

The Question of Priesthood

Paulinus Milner, O.P.

529

The large number of conferences, books and articles that now centre on the nature of the priesthood seem proof of a general disquiet on the part of both priests and laymen. From the Netherlands comes the edition of the papers on this subject given at a congress in Lucerne in 1967 (*News Bulletin of the Institute for Inter-European Sacerdotal Exchange at Maastricht*, April, 1968, Vol. 2, Nos. 1/2); the March number of *Concilium*, also emanating from Holland, is devoted to the subject. It has even been suggested in certain quarters¹ that a campaign of agitation is being organized by a small group of rebellious priests and theologians operating from the Netherlands, which is responsible for the open letter signed by 260 French priests last November² and for the resignation *en bloc* of the twelve executive councillors and regional representatives of the *Mission de France* in March this year.³ Both events are concerned with the same problem and reflect ideas aired at the Lucerne Conference. The 260 priests state that they have come to believe that the clerical status imposed upon priests with the style of life and human relationships which it implies is one of the biggest obstacles to the revelation of Christ in the modern world. The worker-priests, for their part, have resigned because of the failure of the French bishops to recognize that the role of the *Mission de France* implies a third form of pastoral ministry different both from that of the religious orders and that of the secular ministry. Has the unrest, the doubt, and the difficulty of preaching the Gospel in the world of today produced the congresses and the literature which tries to undertake a theological investigation of the role of the priest in the Church, or is the unrest created by the literature? Perhaps the existence of intelligent men who can seriously believe the latter, or who can think that the appearance of the encyclical *Sacerdotalis coelibatus* could put an end to all questioning of compulsory clerical celibacy, is yet a further symptom of general malaise. It is comforting to believe that no 'good' priests are in doubt as to the utility of their ministry and the way of life which it traditionally implies, unless doubt be sown among them by revolutionary theologians; but experience does not bear this out. It was the experience of wide-spread frustration which led the Downside Symposium to discuss the problems of the priesthood in April of this year (the papers of which are shortly to be published by Darton,

¹*Courrier Hebdomadaire de Pierre Debray*. No. 126, 4th, Avril 1969. A polycopied sheet issued from 18 rue des Quatre Vents, Paris 6e.

²See *Informations Catholiques Internationales* 325, p. 6; 329, p. 10; *Herder Correspondence*, January 1969, p. 16.

³*Informations Catholiques Internationales*. No. 333, p. 7. *The Tablet*, March 22nd, 1969, p.303.

Longman and Todd), and led the Annual Conference of Practical Liturgy to take this theme for its subject this coming September.

No one who studies the problem can deny that we are saddled with a style of priestly ministry which receives no support and quite a lot of opposition from the New Testament,¹ and one which is foreign to an important part of the Church's tradition. The latter fact is well illustrated by the ordination prayers that have been used and are still used in the Western Church, now conveniently published with a translation and useful introduction by H. B. Porter, Jr.² These express what the Church intends when it ordains a man for the ministry.

Several slightly different conceptions of the Christian ministry are found in these prayers, but there is very little which resembles what some now take to be the unchangeable norm. The Roman Church, however, has by hundreds of years of use given its sanction to the theology they express. More strangely still it has recently decided to use for the ordination of bishops the ancient prayer found in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus. This prayer along with two others for the ordination of deacons and presbyters reflects the ecclesiastical organization typical of the early Church. In the words of H. B. Porter: 'The bishop was vested with a most comprehensive pastoral responsibility, and he was assisted in the practical discharge of his many tasks by the deacons. The bishop and his deacons seem to have represented what is today thought of as the professional ministry. The presbyters on the other hand, appear often to have been leading older men of the Christian community deriving their income from secular means, who served as the bishop's permanent board of advice and who joined with him in many of his sacramental functions' (*op. cit.*, p. xiv). The prayers themselves *do not define the nature of the charism they ask for*, but trusting in God's purpose for the salvation of his people, they ask him to send down upon the candidate whatever grace may have been prefigured by the priests of the Old Testament and their worship. They are quite clear that the new sanctuary of God is the body of the Church itself (Prayer for the Ordination of a bishop according to the new rite), but they prefer to designate the charisms of the new minister by allusion to God's acts and ordinances in the old dispensation. It is remarkable that although the bishops are usually called 'priests',³

¹See e.g. Dr Joseph Blank, 'The Priest in the Light of the Gospel', in the News Bulletin mentioned in the opening paragraph, also Karl Hermann Schelkle, 'Minister and Ministry in the New Testament Church', in *Concilium*, vol. 3, No. 3, March 1969, p. 5.

