

TESTIMONIALS

REPLY TO FR. GENERAL'S LETTER ON PRIESTHOOD IN THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

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*What is the relationship between ministerial priesthood
and the many kinds of apostolic activity
carried out by each Jesuit?*

The question seems to consider the real experience of each Jesuit from an analytical angle. If I have to answer, rather than give a 'reflective' response, which belongs to theological study connected with the Institute of the Society, I offer modestly to do it from experience.

MY EXPERIENCE OF VOCATION

In the beginning of my vocation to the Society of Jesus, the priority in what I wanted and in my experience of the Exercises was to be a Jesuit rather than to be a priest. I don't believe my vocation would ever have led me to become a diocesan priest or to enter any other religious order or congregation. I believed firmly that God was calling me to the Society of JESUS (Lk.18: 18-30) It is true that with the passage of time, when I was a scholastic, ministerial priesthood in the Society of Jesus was there on the horizon,

even though I had great respect for the brothers whom I was getting to know, some of whom seemed to me to be models of holiness.

What was important, above all, was to be 'a holy Jesuit.' Kostka, Berchmans, Gonzaga, I came to know better as 'holy Jesuits'. And Xavier, Ignatius, Pierre Favre, as holy apostles.

During the two years of Regency I felt completely fulfilled, without being a priest, not only in teaching philosophy or latin as mission, but in exercising a real apostolate among the students as expression of the Lord's call.

During theological studies at the Gregorian University, Rome I began to experience priesthood as a near horizon, motivating me to apostolic work in and out of the Society's institutions. I had Albert, now Cardinal, Vanhoye, as professor for the letter to the Hebrews. (Note: I need to go deeper into the exegesis of this New Testament text.)

THE STORY OF MY DEVELOPMENT IN EXPERIENCE OF PRIESTHOOD

I lived the priesthood as a specific form of being a Jesuit for others. (Note: all this has to be read in the key of spiritual mediocrity and poor achievement.) Along with many other apostolic and professional activities - 'Teaching', in quotation marks, Psychology, Spiritual Exercises, weekend conferences, retreats, talks, spiritual conversations, and so on - I experienced the first stage as formator of scholastics, in however superficial and mediocre a way, more as formation of Jesuits than as deep explicit preparation of those young men in experience of God for ministerial priesthood. What mattered to me was the man and his FAITH, the gospel re-read through the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

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What was essential, for brother or priest, was – and I believe still is – to be human, a believer and a follower of Jesus. I saw priesthood as a sacramental dimension of service to the Church and to humanity.

I felt myself to be Jesuit-priest, not priest-Jesuit. True, as regards allotment of time, my work, which today I live as mission, was more human, teaching, and less sacramental; the spirituality was that of a poor sinner

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who evangelises and 'signifies' the Lord Jesus through service, which is one dimension of adoration of the Lord, the Word, through the Eucharist, the ministry of reconciliation, and so on.

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For me, presiding at the Eucharist was an important form, but one more form, of 'loving and serving in all things', with the awareness of being a sinner in need of salvation.

The memory of my ordination in the church of the Gesù in Rome is centred on the laying of the hands, which was done, with other Jesuits, by Pedro Arrupe, General of the Society, whom I considered, and still consider a saint, rather than on the presence of the bishop, Cardinal Traglia, the Pope's Vicar for Rome, whom I only recall as rather fat. The charism of service – loving and serving his Divine Majesty in everything – impressed me very much.

SACRED-PROFANE

1. At the beginning, mistakenly, I experienced a separation between the sacred and the profane.

2. I valued the autonomy of the profane, exaggeratedly, without seeing it in greater depth as loved by God, in Jesus. I over-emphasized the profane – the 'professional' job – sometimes with a little embarrassment about showing that I was a 'cleric', and other immature behaviour.

