

Bones of Contention

by Aelred Squire, O.P.

A brief report of a congress on the pastoral relationships of priests, held at Louvain, and published in France in 1968, shows encouraging signs of a serious wish on the part of a team of both reputable clergy and of qualified psychiatrists to assess the psychological implications of the priestly role in the contemporary world.¹ That its conclusions should be tentative is only to be expected, for there is so much new ground to cover, and an English translation is probably not to be looked for. It is, in any case, doubtful if, as it stands, it is an eminently exportable product outside a French-speaking milieu. But in raising, as it does, some of the more profound sexual implications for the figure of the priest and being bold enough to make articulate the latent ramifications of his relationship to money, it blazes a trail along which others are bound eventually to follow. The truth of the most universal of its observations can scarcely be disputed, namely that to the conscious reaction to the very notion of the priest there is 'not sometimes, but invariably' a normally, unconscious affect which is exactly its contrary. 'On the image which arouses a conscious aggressiveness, another image imposes itself in the unconscious which arouses a feeling for its antithesis. Indeed this phenomenon is translated into noteworthy sociological terms in our contemporary society. Consciously anti-clerical, it nevertheless throws up a mass of books, films, etc., dealing with the person of the priest. A fact which shows well enough that it is not indifferent to him.' It does, indeed, remain astonishingly true that a cleric who marries, or who commits even some fairly mild misdemeanour can be sure of headlines, often of a photograph in the press, and even of one of those ambivalent expressions of compassion which would scarcely be extended to anyone else in similar circumstances. The less 'interesting' members of the profession may well find food for reflection in these facts, for even to some of the more zealous of them not all the expectations of the priesthood which they imply are equally palatable. It may, for instance, be legitimate to describe a book on *The Priest in Crisis*² as 'disturbing', as its publishers do, but when its penultimate chapter disowns any intention of being 'probing' about what one might be pardoned for supposing to be its main subject, one's disturbance is obviously not of the kind intended. Is it, after all, really possible to write a satisfactory sociological study of the

¹*La relation pastorale*, collection *Cogitatio Fidei* no. 33, Paris, 1968.

²David P. O'Neill, *The Priest in Crisis*. Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1968. 30s.

priest in the modern world without directly discussing who and what a priest is, whatever difficulties and obscurities this may involve? And may not even the most sincere investigator of priestly adaptation to modern needs be justly suspected of evasion if he refuses to face, fairly and squarely, this underlying theological question?

The results of the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council on this difficult subject were embodied in its decrees *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Optatam Totius*, which the French series *Unam Sanctam* has now published in Latin with a French translation and accompanied by historical, theological and scriptural notes and commentaries by various competent hands.¹ That the Council left unresolved a number of teasing questions that might be asked was only to be expected when one considers the situation for the theology of the priesthood created by the Council of Trent's having taken its point of departure from the priest rather than the bishop, a matter the implications of which for the discussions and conclusions of Vatican II are clearly analysed by Mgr H. Denis. To the other studies in this volume it will be necessary to allude later, but it may with some confidence be said that the positive positions reached by the recent Council will be most likely to become familiar as time goes on through the use of the forms of the revised Roman Pontifical, which also appeared from the Vatican Press in 1968.

It is true that the bishop's optional address to the candidates for priestly ordination retains, with the addition of the Resurrection, the memorable old phrase: 'Consider what you do, imitate what you handle, so that as you celebrate the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord you mortify in your members every vice.'² But otherwise it is a completely new document, built round the three-fold conception of the bishop as sharing in the work of Christ as teacher, priest and pastor. 'But priests are constituted cooperators with the order of bishops, and joined to them by the sacerdotal gift are called to the service of the people of God' (*qui cum eis munere sacerdotali conjuncti*). They are, the bishop tells them, to be configured to Christ the high and eternal priest, conjoined to the priesthood of the bishops and consecrated as true priests of the New Testament, 'to preach the gospel, to foster the people of God, and celebrate the divine cult, particularly in the Lord's sacrifice'. Each of these functions is then considered separately, as they are in the Council's document on the priesthood. First comes the teaching function, which includes the practice of what one preaches. Then comes the function of sanctification, 'wherein the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is perfected by the priestly ministry as by their hands it is offered upon the altar in an unbloody manner in the celebration of the mysteries'. But this gift of sanctification in Christ is further

¹*Les prêtres ; formation, ministère et vie*, collection *Unam Sanctam* (Paris, 1968).

