

# Life of the Spirit

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## A PRIEST: FIRST AND LAST

### I

SERMON PREACHED AT THE FIRST MASS OF  
FATHER JEROME RIGBY, AT ST DOMINIC'S,  
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BY

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WHAT is a priest? He is a mediator between God and man (*Summa* III, 22, 1), that is, he stands halfway between God the Creator and man the created, giving the sacred things of God to the people and offering the prayers of the people to God. Says St Paul, 'Every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices' (Heb: v, 1). A priest then has duties to God and man, and these duties are duties of love.

First let us look at his duties of love to God. And here I would speak not of the whole of a priest's duty to God. I would put aside for the moment his daily divine office, his prayers and meditations and benedictions, his officiating in the sacraments of baptism, penance and the rest. I wish to limit myself to one single act with which the priesthood is infinitely bound up. I mean of course the Mass. What is the Mass? It is Calvary. It is the sacrifice made by the Son of God in atonement for the sins of the world, the outpouring of that precious Blood, 'that speaketh better things than that of Abel' (Heb: 12, 24). It is with that sacrifice that the priest begins his day. 'When morning was come Jesus stood on the shore' (John 21, 4); morning by morning Jesus, his Master, his Friend, his Lover, stands on the shore and the day begins in the light of that Presence. He takes into his hands the little round disc of white bread and utters over it ineffable words, he holds up the golden chalice of wine and in the person of God bids the substance of wine be changed into the Blood and Soul and Divinity of Christ. Then

he receives the consecrated Host and Wine into his heart and by the vision of faith he is face to face with God. 'In that day you shall know that I am in the Father and you in me and I in you' (John 14, 20). At that moment the priest is in him and he is in the priest. And Oh! the joy and peace and love of those first moments, a joy and peace and love without fixed horizon;

'And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond  
Still leagues beyond these leagues there is more sea.'

The priest and his divine Friend are together surely throughout the day and the fragrance of that morning visit lasts till the set of sun. Henceforth the priest is never lonely. When alone in his cell, when working among his people, at home and abroad, in the silent church as well as in crowded rooms, he has his Friend with him; a friend always the same, whether we are tepid or fervent, sinners or saints, for 'the bruised reed he shall not break and the smoking flax he shall not quench' (Is. 42, 3). Such is the divine friendship that the priest enjoys, for it is a friendship indeed: 'I will not now call you servants for the servant knoweth not what his lord doth. But I have called you friends because all things whatsoever I have heard of my Father, I have made known to you' (John 15, 15). Surely then he may cry out with the Psalmist 'What have I in Heaven? or besides thee what do I desire upon earth? For thee my flesh and my heart . . . Thou art the God of my heart and the God that is my portion for ever' (Ps. 72, 25 and 26). There is but one love in all our lives; early or late it may come, but there is but one. It is the first and the last, and it is eternal. For the priest this love is for God present in the Sacrament of the Altar. Counting all things but loss for the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Lord, for whom he has suffered the loss of all things, counting them as nothing that he may gain Christ . . . being made conformable to his death (Phil: 3, 8 and 10). Then in the transport of his Mass-carried beyond himself in the love of his Father and Master and Friend, the words of St Paul break from him: 'With Christ I am nailed to the Cross'—his very personality seems strained to the breaking, so close is that union of love with love, each embracing and embraced, 'With Christ I am nailed to the Cross, and I live now not I but Christ liveth in me' (Gal: 2, 19 and 20).

