On Priesthood and Celibacy.

The School of Benedict XVI

> "Only what has been lived and suffered can be thought. And only if we continually re-embrace the Lord's inheritance in this totality [of life, suffering and thought - JSz] can our thinking find its way".
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> J. Ratzinger, *Priestly Ministry*, 1970

1.

The perspective is indeed vast: I no longer call you servants, but friends (cf. Jn 15:15). Christ's words define the very essence and core of the priesthood. The Lord makes us His friends… He entrusts to us everything, offering Himself as that we can speak on His behalf. I absolve your sins… This is my body, my blood… What enormous trust…

Our response must be to care for this friendship. For our communion with Christ: in thinking, desiring, feeling. The response must be a persistent, humble prayer, like the one before Mass communion: "do not let us be separated from you".

Christ, in turn, responds to our response. And so the conversation between Jesus and his disciple unfolds. During ordination, in laying His hands on us through the hands of the bishop, the Lord says: "You belong to me, and my hands protect you. My heart protects you. You are hidden in my hands and thus have a place in the space of my love. Remain in my hands and give me your hands. Do not claim ownership of things or people with your hands. Let them remain empty. Let them transmit my touch, the touch of God. But do not be afraid. I am with you all the days. I will not abandon you. And you do not abandon me".

This is how Benedict XVI portrays this conversation.

Fundamental to the life and ministry of the priesthood, then, is an interior, personal relationship with Christ. All priestly formation should lead to the development of such a bond. The priest must be a man who has come to know Christ deeply, has met Him and has learned to love Him. He has come to know, meet, and love Him. "He must therefore be a man of prayer, a truly 'spiritual' man. In this sense, we speak of a priest as 'spiritual'. If he does not have a strong spiritual foundation, he cannot persevere in his ministry. He must also learn from Christ how not to seek himself in life and not to seek his own exaltation. He must learn

to live for Christ and for His fold. Such a way of life defies our natural inclinations. However, the man who is able to forget himself gradually finds that he is truly free. An invincible joy springs from union with Christ". This is a quote from Benedict XVI's "The Essence of the Priesthood".

2.

Fr. Andrea Santoro, a martyr, an Italian priest killed at the beginning of this century in Trebizonda, Turkey, while he was praying, wrote: “Man becomes ready for salvation only through the sacrifice of their body. We are to carry the evil and suffering of the world in our bodies, just as Jesus did. Jesus took on human flesh. Let us give Him our body so that He can come and transform this world”.

This is what priestly celibacy is; it is a strong, significant and straightforward sign for our secularised age, a sign of readiness for sacrifice and martyrdom. It means to give oneself completely to Jesus, not only in spirit but also in body, so that he can come and transform this world. Virginity is an emphatic sign of the primacy of God in human life, of the indispensability of God's priority in arranging the world. Indeed, the most obvious sign and witness of the primacy of God is always human life lived according to the logic of the wheat grain: who loses themselves, gain themselves. This loss of self is inherent in being a Roman Catholic priest. It is a "structural" feature of the priesthood, so to speak, which is why the Church links priesthood with celibacy. Celibacy is precisely accepting that life will not be fulfilled in a "regular" way. It means giving up one's own life agenda, allowing another to gird one and lead one where one does not actually want to go oneself, as Jesus says to one of his disciples.

Celibacy today is one of the greatest signs that one truly believes in the reality and truth of God. It is a veritable treasure of our Church. Perhaps this is why the ancient Christian writers called celibacy "white martyrdom"; in the first centuries (and not only then) martyrdom was the acme of holiness. This is not because celibacy in itself involves intractable suffering; matrimony can be a much greater cross, and arguably sometimes it is. Nor is a life of celibacy something better (ethically, meritoriously) than a life of marriage. For the best thing for man is always what God wants of him, whatever that is. The greatness and value of priestly celibacy, on the other hand, lies in the fact that celibacy, like martyrdom, is a powerful sign of faith in the absolute primacy of God in life and in the fact that life is fulfilled solely in and through God.

