

The Priesthood, Part Two

Continuing from last week, here is an excerpt from Pope Francis, and a reflection I wrote years ago, upon the 25th anniversary of my becoming a Jesuit. . . .

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Pope Francis's Address to Priests at Chrism Mass, 2013

A fine image [of priesthood] can be found in the Psalm: "It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down upon the collar of his robe" (Ps 133:2). The image of spreading oil, flowing down from the beard of Aaron upon the collar of his sacred robe, is an image of the priestly anointing which, through Christ, the Anointed One, reaches the ends of the earth, represented by the robe.

The sacred robes of the High Priest are rich in symbolism. One such symbol is that the names of the children of Israel were engraved on the onyx stones mounted on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, the ancestor of our present-day chasuble (cf. Ex 28:6-14). This means that the priest celebrates by carrying on his shoulders the people entrusted to his care and bearing their names written in his heart. When we put on our simple chasuble, it might well make us feel, upon our shoulders and in our hearts, the burdens and the faces of our faithful people.

A good priest can be recognized by the way his people are anointed. This is a clear test. When our people are anointed with the oil of gladness, it is obvious: for example, when they leave Mass looking as if they have heard good news. Our people like to hear the Gospel preached with "unction", they like it when the Gospel we preach touches their daily lives, when it runs down like the oil of Aaron to the edges of reality. When we have this relationship with God and with his people, and grace passes through us, then we are priests, mediators between God and men.

A priest who seldom goes out of himself, who anoints little – I won't say "not at all" because, thank God, our people take our oil from us anyway – misses out on the best of our people, on what can stir the depths of his priestly heart. Those who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators, gradually become intermediaries, managers – instead of being shepherds living with "the smell of the sheep", shepherds in the midst of their flock.

Dear priests, may God the Father renew in us the Spirit of holiness with whom we have been anointed. May he renew his Spirit in our hearts, that this anointing may spread to everyone, even to those "outskirts" where our faithful people most look for it and most appreciate it. May our people feel that their names are written upon our priestly vestments and that we seek no other identity; and may they receive through our words and deeds the oil of gladness which Jesus, the Anointed One, came to bring us. Amen.

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To all of the people whom I have served as a Jesuit:

When a Strake Jesuit student who used to visit me frequently for pastoral conversations found out that I was being transferred, he let me know his displeasure. When I pointed out to him how many other wonderful Jesuits there were for him to visit there in Houston, he countered with, “Yes, but you’re *my* priest.”

As I look back on my time as a Jesuit, I find myself measuring the experience not in days or years, but in the faces of the people who have so lovingly and trustingly shared with me the inner rooms of their hearts and have allowed me the unbelievable privilege of accompanying them as they seek God in those depths. That I might be the one to aide another on such a grace-filled adventure would be enough to fill me with awe and wonder. But my experience of serving you as a Jesuit is far more awesome than that. For in this process, I myself am adopted by you—am taken possession of by you (“Yes, but you’re *my* priest”)—and I find myself in the intimacy of a relationship I could have never dreamed of.

My friends and family have said, “You should be so proud of your 25 years as a Jesuit,” and I suppose that I should be. But mostly I feel grateful and loved. Mostly, I feel like the *recipient* of fidelity rather than the achiever of it. I am happy about my fidelity to this calling, but far more than this, I am grateful to God and God’s people for their fidelity to me.

“A good priest can be recognized by the way his people are anointed,” says Pope Francis. Indeed, I have found this to be true. As I give you absolution, bless your rosaries, grieve your losses with you, consecrate your hosts and break open the Scriptures for you, you in turn consecrate my priesthood and fill my heart with grace-filled joy and gratitude.

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