²In all quotations I give my own rendering of the Latin of the *Editio Typica*.

elaborated by explicit reference to the sacraments of baptism, penance, and the anointing of the sick, all the acts of public worship, and the recitation of the canonical hours 'not only for the people of God, but also for the whole world'. The priests are to remember that they are men taken from among men and constituted for men in those things which pertain to God. They are thus not their own, and so, finally, they are to have the example of the Good Shepherd ever before their eyes, 'who came not to be ministered to, but to minister'.

As if to insist upon these several points, they are then formulated in four distinct questions which, unlike the address, are not optional, and to which the answer 'I do' is required. They run: 'Do you wish perpetually to fulfil the function of the priesthood in the grade of the presbyterate, as upright cooperators of the order of bishops in fostering the Lord's flock under the leading of the Holy Spirit? Do you wish devoutly and faithfully to celebrate the mysteries of Christ to the glory of God and the sanctification of the Christian people, according to the tradition of the Church? Do you wish worthily and wisely to fulfil the ministry of the Word in the preaching of the Gospel and the exposition of the Catholic faith? Do you wish to be joined ever more closely to the high priesthood of Christ, who offered himself as a pure victim for us to the Father, and with him to consecrate yourselves to God for the salvation of men?'

Although these questions are, in themselves, a distinctive feature of the revised rite, they contain, of course, nothing which will surprise those who have always considered their priesthood as a specific deputation by and for the Church, though they are, if properly weighed, calculated to make the unwary pause before involving themselves in a mystery whose character is made as explicit as it can be in the fourth and final question. In English, which has only one ordinary word for 'priest', it is difficult to maintain the clear theological distinction which the Latin of these questions embodies in its use of the words *sacerdos* and *presbyter*, *sacerdos* being reserved for that priesthood which is peculiar to Christ himself, the bishop and the priest in the more conventional sense sharing in this unique priesthood of Christ in differing degrees or grades.¹

This assimilation of the work of Christ to that of a priest is, naturally, unique to the Epistle to the Hebrews among the documents of the New Testament, where alone our Lord has the titles 'priest' and 'high-priest' explicitly applied to him. A valuable excursus in the *Unam Sanctam* volume, referred to above, examines with care the scriptural citations in the documents of Vatican II on the priesthood. It notes with specific details that of 153 clear scriptural allusions occurring once, or more frequently, only 59 are to be found in previous pontifical documents. In particular it is noted that *Presbyterorum Ordinis* does not fear to include references to texts

¹cf. 'Priesthood and Ministry', by Cornelius Ernst, O.P., *New Blackfriars*, December, 1967.

from the first letter to Timothy and that to Titus, previously passed over in silence as embarrassing to the case for priestly celibacy. It is noted too how the preparatory discussions led to one certain and one probable omission of texts about Christian holiness general in their import which had previously been used, even by John XXIII, in specific reference to the priesthood. A special paragraph is devoted to the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews which has, inevitably, always been cited in these contexts, 'though it has perhaps been applied a little too unilaterally to the ministerial priesthood, forgetting that it has in view primarily the priesthood of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the priesthood of the Old Testament'. With whatever variety of nuances these texts were previously applied, Hebrews 5, 1 was consistently invoked as saying that the priest was constituted in relation to the things of God. 'But our decree presents this reference in a new way: Taken from among men and appointed on behalf of men in relation to the things of God that they may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins, they live among the rest of men as their brothers. The contrast is striking!' Without forgetting that 'priests are witnesses and dispensers of another life than that of this earth', Vatican II sees first that the Epistle to the Hebrews is insisting upon the fact that a real share in common human experience was an essential part of our Lord's qualifications to be a priest, as it must be for those who share in that priesthood. Thus, although the total number of citations from the Epistle to the Hebrews in the new documents is not less numerous than in earlier texts, they are more significant. The present writer remembers many years ago preparing a retreat for secular clergy designed to redress the imbalance frequently produced by some of the more potentially inflating texts from Hebrews commonly cited on ordination cards, and being rewarded by a great deal of spontaneous, stimulating and profitable discussion, which in those days was not yet a normal feature of retreats.