After Israel's entry into the Promised Land, the generation of Levi, i.e. the Old Testament priests, was the only one of the twelve generations to which God did not assign land. “The Lord is his patrimony”, “It is you, o God, who secures my life”, rather than land – this is how the relevant excerpts from Scripture define the predicament of a Levite. The life of a Levite was thus both a privilege and a great courage. God was the bedrock of his life, his "land". Benedict XVI: "This Old Testament model is fulfilled in the priests of the Church in a new and much more profound way: they must live exclusively through God and for Him. St. Paul elucidates what this could mean in concrete terms: henceforth, he lives on what people give him, because he brings them the Word of God, which is our true bread, our true life. In this New Testament transformation of the Levite's understanding of landlessness, the renunciation of marriage and family is revealed, which stems from the radical being for God. This is how the Church understood the word 'clergy' (common inheritance). Joining the clerical state means renouncing reliance on oneself in life in order to recognise God as the only support and assurance in life” (*What is Christianity?: The Last Writings*, Kraków 2023, p. 165-166).

This is what priestly celibacy is: being lackland and being subject solely to God. It is a sign that God alone is enough to live and live a rewarding life. “Living” in God as one’s own land is the absolute heart of a priest’s life. They left everything and followed Him (cf. Lk 5:11), says the Gospel. God and His cause are worthy of putting one's life on the line, of clinging to the Gospel. The life of a celibate is a clear sign in the Church that God really exists. That it is worth and necessary to bet on Him in life. That He is the treasure, the most precious pearl, the one and only.

God is the only one you cannot live without. And this is what celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church is a sign of. It is not celibacy that is the real and ultimate disability in life, but godlessness, life without God, a-theism. God is all we need. The radicalism of renouncing the most beautiful and highest form of human love - which is marriage and the family - is a necessary sign for all of us (non-celibates and celibates) of the absolute necessity of God for the fulfilment of human destiny. Everything that does not reach up to God is inadequate, Benedict XVI teaches.

This what we celibates (flawed like all humans but trusting) bear witness to. I write this without pride, but with a sense of the value and of such a choice and form of destiny, of a

way of life. Let me repeat after Andrea Santoro: "Jesus took on human flesh. Let us give Him our flesh so that He can come and transform this world".

Of course: God exists and is truly God. It also means that He is generous and will not allow us to surpass Himself in this generosity. Every priest experiences this in hundreds of ways... He who is with God is never less alone than when he is alone (William of Saint-Thierry). We will come to this later on.

3.

What image of the priest can we glean from the culture of the first decades of the 21st century? This was the question I was asked by the editors of a Polish quarterly.

One has to be careful with the term "image", I replied. I do not want to depreciate the problem; it is important how we are perceived and whether we are understood. Neither do I want to disdainfully distance myself from public respect and support (that I don't care and that I supposedly have more important things in mind), because it is important (spiritually, socially, psychologically, etc.) both for a priest and for the great Cause that is at stake here. But still, image is something secondary to truth, and too much focus on how we are perceived can be harmful. Benedict XVI did not care about PR, and someone will probably say that this is where he faltered, but I do not necessarily agree. It was, I would argue, the opposite: not caring about the trivia was the wellspring of strength, courage, and freedom of this fragile man.

I repeat: it can be damaging. Mainly because the Roman Catholic priest says (what he is supposed to say), does (what he is supposed to do), and lives (as he is supposed to live) not at the command of the people (even the people of God), but at the command of Jesus Christ. This must not be forgotten: the people do not choose for themselves a representative or hero to be the exponent of their hopes or ideals, someone who "boosts them". It is God who draws the people (each and every man) to Himself and sends them a man to proclaim His demands and His salvation. This is the foundation stone. If this is lacking, everything will be turned upside down.

The crux of the matter, then, is our, priests', image in the eyes of God, not in the eyes of men.