3. Finally I have been seeing that everything is sacred, from God, in Christ Jesus, (cf. the Cardoner illumination), including the tasks that might at first sight be described as simply profane. From this point of view the priesthood does not give sacred 'power' over the profane, but reveals to the people of God, however ineptly, ITS ROOTS AND ITS VOCATION as chosen people, royal priesthood, consecrated nation (1 Peter 2:9). Of course, that could be done without being a priest, but to be a priest for others means something and Somebody who exists and who is active in them as in me and who has entrusted me with this ministry.

Note: In almost all religions, from the primitive peoples who live the separation between sacred and profane, there have been 'priests' – wise old men, servants of the Totem, shamans, pastors, liturgists and so on..

Human beings are 'symbolic animals', makers of symbols, needing 'bridges' to the sacred, discreet intermediaries...

At crucial moments in life, birth, adulthood, crossroads, death, these mediators carry out an important role. In the new dispensation of the revelation of God in Jesus the Christ, the priest is not the one who says 'I am holy', but the one who conveys 'You are holy', 'we, the creation, are holy': everything is a place of encounter with God.

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MY PRESENT EXPERIENCE

In my previous development I can say that, believing in the one Priest JESUS and in the priesthood of the People of God, I experienced myself, through God's grace, as priest in the sense of being a sign not only of the ontological-cultic but of the prophetic service of priesthood in the Society, without ever being able to separate what belonged to Jesuit and what to priest in my experience.

The experience – let's call it 'mystical' – of God as merciful with me and with others emphasizes the Message, the Good News, in a way that brings a service through priesthood in the Society which depends not so much on my own qualities as on Christ who, through his death and resurrection, builds the people of God by the action of his SPIRIT. This becomes a reality in the Eucharistic prayer in that the thanksgiving touches not only what has happened during the day but God who has come in his Passover.

I believe that personal and community prayer is God's gift. Each day I experience this believing awareness of his silent Presence and of his living Word. Prayer in depth is priestly, and priesthood must be prayerful.

I live the ministry of reconciliation as 'office of consolation', daring to see God's action in the revelation of forgiveness of sins. This brings me great joy. I believe sincerely that this experience of priesthood has brought me into communion with the God of the Contemplation for Attaining Love. Now I live the memorial of the Last Supper as words which renew and in some way make present the consecration of humanity in its variety of persons and tasks, through the feebleness of our believing memory and the weakness

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of our surrender to the Kingdom. The archetypal word over the bread and wine is to receive ourselves from God, in Jesus, in his mystery of death and resurrection, to feel ourselves and to believe ourselves saved in hope, and to create a committed community of believers.

I think that priesthood, in a human image perhaps inadequate for God's mystery, is like an ICEBERG. The floating part of the mountain of ice, what is visible, is ministry: human help, COMPASSIONATE, social, liturgical, sacramental, evangelical, 'pastoral'. The hidden part of the iceberg is the mystery of God, saving mystery in Christ. The floating part, much smaller, is ministry; the hidden, secret, much greater, is mystery. If we move, think, act solely at the visible level we shall do many good things, but we shall not reveal that 'only God is good.' (Lk.18:19). It is not a matter of separating levels in priesthood, but of UNIFYING them, unifying ourselves in its complete truth which transcends our thoughts and psychological, sociological and human reflections, which are all very well in other ways. Priesthood draws what is flourishing in it from what is hidden.

PRIESTHOOD IN ITS RELATIONAL ASPECT

I experience priesthood within the Society of Jesus not simply as I feel myself but, which I consider very important, as other people see me, and see us, in the priestly role. Socially this also has changed very much. Although some may look at us disapprovingly or see us as 'bad', there are still many people, not only Catholics, in whom 'the priest' raises a question, and to whom he may give hope in the living God. I have had many experiences of this kind, I almost dare to say, with some exaggeration, daily: agnostics or people with very weak faith, in whom the human priest in front of them provokes a dialogue, a critique, a doubt, a search for Jesus.