It is therefore a pleasure to welcome among the clamour and variety of personal, not to say private, declarations of faith in the function of the priest a much-needed study by an English Dominican designed to go deeper into the implications of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and stimulated by similar queries about the appositeness of the use on ordination cards of many texts from that letter. Although his publishers have seen fit to present Fr Jerome Smith's *A Priest for Ever*¹ with a jazzy cover and a promise of revolution on the back, it is no dispraise of its contents to say that those who buy it on that account are unlikely to pursue its argument very far. It sticks to its professional purposes with an austerity unhappily too rare to appeal to contemporary habits in short reading, and reasonably supposes for its proper appreciation a surer familiarity with the exegetical views it discusses than many of his potential readers are

¹Jerome Smith, *A Priest for Ever*. Sheed & Ward, London, 34s.

likely to have or be willing to acquire. Yet it is only in this calm and studious way that any progress is likely to be made in the assessment of the incontrovertible factors which govern the theology of the priesthood.

Fr Jerome would certainly be the first to admit that his study, as it stands, is only a modest and fragmentary contribution to what must be a task of ecumenical significance as well as something vital to the internal life of the Church itself. His concluding section sensibly does not attempt to draw together the threads of his argument and those who have not done him the courtesy of following it through will hardly be in a position to grasp what he means by saying that it 'moves towards remythologization'. Yet in citing with approval the following words of C. K. Barrett he draws attention to the central point on which he has kept his eye all the way through: 'There is no writing in the New Testament which emphasizes more strongly than Hebrews the inadequacy of the Old Testament and its institutions, and the discontinuity (as well as continuity) between the Testaments.'

Those who wanted to find the essence of this position in an early document of unimpeachable orthodoxy would do well to examine the closing section of the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* of St Irenaeus, considered in its relation to its argument as a whole. Again one cannot be excused the consideration of the entire work if one would correctly appreciate what is really being said. It is in fact a matter of some interest that the elements which have been jettisoned in the bishop's instruction to the priests in the revised pontifical are exactly those which emphasized the *similarities* with the Old Testament, which must indeed often have puzzled those who either understood or reflected on them in the past. When Fr Jerome says that 'the argument of this essay moves towards remythologization' he makes, in effect, a cautious and considered statement of his awareness of the limitations within which, at our present state of theological knowledge, he knows himself to be working. It will be necessary to return in a moment to one aspect of 'mythologization' inescapably related to the priesthood which those who are priests can only ignore at their own and everyone else's peril.

Meanwhile, it may be noted that there is abroad an apparently powerful need on the part of many who find an understandable difficulty in living with the unresolved—and to some extent unresolvable—mystery of the priesthood to justify themselves in terms of new pastoral approaches. It is not a studied insult to say that the first volume by Karl Rahner of a new Catholic series *Studies in Pastoral Theology*¹ is not calculated to galvanize them into action. He would, in any case, surely never have been so imprecise as the enthusiastic author who introduces him with some wild statements about our all being theologians, couched in terms which reveal that

¹Karl Rahner, *Theology of Pastoral Action*, Burns & Oates, 30s.