There is a wonderful concept, an ancient one, deeply connected with the authenticity of a religious attitude: "God-fearing". The priest is to be a God-fearing man and therefore he is to fear God rather than people. This is no slavish fear, a fear of an incalculable power

hostile to man. Such fear was transcended by Jesus when he made us his friends (see above). It is about the fear that exists in great love, which dreads its loss and would not hurt the Beloved. In this way, the priest must "fear God". For, says the Psalmist, "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom". The opposite of this statement is also true: the fear of man (placed before the fear of God) is the beginning of all foolishness.

Importantly, the priest's freedom from the fear of men (and the kindred servile attitude and flattery, the pretence of being a "cool guy", etc.) is to spring not from pride (and the kindred sense of superiority, contempt for the "laity", condescension, etc.), but, like God-fearing, from love.

The priest must be a courageous and indefatigable fisherman/shepherd, which he can be only by committing his life and the attendant risk. These are the stakes; if we offer less, the Church and the faith will disappear. We must offer something of our own blood. God does not want a mouthpiece priest who will merely repeat “another’s words” (even if they were God’s). The word proclaimed by the priest must become his own word and he must no less than intertwine his life with the life of God on earth. Naturally, then the priest will be the pain in the neck of his time as the one who guarantees God’s truth with his soul and body (being celibate) and makes it credible through his life. Then he cannot be ignored, irrespective of the “image issues” of the Church and God’s disregard for the question of image.

Benedict XVI: “The priest needs to know how to keep a vigil. He needs to be vigilant in the face of the hostile powers of the Evil One. He should sustain the world in a state of sensitivity to God. He should stand upright in the face of the trends of the age. Unyielding in the truth. Unyielding in the service of the good. Standing before the Lord must always, in the deepest sense, also mean a readiness to burden oneself before the Lord with the affairs of men” (*What is Christianity?: The Last Writings*, p. 171). The pope also wrote at some place that if there were no Roman Catholic priests, they would need to be invented ASAP.

4.

In the 1970s, when I was a student priest, I would meet elderly, simple and pious people who were certain that preparation for the priesthood involves basically practicing the celebration of Holy Mass. It must have been similar in Bavaria thirty years earlier, because Benedict XVI mentions it. He writes: one was surprised that the seminary took "so long, however one knew that in order to do so one had to master Latin and that it was not such a simple matter".

An excellent metaphor and essentially a profound truth. Benedict XVI said: "Preparation for the priesthood is a matter of learning to celebrate the Eucharist. But one could also say the opposite: that the Eucharist is there to teach us how to live. The school of the Eucharist is a school of a proper life; it leads us to learn from Him who alone could say of Himself: I am the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). The mission of the Eucharist is that the priest, speaking, has the right to identify himself with Christ's 'I'. To become a priest and to be a priest means to move relentlessly towards this identification. We will never attain it fully, but in seeking it we are on the right path: on the path to God and to man, on the path of love."

To learn to celebrate Mass... What must happen to the priest is what happens to the wheat grain, and ultimately to Jesus during Passover and Holy Mass. Saint Paul sets an example. He was not a good speaker. He made mistakes both in his life and in his pastoral strategy, and he was not free from defects of character. But the extraordinary effectiveness of his apostolate came from his personal commitment to preaching the Gospel from his total dedication to Christ. "yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). It was a devotion to the Lord so complete that the Apostle to the Nations did not fear or retreat from dangers, hardships, and persecution.

This principle holds true in every age; today is no different. The Church is effective and credible insofar as those who belong to it are prepared to personally bear the consequences of their fidelity to Christ. As in Paul's time, Christ also needs priests today who are ready to sacrifice themselves, to identify with him, ready to enter with him into the very heart of the Mass. And in celebrating the Eucharist, the priest cannot stop at words and rites: he must offer himself. This is what his Mass is all about.

If Christ is the Word, "the Word made flesh", then the priest is the voice for the Word; we intuitively feel that this is both beautiful and profound. What does it mean, though? What does Paul's "having clothed oneself with Christ" mean? It is about much more than the attitude of, say, a telegrapher who faithfully transmits someone else's words and does not even have to be interested in their content. A priest, meanwhile, must communicate Christ's words in the first person, and identify with them in such a way that they become his own. The Gospel needs a witness: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me".