In my previous work as a psychotherapist I felt that I was a 'professional psychologist'. Now I feel that I am a Jesuit priest who knows something about the job of a psychotherapist and HELPS, 'accompanies in a caring way', which is what the word 'therapist' means, raising his heart to God so that he may bring about human and divine healing in the other person, and speaking explicitly about the Spirit if the other person is

motivated or receptive, or asks me 'the reason for my hope', always within the correct therapeutical framework. This is the office of consoling, which I also carry out at the moment in my accompaniment of priests and Jesuits.

The Society is a priestly, apostolic order. It has more to do with the saving mystery of God than with our tasks or with the 'grades'. As I have already written, 'Priesthood draws what is flourishing in it from what is hidden.' Vine and branches. I feel that I am a blurred signpost to the Way, not the Way itself. If that helps anyone, good. Praise God.

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***In the first answer I have outlined something of the second question on
the ministerial priesthood as 'the essential character of the Society'***

When the first companions, apart from Pierre Favre who was already a priest, joined together as friends in the Lord, they saw that the very Ignatian and essential word 'helping the neighbour' would gain depth and power through priestly ministry, lived in poverty 'in an apostolic manner' and in universal service. It seems clear from the practical point of view that, for the manifold tasks to which the Body of the Society is dedicated, or anyway for many of them, there is no need to be a priest. When they chose priesthood for the few professed that they were envisaging, I believe that what weighed with them in their discernment, as well as the historical circumstances of the sixteenth-century Church, was not only the universal tasks but 'the how' and 'the where' from the – 'immediate' experience of God. It was in this, more than in the material nature of the task, better mission, that the 'apostolic priestly character' was charismatically present. This was perhaps understood in Faith as a particular realisation of communion with Christ, Mediator and Saviour, with the Church, and thence came the offering to the Pope, as a priestly group, in what concerned the missions.

In the historical moment of the Reformation I think the 'Masters of Paris', as they were known for a time, were more interested in their theological formation and their willingness to evangelise than in 'being priests'. They were seeking reform/conversion of the Church from within, and the bishops and priests were the centre of the Church; the laity counted

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for very little, except in the temporal power. These 'Masters of Paris' at first called themselves 'poor priests of Jesus Christ' and 'reformed priests', later clerks regular. In addition to proclaiming the gospel among believers and unbelievers, from the beginning the conversion of the Church, the reform of the Church, was prominent in the Society's intentions: priests, bishops, the illiterate and ignorant.... Fortunately today the laity have greater prominence, though still too little.

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The Society brought the novelty of a revolutionary Order, without habit, choir and so on, with great mobility and flexibility in that priestly ministry was placed in 'seeking and finding God in all things', not only in devotionally fruitful encounter but in apostolic commitment and priestly mediation between the Mystery of God, grace, and the reception of God's Word and will in the individual and specific lives of persons and peoples.

The first companions opted, within the framework of the Spiritual Exercises that Ignatius had been giving them, for a poor priesthood, without ecclesiastical benefices, travelling and ministering the Word and works of mercy. Pierre Favre wrote 'I made the Exercises and received all the orders for Him alone, without any intention of attaining honour or temporal goods.'

'Helping souls', Ignatius' first wish, took shape in an itinerant priestly ministry, to receive a canonical mission from the Church. Priesthood in the Society was always MISSIONARY. They offered to the Church of that time a new kind of priestly ministry: service of the Word, the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist, service in hospitals, catechesis of children, human and Christian formation, theological thinking, WORKS OF MERCY. They all emphasized the Mass – see the Spiritual Diary, Favre and many others – with deep preparation, and extensive devotion: frequent communion, which was unusual at that time, reconciliation, methods of prayer. For them, priesthood is a means to the end: 'to help souls, for the greater glory of God.'

The work of the colleges which were founded, and which do not appear in the first lists of ministries, is according to Nadal 'a new form of the ministry of the Word.' In a conference, speaking of the time in Venice, 1537,

Nadal forgets to mention priestly ordination, stressing the call to follow Christ as forming part of the Society of Jesus.