he has never even considered an earlier sense of the word theologian; this originally alluded to something that *ought* to be true of us all, and enabled St Gertrude's conversion of heart to be referred to as 'becoming a theologian'. With *this* sense of theology all the best of Fr Rahner's own work is imbued, and those who admire this quality in him will be likely to find themselves happier with a collection of occasional pieces on the priesthood under the title *Servants of the Lord*.¹ There is in fact hardly anything of importance that can sensibly and unassailably be said about the priesthood in the contemporary or traditional situation that is not somewhere in some way said in the course of this book. Of special value is one of the more recent studies on 'The meaning of ecclesiastical office', which presupposes the documents and findings of Vatican II. 'Office is not lord of the spirit and his gifts but their servant. . . . Heralds of Christ's truth, they must first be hearers of his word. . . . Ecclesiastical office has its limits. It does not reach beyond the point where a man's own heart begins to act. Each of us must talk prayerfully with his God; the priest at the altar cannot do this praying in anyone's stead. . . . Compared with what God alone does and with what every Christian in God's grace may and must do, what ecclesiastical office does and can do is really very little.' These are, I imagine, the kind of things we should expect a writer to say who has always made it his business to point to the deeper levels of the work of the apostolate which alone give it meaning and efficacy. As another essay says: 'In the end every human being steps into the unutterable silence of the everlasting God.' It is the fact that the priest is also a man *even in relation to his own priesthood* that makes this statement universally true.

It also implies that it is his personal qualities as an individual that the priest puts at the disposal of his own priesthood, if he understands his vocation, as deputed by the Church, correctly. This is admirably said in an essay on 'The priestly office and personal holiness' that can scarcely be taken too seriously: 'You are only what you should be as a priest if you bring your whole life into your vocation. . . . The candle on the candlestick in the house of the Church that you are to be must burn by the oil of your own heart. . . . If you try to make the gap between your office and your life one of principle, deliberately maintaining it, if you try to keep yourself for yourself, giving the Church only your fulfilment of particular official duties, then you have violated a basic law of your life and of Christianity; that office and person must be one. And the violation will avenge itself. In your life. . . . One's sacramental powers remain but in such a way that nobody wants them. And the grace that is not passed on becomes a curse.' These words are terrifyingly true, as many unhappy men have discovered.

Yet it must unfortunately be said that there are many ordinands to whom these things have never been pointed out—at least in a way

¹Karl Rahner, *Servants of the Lord*, Burns & Oates, 30s.

that they were able to grasp. The professional rather than the theological approach to the priesthood has been fatal for priest and people in too many lives. It is very necessary that someone should point out, as Fr Rahner does, that: 'When all is said and done his calling cannot be learnt; indeed, seen in the round with all its necessary implications, it cannot even be wholly imparted by the *opus operatum* of the laying on of hands. It is a charism that must be embodied and lived in ecclesiological terms—indeed in terms of profane society, though in a way that is changing before our eyes. His life must be invested in his vocation; and his vocation must remain no less his life though he be no longer able to exercise it in the civil sense. . . . The priest of tomorrow will be a man to whom mature people find their way even though society does not drive children to him.'

It is reflections like these that give many troubled and hesitant men who have been assured that 'everything would be alright' after their ordination some grounds for feeling that they have been betrayed. Ordination is not a rite that promises any miracles of personal transformation. On the morning after, men to whom the claims and responsibilities of life were sometimes already more than they knew how to bear, find themselves saddled with a burden that, more and more, imperiously requires a personal maturity of a quite special kind. In order to make this point clear it is necessary to refer to a psychological fact about the priesthood of which no amount of theological theory can dispose. Once a man is known to be a priest, or makes any serious attempt to fulfil his deputation by the Church, no matter what 'style' he may choose, whether he fits into a convention or tries to devise his own, he is inevitably exposed to the phenomenon of 'projection' on the part of those who consult or associate with him. He is, after all, precisely from the point of view of his function, playing an archetypal role. Nor can he escape this by putting aside the traditional vestments—which have at least the merit of making this fact visible—and carrying out his functions in his shirtsleeves. Consequently he may become ensnared in his situation in one of two alternative ways. He may actually believe that he *is* the archetypal thing that uses him and that people see in him, and here the inscription on his ordination card may lead him directly into the trap of inflation so that, interiorly, he alternates in a series of unbearable crises between his godlike, other-worldly role and his, to him, profoundly shocking and shameful human sinfulness. Alternatively, retaining his own awareness of the distinction between his office and his person and hence of his common need of the grace which the priesthood exists, among other things, to make available, he may fail to bring this distinction to the attention of those who depend on him so that insensibly he renounces his official deputation and so becomes the focus of the private illusions of his clients who distinguish him as the kind and understanding priest over against the