"Follow me", that is, imitate me and live like me: "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it" (Lk 17:33). An extraordinary witness to this attitude, John Paul II, lived at the turn of the millennium. The trajectory of his life and his priesthood is a clear testimony to this truth. At every turn of his life, he lost everything he had: his acting and artistic passions, his academic work, his fellowship with young people, Krakow, his homeland, and finally his health, and his life. All this must have appeared to him as a loss of himself. He lost all that precisely when it was becoming his human identity, the content of his pastoral work. He never wanted to keep his own life, to have it for himself. He wanted to offer himself without limitation, right up to the last moment, for Christ and thus also for us. It was in this way that he was able to experience how all that he had placed in the Lord's hands was returning anew, by God's will: his love of the word, of poetry, of literature, of Polishness. These became essential elements of his pastoral mission and imparted a new freshness, a new relevance, and a new strength in proclaiming the Gospel even when it is a sign of opposition. This is how Pope Benedict saw and understood Saint John Paul II.

The priesthood, then, is not an accumulation of activities. It is first and foremost the reaching down to the very bottom and essence of life, a requirement placed upon us, and a certain lifestyle. In this sense, we speak of it as a vocation rather than a profession. The old rite of Holy Orders contained a concerning statement: *sat periculosum est hoc* – "What you are about to begin now is gravely dangerous". To have to deal directly with God and on a daily basis, to treat it as part of one's job description, so to speak, to write "vocation" when one want to know our "profession". All this can be in many respects hazardous. Among other things, it runs the risk of making proximity to God a matter of course, of reducing the tangible presence of the living God to a habit which is "harmless" to the fear of God and seemingly obviates the need to return to God on a regular basis. It may transform the life-giving drama of the Mass into a "harmless" text with little meaning, not followed by one's mind and life.

This is the task God entrusts us with: to be the fishermen of men. First, to allow ourselves to be caught by God himself, to let God "take us alive", as the Church Fathers used to say. Then, in this Gospel "fishing company" led by Peter, to fish people out of the salty waters of death ourselves. It is a glorious task of Jonah, Peter, and Christ himself. Of course, there will be many fishless nights along the way. But the ultimate end of this work is always and irrevocably a miraculous catch, if only the Master accompanies us in the boat of our lives

and is very close. “Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” – says Jesus (Jn 15:5).

To remain in Him means to imitate Him. It means not to seek one’s own way and renounce one’s will to the will of Jesus and treat it as true priority. It means to follow Him even if it involved treading on water and have the courage to oppose the natural force of gravity: “Take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33). He is the way. When a priest lives within the field of gravity of Jesus’ love, within the circle of His grace, they are on the safe side. However, “being with Him” must be the heart of the priestly ministry and life. Long days and long nights of experiencing communion with Him.

Communion with God, belief together with people - this is the span of the arms of the priestly vocation and the cross. But this cross, the cross of the Mass that teaches us and that we learn all our lives to celebrate in our own lives is the deepest joy. “We are helpers of your joy”, writes Paul to the Corinthians on the essence of priestly ministry. This is a great definition of the essence of being a priest: he is there to kindle, strengthen, and protect people's joy in God and in life.

It's interesting, but many of us wearing Roman collars can't explain why we have become priests. Basically, we just had the conviction that God wanted something from us and that we would only be able to achieve it if we became priests. And that this was the right thing to do; this was what we had to do with our lives.

5.

Sat periculosum est hoc.

What these words also mean is that in every age, including our own, the priest is the first to experience temptations and to feel the pulse and dramas of his time, to endure the anguish of faith with and for others. Like Jesus in the desert, he participates in the temptations of his people and the world in order to overcome the Enemy and open the way. If, at a given time, philosophy, science, or political power create obstacles to faith, it is priests who are the first to feel it, before the lay faithful. And it is they who - through suffering and perseverance in faith, in prayer, in trust in the Lord - are to mark out the way of God in the new deserts of history, overcoming the Enemy. God never leaves them alone in this work.

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