Summing up, with a jump to the twentieth century, in which the General Congregations from 31 to 35 concern themselves for the first time with explaining the priestly character of the Society, showing that there is a need to deepen the priestly dimension of the Body of the Society: what seems clear is that for historical reasons, or, I believe, also and above all profoundly from the Spirit, the Ignatian charism presents a way

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of exercising priesthood which is very different from the traditional way. It is charismatic, and starts from a personal experience of God which accepts humanity, the signs of the times, evangelising without settling into the direction of a community. It is not sedentary but nomadic through and through, and very creative. All this needs to be deepened historically and theologically from the present-day point of view.

I believe that the specific priesthood of a Jesuit in the Society is one thing, and the other, deeper and more theological, is the priesthood of the Society, of which, as I shall say in answer to the third question, we all form part, brothers and 'fathers'. In this whole question we are touching not only on a praxis which can be discussed and interpreted but on the mystery of a charism, that is to say, the saving mystery of God.

How do the life and vocation of the Jesuit brother relate to the 'priestly character' of the Society of Jesus?

Holy Mother Church has doctors who will know how to answer. But as well as 'doctors', the Society has brothers who live their vocation in the body of the Society for the Church and humanity, who will give us a better answer. These brothers, many of them saints, which is to say that they have fulfilled the Spirit of the Society completely, I don't know theologically how, though I sense it, live out their help for souls, with their own individual bodies, in the unity of an apostolic body. If we take this deep unity into account, beyond accidental differences the whole apostolic body is priestly in the deepest sense. It is not so important what you might

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do, but out of what you do it and why you do it. That is to say, out of the mystery of God and for the glory of God the life of man.

Recalling the Pauline text, my hands are not the heart, but they form a unity with it. My hands may bless, and also those of any brother, because it is the heart of God which blesses.

Clearly, in ecclesiastical distinctions there are differences between the priest and one who is not a priest. Do these differences have essential

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importance at the root, the Love of God and the apostolate proper to the single Body of the Society? Helping the neighbour is theological because of its foundation in the Incarnation and because of LOVE. If the Society lives it in a priestly way all members of the Society do so with that deep vision of

the 'sacerdotal' which is not just a ministry but a consecration.

General Congregation 31 in its Decree 23, confirming the Society as 'priestly body', says 'in that all, brothers, scholastics and priests share together in the unity of the apostolate which the Society carries out.'

I wrote at the beginning that my vocation was more to the Society than to the priesthood. Now I say that I have met brothers who are not priests according to Canon Law but are priestly, not only through the priesthood of the faithful but through the fact of belonging to the body of the Society, 'ordained through the grace of God's call in the body of the Society.'

At the deep level of the Spirit, the brother says 'this is my body which is given up for you' in his Christian Faith and Love, with his life. We are not talking of rites but of 'liturgy' in its primitive diaconal, non-ritual sense. Remember Teilhard de Chardin's Mass over the world. The Jesuit brother is not only the one who 'helps me to celebrate Mass', he is the one who celebrates the Paschal Mystery of Jesus with a special vocation to make it authentic in and from the body of the Society.

I believe that in Jesuit practice (and that of many others) the priest is considered as 'more' than a brother. Historically it seems so. The Jesuit priest is not more than the Jesuit brother. The 'magis' is something deeper which has to do with surrender to Jesus. 'Whichever among you wants to be first, let him be your servant.' If we seek a ministry, service, if we are called to it, we need to be 'less', not 'more', to be faithful to this call from God.

Who or what is more tree, the visible fruit or the invisible sap? It is all one. I know that I am touching on a difficult subject according to Church law, but with all due respect to that, there is a deeper dimension which touches the God of the Church.

Life teaches us painful lessons, and I know from my own experience as a sinner that very often holiness and priestly ministry do not go hand in hand, either in the Society or outside it. Holiness and redeemed humanity and apostolate, fruit of the Spirit, is the principle and foundation of the Society, in that some exercise priesthood and all are 'sacerdotal', according to the will of God in Christ.

Translated by Patricia Harriss CJ