

The Priesthood

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St. John of Avila defined the priesthood first of all in terms of its relationship to the Eucharist. By it "bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord," and the Lord Jesus Christ is thus present by a real presence. Avila insists that there is no greater power on the earth than that of priests. Moses' power turned the sea into dry land and Joshua's voice was obeyed by creatures (Jos. 10:13-14). But the priest's power in celebrating the Eucharist is far greater than theirs, for by his word and action, the priest gives sacramental being to God made man. (!) The power of his word is similar to that of Mary in the Incarnation. At her word, the Son of God was made flesh in her womb; at the priest's word, the Son of God is sacramentally present under the forms of bread and wine and offers himself to the Father.

Since by the power he exercises the priest has the supreme dignity of acting as mediator between God and man, he must be holy. The Old Testament required holiness for priests who would instruct and offer sacrifice but would not have the sublime dignity of the New Testament priest. "The priests of the Lord offer incense and bread to God; therefore they shall be holy to their God" (Lev. 21:6). Avila interprets the "offering of incense to God" as a reference to the priest's role as mediator. Christ is the only true Mediator and the great High Priest, but the priest shares in Christ's Priesthood and thus, at the altar, represents Christ as he offers himself to the Father. For this, the priest must live in loving intimacy with the Lord, and be conformed to His image. This is where Catholics differ with most Protestants, who view the Eucharist as merely a memorial service, whereas Catholics look upon it as an actual re-enactment of the Last Supper by the celebrant, where he stands in for the Lord Himself. The other side of his role as mediator is to care in Christ's name for those committed to his care.

As the one who "offers bread to God," that is, as the one who celebrates the Eucharist, the priest must participate in the holiness of the Lord. "If sanctity is not required to touch the most pure Body of Christ our Lord, the holiest thing of all, I do not know for what it is needed on earth." Avila links the Eucharistic and pastoral tasks of the priest, insisting that holiness is also essential for the priest's office of caring for and sanctifying the Mystical Body of Christ (the Church). In short, Avila holds with St. Gregory and John Chrysostom that the same holiness is required of the priest for touching the Mystical Body of Christ as is demanded for offering the Sacrificing of the Mass and touching the Eucharistic Body of the Lord.

The priesthood is God's gift to the Church, and no one, Avila emphasizes, should dare to take the office on himself but must receive it as a call from God, verified by the Church through the bishop. If one enters this exalted state by his own will,

he will find himself with obligations beyond his means and will end up causing no little harm to himself and to the Church. Father Avila recommended to the bishops that they take great care in the choice and acceptance of men to be prepared for ordination. He stressed that no unsuitable candidate should be accepted for the priesthood under any condition, no matter who supported his entrance. In fact, it should be made difficult, so that those unsuited would not want to enter.

The Body of the Lord in the Eucharist will be unworthily treated by such priests and the holy Mystical Body will be greatly harmed as "those who were supposed to be shepherds turn themselves into wolves and make carnage in the souls of those they were supposed to bring to life." Fr. Avila did not say that all candidates must be capable of the highest academic achievement, but that all should see the importance of study and be willing to engage in it according to their capacity. The lack of spiritual capacity is a far greater hindrance.

In his memoranda to the Council of Trent, Fr. Avila insisted that, before ordination, candidates undergo a rigorous program of spiritual and intellectual formation in accord with the Gospel and the Church's teaching, and that they continue to grow in these areas after ordination. Any review of the formation and education of priests today can only profit from being so strongly reminded of the nature of the priesthood and the indispensable role of the priest in the sanctification and salvation of the members of the Church.

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