²H. B. Porter Jr., *The Ordination Prayers of the Ancient Western Churches*, Alcuin Club Collection No. XLIX, London, S.P.C.K. 1967.

³Hippolytus's prayer (New Rite) asks that the one whom God has chosen for a bishopric 'may exercise high priesthood for thee without rebuke' (Porter, p. 6). In the old Roman prayer, bishops are referred to as 'thy servants whom thou hast chosen for the ministry of the high priesthood' (*ibid.*, p. 21). The Gallican rite refers to the bishop as 'priest' (*ibid.*, p. 42), and prays that God may adorn him with the high priesthood (p. 43). It is also asked that the presbyter may obtain the sacerdotal gifts of the Holy Spirit (p. 51). The constant use of the term 'high priest' rather than simply 'priest' is perhaps an indication that the authors had not forgotten that only by an analogy with the Old Testament could the term priest be applied to the ministers of the Church.

their priesthood is seen to consist in their efforts for the building up of the body of the Church rather than in any particular cultic function. The Church prays that the bishop may be given the *spiritus principalis*, the spirit of leadership, the same which the apostles received for the establishment of the Church throughout the world. He is to assign duties, loose bonds, and by his gentleness and singleness of purpose stand before God as an offering. In this way he will minister to God day and night (Porter, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7). The ancient Roman prayer for the ordination of presbyters, which is still in use, simply asks that God may make them worthy assistants for the bishop so that the words of the Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth (*ibid.*, pp. 26-28).

There is nothing in any of these prayers to suggest that the ministers of the Church are cult functionaries set apart from the rest of men by a sacral way of life. There is not even an explicit reference to the power of celebrating the eucharist until the anointing of hands became part of the rite through Gallican influence in the eighth century. It is true that in the later documents the candidates appear as men who have embarked upon an ecclesiastical career and after a suitable period of training are chosen by their ecclesiastical or civil superiors. The rites then become increasingly concerned with the conferring of sacramental power. But this is the product of a certain social development rather than one of greater doctrinal insight.

Again it is interesting to note the modern desire for bishops and priests chosen by their people is taken as the norm in the ancient rites.¹ Even when popular election had long ceased to be a reality the liturgical books continued to preserve the rites associated with it. The Gallican rites show that the consensus of people and clergy was understood as the manifestation of God's own choice (Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 49).

If in the very rites used by the Church there is no clear definition of the priesthood to be found, and even a certain deliberate vagueness as though it were for God alone, by the gift of his grace, to reveal the true nature of that which was prefigured by the priesthood of the old dispensation, it is difficult to see what right any have to discourage the questioning of the ecclesiastical *status quo*. If it is indeed true, as the 260 priests of *Echanges et Dialogue* maintain, that the clerical status together with its way of life is the chief obstacle to evangelization of the modern world, then it is necessary to question and seek out the origins and explanations of obligatory clerical celibacy, the abstention of priests from normal employment, distinctive dress and way of life, and it is necessary to find sufficient justification for their being maintained in the modern world. It will

¹Let a bishop be ordained after he has been chosen by all the people' Hippolytus (Porter, p. 7). The Roman books of the seventh century give the form of a letter by which the people and clergy formally ask for the consecration of the one they have chosen.

also be necessary to go further and question the notion of the Christian priest as a man set apart for a cultic role and living a sacralized life. Is the first job of the priest to preach the word of God and to build up the temple of God which is the body of the Church, or is it to be a sacral figure set apart in the society for a sacramental worship? Such questions cannot be left to the academic discussions of theologians, they have become the nightmare of the majority of pastoral priests. They call not only for theological investigation, but for courageous action on the part of the Church's authorities.

THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN WORLD AFFAIRS

Darril Hudson

The role of the ecumenical movement as an international pressure group.

'A most welcome, readable, and authoritative approach. . . . No one after reading Professor Hudson's book could accuse the Churches of inventing an ecumenical movement to please themselves and for their own benefit.'

Cecil Northcott, Guardian

'A brave effort with a comprehensive survey of ecumenical activity. . . . This survey is supported by a first-class section of footnotes, bibliography, appendix and index. . . . Professor Hudson has tackled an impossibly wide subject and emerges with great credit.'

Brian Rice, Church Times

Published jointly with the London School of Economics 63s
Weidenfeld & Nicolson 5 Winsley Street London W1