

preach the Gospel, and head their religious communities in the ways described above? Possibly, here and there, once in a long interval of time. Most priests are people like other people. They like, among other nice things, nice bank accounts and nice homes. They also like a good meal, an occasional drink, or a flavorful pipe, as one would want them to. But they also go after honors, nor are they above being jealous of, or cross with, each other. Are we to conclude that most priests are bad priests? No, though some *are* bad. The majority are various approximations to the ideal, and that's all that can be realistically expected. The ideal priesthood is such a precious gift, so very desperately needed in this dog-eat-dog world, that people should be thankful for *any* approximation to the ideal.

The life of a priest is full of tribulation. Yet he can be, for himself and others, an instrument to communicate the "peace that passeth all understanding." To take part in the life of Christ in that way, to be His minister with all the hard effort and suffering it entails, is a joy greater than any happiness one can find in this world.

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## The Priesthood

There are two towns. One of them is without priests. The other is without garbage collectors. Which do you choose to live in?

Fortunately, we do not have to make that decision, but the question is not without merit. People would answer it differently from age to age. I imagine a man of an earlier culture would opt for priests against garbage collectors without hesitation. If the services of a priest are indispensable by way of one's going to heaven, surely he is more important even than the man who removes the ugliness and stench of decaying organic mat-

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ter. Ah, but there's the rub! *Is* the priest indispensable as an intermediary between earth and heaven? What if there *is* no heaven?

This last question must be faced. There is no point in avoiding it, or relegating it to the background. If there is no heaven, then the priest is, as priest, of all men the most useless.

The conditional ("if there is no heaven") makes the priest's function a very difficult one in an age where people profess not to believe in heaven. For the priest's function is precisely to get people to *see* that there is heaven, and then lead them there.

Not just *many* people, but *all* people are looking for heaven. Many become discouraged and turn away from "heaven" because they do not know what heaven really is. They are misled by pictures in their minds. They think heaven is place where people go later, not now. They think it is a dream-like, softly but opulently decorated habitat of endless numbers of beautiful people, some lounging around, others accompanying angels playing the harp. The fact is that "going to heaven" is a manner of speaking. When you discover that you are a child of God, loved and not alone, you have begun to see what heaven is like. This love must be traced beyond another person, or beyond other persons. The love given to another person or coming from him is very valuable. A genuine love is an exquisite thing of great rarity. But it can be disappointing. It is often cut short. Rather, two or more people who love each other must do so in God. In this way, when they lose each other, when a community where there is love loses one of its members, as it must, the survivor knows or the survivors know that the one who is no longer there has gone forth unto the Being from whom all love and justice spring. That is heaven. No more can be, and need be, said about it.

How is all this to turn into a conviction to *live* by? How are the people of the world to know heaven?

We think of the priest as a person of certain privileges. Some things he alone is authorized to do. If the

community does not have a priest, how is the Divine Liturgy to be celebrated? Who will baptize our babies? Who will bless our houses?

To think of the priest as a man whose job it is only to perform the Divine Liturgy is an error. It also *leads* to error. Such a one-sided view leads away from the specifically Christian view of priesthood. This priesthood is quite distinct from priesthood as seen in the Old Testament. It is distinct from priesthood as seen in other, primitive, religions. In many non-Christian religions the "priest" is a glorified, and sometimes not-so-glorified, magician. He is a shaman or a medicine man. He knows the proper things and the proper words to be done and said to bring about a desired result. He will, for example, say the right words, do the right things, as a consequence of which the right god will hear the petition of the suppliant and bestow the requested favor.

If we assume that the Christian priest's distinctive job is nothing but the celebration of the sacraments, we will be faced with a hard question. How shall we tell a Christian priest from a magician? Isn't it true that the priest puts bread and wine on a table, goes through some motions, says the right words and, lo and behold, the bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ! Isn't this magic?

No, it is not. The Christian priest is not a magician, and the sacraments are not forms of magic. Why?

Because each performance of the sacrament of the Divine Liturgy is not a separate, isolated event. When the priest celebrates the Divine Liturgy, he does not do anything *in addition* to Christ's work. He does not do anything that Christ has not *already* done. He *continues* Christ's work, but without bringing about anything *more* than what has been brought about or achieved by the crucified and risen Lord. In the Divine Liturgy, Christ offers Himself to God the Father. One must not therefore think of the Divine Liturgy as a performance whose *end in view* is to change one thing into another: bread to flesh, or wine to blood. The Divine Liturgy is

not a short cut for the preparation of a drug with magical properties. The aim of the Divine Liturgy is to witness the concrete presence of Christ Himself in the midst of us now, as yesterday, as tomorrow. It is to witness His physical and visible, not just spiritual and invisible, presence.

The priest is the one through whom such witnessing becomes possible. But there cannot be such witnessing without the preaching of the Gospel. Next to the celebration of the Divine Liturgy that is the second major function of the priest. Now, preaching the Gospel is not the same as telling the people the events recorded in the four Gospels. It is not the same as repeating to people the moral lessons to be learned from the Gospels and from the Epistles. To preach the Gospel is to preach it with one's life. In the priest's life, the Gospel must come alive. It must be visibly realized. To celebrate the Divine Liturgy Sunday after Sunday with total absorption, with a mystical experience that will forcibly communicate itself to the congregation is difficult. But it is equally difficult to live the Gospel. Very few people have the moral fortitude, for example, to accept suffering on behalf of other people. There is evil wherever there is a community. A community is always looking for a scapegoat. A priest is someone who will voluntarily bear, and take away, the sins of his community.

But of course, he who taketh away the sins of the world is also the one whose mercy the world begs. Christ the Lamb, Christ the Prophet is also Christ the King. By way of participating in the kingship of Christ, the priest heads his community--a community that is not secular, not political, but religious. He wins the respect of the community not because of his clever manipulations, not because of his position, but because he is the sort of man he is. People tend to respect spirituality when they see it. That is the priest's third function. Thus, we have the sacramental, kerygmatic, and ecclesiastical functions of the priest.

Are there priests who celebrate the Divine Liturgy,