But a priest has duties also towards his neighbour, and these again are duties of love. It was Cain who sought excuse for he would not be his brother's keeper. It was Christ who was the Good Shepherd, laying down his life for his sheep, and a priest is *alter Christus*, another Christ. He is not only a sacrificing priest, but

also a self-sacrificing priest. The titles given him by the Sacred Scriptures are all titles that imply this duty of love towards his fellows. For priests are called 'Fishers of men' (Mark 1, 17), 'Shepherds of the flock' (1 Peter 5, 2 and 4), 'ambassadors of God' (2 Cor. 5, 20), even 'fellow-workers with God' (1 Cor. 5, 20). According to the various parables they are ploughers and sowers and reapers. 'In this', says St John (1 Ep. 3, 16) 'we have known the charity of God because he hath laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for our brethren'—'We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren' (3, 14), 'for the charity of Christ urgeth us' (2 Cor. 5, 14). Some think of the priest as like Melchisedech, 'without father, without mother, without genealogy' (Heb. 7, 3), as though he were some sexless mystery. It is true in a certain sense, for a priest will often have to labour among people who care not what his name may be or his family, who are ignorant of where he was born, and trouble themselves little as to where he may die. In that sense he is very often a lonely figure, apart from, and distinct from, his fellow-men. And yet how one-sided is this view and in reality how utterly false. The true love of God makes a priest more and more affectionate to those that he loves. The very love and loyalty that he pays to his Master overflow in tenderness to those whom his heart holds dear. '*Veracior est illa amicitia*', says St Jerome, '*quae sanguine Christi conglutinata est*'. Those friends are the more truly loving whose souls are cemented together with the blood of Christ. Think you that when the priest prays for his friends in his communion, when he mentions their names with his lips that are purple with the blood of God, think you that he is a lonely figure then? Surely there can be no love that is stronger, more affectionate, more tender, than the love of a good priest. Ask of the mothers and fathers who have given their children to God, ask of them if these consecrated sons are less affectionate, less loving to them than the others who yet abide beneath their father's roof. Ah, no! It is not the good priest who is less of a son, less of a brother or a friend. No, it was the Judas who betrayed his God, who also, we are told, cared nothing for the poor. But the true priest holds his office by love alone—'We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren' (1 John 3, 14) 'for the charity of Christ urgeth us' (2 Cor. 5, 14).

Does all this seem frightening to a priest, this high ideal of love of God and love of man, this noble manner of Christ, this following of Christ that he is bound to strive after? Do St Paul's words ring sternly to him, 'Neglect not the grace that is in thee, given thee

by the imposition of hands of the priesthood' (1 Tim. 4, 14)? 'Neglect not' for alas he may neglect it. He is frightened at times, for no man but the priest himself knows his own secret failings, knows his sins of childhood and boyhood, knows his unfaithfulness to grace, and can contrast his littleness and meanness with the noble character of his friends and school-companions, who yet were not called to that sublime office. No one knows, and yet he goes on, feeling that he is but obeying God's voice and that he can do all things in him that strengtheneth him. For he hears the words that Josue proclaimed in his camp, 'What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest he make the hearts of his brethren to fear' (Deut. 20,8). That proclamation has been passed down the line, some have drawn back, but others have gone forward, knowing indeed their unfitness, but trusting in all reverence to the loving-kindness of God.

And so, my dear brethren, today one more priest comes here to sing his first Mass, to take for the first time into his hands the Body and Blood of his God, that God that giveth joy to his youth. Today for the first time he will consecrate the bread and wine and change them into the Body and Blood of Christ Jesus our Lord. Pray then for him and for his. Thank God with his father and mother and family that they have been honoured with so great a grace; and what a joy it shall be to them, to the father and mother, in the dread hour of their death, to know that they will be remembered morning by morning in the sacrifice of the Mass. Pray too for him, and when the bell for the Consecration sounds and there is stillness in this great church and the Divine Victim is lifted up and is visible to every human eye; and when after the Mass is over and you come, in accordance with our hallowed Catholic custom, to kiss his hands that are yet wet with the chrism of yesterday's anointing—pray for him. I say, that he may worthily live up to his high calling, that he may be a priest in truth forever according to the order of Melchisedech, that his labours and works, that his sorrows and disappointments, as when he sees despite his every endeavour, souls falling from their love and service of God; that his joys and successes, that his whole life and that his very death may be according to the mind of Christ.

O Father, O Master, O Friend, O Jesus, aid him more than ever since, being nearer to thee it is meet that men should perceive it and that his tongue may utter words bearing the impress of the sacred Presence (cf. Lacordaire, Conf: 37 Notre Dame).