

SACERDOS IN AETERNUM

BY

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NLY recently the liturgy has recognised this title by a votive Mass in honour of the Priesthood of Christ. One of the oldest of his titles, its origins stretch back not only through the history of the Jewish people but through the history of the whole world.

Jesus our brother, Jesus the Man, the Everlasting Man, Jesus the representative of our race before the throne of God, his and our Father, stood and stands before that throne in the character of priest. Chosen by God he was, before ages began, a worthy representative, performing the supreme act of a priest: sacrifice.

The Jewish priesthood was a confined thing. A symbol, may be, of things to come, yet so much a symbol, so much a superficial creation, as not to merit, at least in its decrepitude, much honour. This fact of its passingness, its shadow-character, was even admitted in the Old Covenant. The new priesthood that was foreshadowed was not to be of its order, but *secundum ordinem Melchisedech*, as the Psalmist made quite clear; further, in the prophecy of Malachy there is the faint warning that the old ways would pass, that sacrifice would not for ever be confined to Jerusalem, and therefore to the Temple priesthood. It foresaw that sacrifice would wash the world with its blood. In every place God must be worshipped in sacrifice. 'Behold, the days shall come, saith the Lord, and I will perfect unto the house of Israel, and unto the house of Juda, a new testament. Not according to the testament which I made to their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt: because they continued not in my testament: and I regarded them not, saith the Lord'.¹

So even with the Old Testament we have direct witness that the old agreement was only for a time; that another Law was to come. 'I will give my laws into their mind, and in their heart will I write them'. But though the law was no longer on stone, there was not to be complete abrogation of all sacrifice—as we have seen from Malachy; and though the old priesthood was to disappear, that was not the end of all priesthood. 'Thou art a priest *for ever*, according to the order of Melchisedech' (Ps. 109, 4), was said of the Messiah and he was to be of the tribe of Juda and not of the order of Aaron. Therefore it followed, firstly, that the Levitical priesthood was not the priesthood of Christ, and so was to vanish, and secondly that if this was to happen, then the Old Law, which only allowed priests

¹ Hebrews, 8, 8 ff: quoting Jeremiah 31, 31-34.

of the order of Aaron, was also abrogated. 'There is indeed a setting aside of the former commandment, because of the feebleness and unprofitableness thereof. For the Law brought nothing to perfection but the bringing in of a better hope, by which we draw nigh to God' (Heb. 7, 12).

Most people are so little aware of the literature of neighbouring peoples, which describes non-Jewish life at the same periods, that they incline to imagine the Jews as alone. The reality is almost the reverse, the Jews were engulfed in a morass of pagan nations, rites and cults. One of the few incidents in the Old Testament which vividly portrays this is when Abram meets Melchisedech after the defeat of the kings. The time is about 2000 years before Christ, as far before as we are after; it was seven hundred years at least before Moses, the instrument of God who was to give them the law—or way of life—preparatory to the coming of the Messias. Melchisedech was an example of ancient custom. He was both king and priest, not priest according to the Law, but according to the ancient type of priest, ancient even in his day. We find it all over the East, even to China, where the Emperor offered solemn sacrifice once a year. It was, after all, natural that the chief should represent his people or city not only to the world but also to God.²

Christ was acclaimed as a priest according to the order or style of Melchisedech, firstly in order to make it clear that he was not in the line of Jewish priests according to the Law, which line was doomed to cease. Secondly, in order to sanctify the natural order of priesthood. For sacrifice is part of the natural order of things. Jesus, by taking upon himself the priesthood, caught up this very ancient thing and gave it real meaning, power and value. The ancient rites and priests were shadows cast upon the earth by the sacrifice and priest that were coming in due time.³

The primæval purpose of a priest is to represent a society before God, to act in their name. He must, then, be one of themselves. The breakdown of friendship between men and God which began with Adam and which every man and woman since has intensified by further ingratitude, rendered worship and due honour to God impossible of fulfilment. There was no Just Man who would live as God had planned: according to God's laws, in love with God. Each one loves himself or baser things instead. There was no Just Man there before God to pay him his due worship and thanks, or to make

² In the case of the Jews there was at first no king, for God himself was their King, as he said to them when they asked to have one. Cf. 1 Kings.

³ 'God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all in these days hath spoken to us by his Son, whom he hath appointed *Heir of all things*'. (Heb. 1, 1 ff.)

amends for others, each man being depraved. Yes, one man there was, the Man Jesus, the perfect Man, like unto us in all things save sin, who could cry in pain, who could be worn down by the heat of the day, by the ingratitude of men, who could cry out at their incredulity, who sweated blood at the thought of cruel death; whose love and attractiveness were so great that men would get up from table and follow him over the brow of the hill into the unknown, on to death; that crowds surged round him night and day, that timid children instinctively left their mothers to go to him, him a stranger. He was like us in our weakness: 'compassed with infirmity' (Heb. 5, 2), 'wherefore it behoved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest before God. For in that, wherein he himself hath suffered and been tempted, he is able to succour them also that are tempted' (Heb. 2, 17).

