivers it with his own life into the hands of the Father. Our impulse is similarly *collective* as we bring to God the sum of our life and times, the whole world in which our lives are woven: we re-present before him all that cannot, for one reason or another, come themselves. Jesus, as he died, brought before the Father Simon Peter, Judas, Annas, Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, both the thieves, and the soldiers who dined for his robe, as well as his mother and the beloved disciple. There is no-one who can say: *he did not die for me*.

**Ministerial Priesthood** Perhaps in order to bear witness to the realism of the common priesthood, the Church keeps a distinction (often misunderstood, over- or under-valued) between Christians living lives shot through with the common priesthood of all the baptized, and those whose whole lives embody its reality. Typically, the spiritual life is to be lived by priests with an intensity not demanded of the lay person. Ordained priests are obliged to the celebration of the Divine Office *on behalf of the whole people*. They are to be constantly at the service of people's prayer and of the liturgy, ready to break the bread of the Word at any time. They are forbidden to engage in other ways of developing the world: they cannot trade or enter politics. They are to make themselves over selflessly to their people, and the symbol of celibacy is assigned to them as an obligation - even though it can only be safely assumed as a freely-accepted sacrifice, which has the power to increase our likeness to Christ (himself unmarried). For the good of the community they accept obedience to the order of the Bishop, and are called to a certain simplicity of life which can echo that offered to those Jesus specially called to "leave everything, and follow". This invitation is *not* extended to everyone, and many people in the Gospel hear the words of Jesus only once, and are not depicted as "followers" in the sense shown by the 12 apostles or the Lucan 72 disciples. Furthermore, there are other ways of "leaving all things to follow Christ" that don't involve ordination, and which lead to a deep uniting of the Christian with the person and work of Christ the priest. The presence in the Church of one form of vocation is no prejudice to the presence of others within and outside the Christian community which function in the same field.

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The common habit of speaking of the clergy as "the Church" is happily disappearing. But it is significant that it should ever have existed. The implication is that the clerical way of life is the real meaning of being a Christian, with lay people as amateurs who can't compete. This is a total abuse, and is not at all the high doctrine of holy orders; it implies a sinful transgression of the direct order of Jesus (Mk 10: 41-45). Priests are there to serve the Church, in all its members, which make up *together* the Body of Christ. In their individual lives, they are called to epitomize the humility with which the Head of the body can be said to govern it: *the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" Notice that link between "authority" within the Church and *sacrifice* itself. It is insofar as a priest can embody this sacrificial way of life that he can be said to have *power* in the Church.

New Testament priesthood is closely connected with the ministry of prophecy (which similarly belongs to all the baptized). A good theology of the ordained priesthood will therefore preserve the *community* nature of the priesthood, and the specific way in which the "high" theology of the Sacrament of Orders can be understood in that context. It has to be said that this is an area of great controversy between the pre- and post-Vatican Two mentalities.