cruel and inconsiderate Church. Thus whether they cast *themselves* in an archetypal role or try to forget, for their private comfort, that others, and not only the old diehards, will inevitably do so, the clergy are in peril. In a Church where all are servants, none is, in all truth, more a servant than the priest, and if he ceases to be aware of this he betrays both himself and his calling. This is a realization that is not easy for anyone to live with.

St John Chrysostom puts the facts of the case quite bluntly in a sermon which ought to be better known to the clergy than it is. Chrysostom's second homily on the Second Epistle to Timothy is not easy to summarize, but the general trend of its argument is suggested by its opening sentence: 'There is nothing worse than that man should measure and judge of divine things by human reasonings. For thus he will fall from the rock (of faith) and be deprived of the light.' One must not, John continues, be ashamed of the fact that it is the cross one is commissioned to preach. (St Paul, who had felt this urgently, was, of course, Chrysostom's great hero.) It is after all, John will insist, God who is going to do all the real work. The sermon builds up a very objective picture of the priest, both as teacher and as minister of the sacraments. When a priest, it argues, is teaching or administering the sacraments it is not his own words he is using and not his own power. 'Do you know what a priest is? He is the angel of the Lord.' (Chrysostom is, naturally, using the word angel in its original Greek sense of 'one who is sent', as his subsequent words make clear.) Is what he says his own, he asks? 'If you despise him, it is not him you despise, but God who ordained him. And how does it appear that it is God who ordained him, you say. If this is not what you think, your hope is in vain. For if God works nothing through him, you have no baptism, partake in no mysteries, receive no blessings; and so you are not a Christian.'

This may sound like the prelude to some pretty inflationary stuff. But it turns out to be quite otherwise. Whether a priest is worthy or not is, from your point of view, a matter of irrelevance, John continues. God, after all, spoke through Balaam's ass. And does anyone refuse to go to the doctor because he is himself a sick man? It might perhaps have been preferable for some who have accepted the burden of the priesthood to have been told that they were going to be like Balaam's ass, that although many would approach them in the reasonable expectation that they were soul-doctors, they would themselves continue to be men in need of a physician rather than that they should have been allowed to get themselves caught up into that archetypal world in which they were 'priests for ever according to the order of Melchisdech'. For, after all, what precisely that means, and in what sense it can be legitimately applied to them, is something that is not yet more clearly determined than the Church's official deputation announces. That, as the new series of questions in the revised ordination rite makes evident, is quite

enough to be getting on with, and for the rest there is only that humble human awareness to which Chrysostom, both by word and life, so memorably draws attention, and which is the one indispensable preparation for the pastoral life. For it is certain that men who cannot succeed in being pastors to their own souls will never succeed in being pastors to anyone else's.

There is really nothing either very exciting or very new in saying this, and yet there is. For, as Fr Rahner has it: 'The really modern Christian is not the man who makes a point of non-conformity to a certain past and conforms to a today that only shallow minds take for the future; he is the man who keeps the old and anticipates the real future. Much in the Church which seems old really anticipates the future before anyone has yet caught sight of it. A person who had the courage to practise a real ecclesial piety in the age of naive individualism was anticipating the age just dawning now; a person who made real exercises of election at Ignatius' feet was anticipating a genuine theological existentialism of solitary decision that may not be fully with us until tomorrow. No, the rare, resolute people who find the things of tomorrow in those of yesterday are the ones to tell us what today really is.'

Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration, 1810 to the Present

A Review and Critique

JAMES T. BURTCHAELL

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