He not only shares our infirmities, he stands out above us all as perfect, being 'faithful to him that made him' (Heb. 2, 17) as one who was 'heard for his reverence' (Heb. 5, 7); and more than perfect, 'who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God' (Phil. 2, 6). It was this dual nature of our Lord wedded in the unity of his Person that made his every act and especially his death, not only the perfect act of one human being, but break the bounds of human limitation and reach to the infinite value of God's act. St Irenaeus sums it up in these words: 'Therefore, as I have already remarked, he caused man to cling to and to become one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of men the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished. And further: unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it in security; and unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a sharer in incorruptibility. For it was necessary for the Mediator between God and man, by his relationship to both, to bring both to friendship and concord and present man to God while he revealed God to man.'⁴ Christ himself cried out, 'Who shall convict me of sin?' (John 3, 46).

But a priest is not self-chosen, 'neither doth any man take the honour to himself, but he that is called by God as Aaron was' (Heb. 5, 4). So Christ did not take it upon himself; it was fore-ordained in the prophetic sentence, 'Thou art a priest according to the order of Melchisedech'. Yet that is not all. Christ plainly describes himself as a sacrifice and as ordered to be so by his Father. 'Therefore doth the Father love me because I lay down my life that

⁴ *Adv. Haereses* III, 18, 7.

I may take it up again. No man taketh it away from me: but I lay it down of myself and I have power to lay it down; and I have power to take it up again. *This commandment have I received of my Father*' (John 10, 17). Then at the moment of the ritual offering of himself at the Last Supper our Lord took pains to make the rite plainly one to represent his dying, the spilling of his blood; and all the words are sacrificial in tone. 'This is my body which is offered for you' (Luke 22, 19). 'This is the chalice, the new covenant in my blood'; that is ratified by the spilling of his blood in sacrifice, as the Old Covenant, too, had been ratified by the spilling of the blood of a victim. 'And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord: and rising in the morning he built an altar at the foot of the mount, and twelve tables according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men to the children of Israel and they offered holocausts, and sacrificed pacific victims of calves to the Lord. Then Moses took half of the blood, and put it into bowls and the rest he poured upon the altar. And taking the book of the covenant, he read it in the hearing of the people: and they said: All the things that the Lord hath spoken we will do, we will be obedient. And he took the blood and sprinkled it upon the people, and he said: This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you concerning all the words' (Exod. 24, 4).

The figure was the sacrifice of Moses at the time that he and the People made their pact with God; the reality was the acceptance of death by Christ when he died upon the Cross for bearing witness to his divinity. That was the command he received from his Father. So Christ is not only the Priest, he is also the Victim. Thus the whole rite of sacrifice, which in the past had always been in symbols, now took on its complete reality. For in all previous sacrifices the rite was performed upon an animal or food—wine maybe, or bread—whereas now the thing offered was truly the person of the offerer. A sacrifice is usually double in its performance; firstly it is a visible act, but more important, this visible act signifies in some way an invisible yet even more real act, one of the will by which the performer of the act and those he represents try to give themselves body and soul back to their God. For they recognise that they come from him and must spring back to him.

Resign them, sign them, seal them, motion them with breath,
 And with sighs soaring, soaring sighs deliver
 Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long
before death
 Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God,
beauty's self and beauty's giver.⁵

⁵ *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo*, Gerard Manly Hopkins, p. 55.

Two acts then: the interior one of ourselves, the exterior one of something else to signify this giving back to God. Christ made his own death the symbol of the giving of himself. There is no more perfect symbol, for we can give no more than our life, which includes all the rest. We might give riches or freedom or knowledge or comfort and yet keep the citadel of the soul. To give life is to give riches and freedom and knowledge and comfort and hand over the citadel back to God. Indeed it is more than a symbol, it is the thing itself—our whole selves.

Once again then we find our Lord and Saviour picking up a world-wide, ancient custom and transforming it into a live, vivid reality.

Christ died once yet ever remains Priest in heaven, the victim of the age-long Apocalypse. Whilst in the Mass, which is no new sacrifice, but Christ's re-presented, he is still the Priest and we are but his instruments. We are not each separate priests, but 'the Priest' Christ by sharing with him, our action being most truly his action. In our priestly life we distribute Christ's gifts, we share in his sacrifice. When we come to die, our death too will be sacrificial because now and also then not we live but Christ is living and dying in us. Our deaths will be the consummation of our sacrifice.

Consequently we must consider Christ's priestly life as continuing from the first moment of the Incarnation for ever through the ages of Creation; we must consider him as offering up creation to creation's giver, to God his heavenly Father. He does this, not alone, but in the company of all his followers, for they all share in some way in his priestly life; they all offer up the internal and essential sacrifice of themselves, and they are partakers of Christ's life, his action is their action and theirs his. When they offer themselves they offer Christ, we being all one body, closely knit together with Christ our head. At the moment then, on the altar, when Christ utterly gives himself over to his heavenly Father daily, at every moment, by separating in a mysterious way his Body and his Blood as symbol of death and utter giving, then we too all utterly give ourselves over with Christ, sharing not only in Christ's priesthood but also in his holocaust.