

The Priest as Instrument of Christ *

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BY VIRTUE OF THE SACRAMENT of Holy Orders, the Catholic priest is someone who—in his very person as a limited, vulnerable, fallen human being—is conformed to Christ the High Priest in a very unique sort of way. Most minimally, the Lord commits for the entire history of the life of a priest to render himself present sacramentally to the world through all of that person's ecclesial-sacramental actions. Wherever the sacraments are celebrated with the intention to do that which the Church intends, Christ will become present and his grace will be accorded to the faithful. That is the mere minimum foundation of priestly instrumentality, already quite exalted. More maximally, Christ promises to grant the grace of personal sanctification to the priest precisely in and through his work of charity on behalf of the life of the Church, that is to say, in his actions of priestly work. Here the promise is conditional: sanctification occurs only if the priest cooperates faithfully with the providence of God, to build up the body of Christ, in a life of faith, hope, and charity. And this life of sanctification admits of degrees. There are degrees of priestly holiness and charity. There is no zenith here because the priest can be indefinitely conformed more and more profoundly to the measure of the charity of the heart of Christ. So if the sacramental promise is most fun-

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damental, the sanctification promise is most ultimate. And most priests, all priests in some real sense, live somewhere between these two promises: the promise of sacramental efficacy and the promise of sanctification of priestly action. However, through both his sacramental actions and the charity of his sanctifying conformity to Christ, the priest becomes a privileged instrument of Christ. This occurs despite and sometimes even in the midst of the human limitations, weaknesses or general fallenness of the priest. It is this mystery that I would like to address here. What does it mean to say that the priest is an instrument of Christ? I will try to do this in three short parts. First, what are the things that priests are utterly relative to, or depend upon, for their instrumentality? Second, what is the grace of sacramental instrumentality even if the priest is a sinner, what Thomas Aquinas calls the “wicked priest”?¹ This is not a morbid question. It shows us just to what extent God is committed to the Church, and thus even to us as his ministers. Third, what is the grace of instrumentality in full blossom? What does it mean for Christ to inhabit the priest, to act through him, to shine in the world, like the light of the monstrance: for Christ to speak and act, as the God-man, in and through his instrument the priest, in and through the very personality of the minister of Christ?

I

We should begin by stating the obvious, not only because it is true, but also because it is deeply consoling. The priest is utterly relative to two other forms of instrumentality, the instrumentality of Christ and that of the sacraments. The primary instrument of grace in the cosmos is the sacred humanity of Jesus. God is the primal source of grace: all grace comes from God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son as man, however, *in his humanity* is a true instrument of grace. Just as the musician plays music through the violin, so God gives us grace in and through his sacred humanity. How so? Principally through the human intellect and will of Christ. The Lord in his human soul, knows us, and loves us, with a human mind and a human heart. He himself *as man* possesses a plenitude of grace, and he constantly wills to give the Church the graces he distributes to us. All of the illuminations given

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) III, q. 82, a.5.

to the Church, all the graces of charity and the infused virtues that we find in her saints, all participation in the gifts of the Holy Spirit: these all come from God, principally, but also instrumentally from Christ as man. The humanity of Jesus is like an everlasting font of living water, the source from which the grace of God flows forth continually into the life of the Church, and out to the world, to all human beings, for whom Christ died.

The second instrumentality is that of the sacraments. We know this well: God has promised to work in the sacraments as causes of grace, and they convey grace *ex opere operato*, from the very working of the sacraments themselves, so long as the minister has the intention to do what the Church does when she celebrates these sacraments. Consider a sacrament that is not intrinsically dependent upon the priesthood, like baptism. The Church confesses that through the pouring of water upon the head and the pronunciation of the Trinitarian formula, spiritual regeneration is conveyed effectively, by which the stain of original sin is removed from the soul of the newly baptized person, and the life of grace is communicated. The baptized are incorporated into the mystical body of Christ. Thus baptism saves. Thomas Aquinas speaks of the sacred humanity of Christ as a conjoined instrument (because it is united to the eternal Word) and of the sacraments, such as baptism, as separated instruments. God communicates grace to us simultaneously through the humanity of the Lord and through the sacramental economy. Or put more simply, Christ himself works through the sacraments to convey his grace to us in and through visible signs.

Why begin with all this? Because it is presupposed to the priesthood and without it nothing the Catholic priest does would make any sense. The ordained priest is entirely relative to Christ, the High Priest, savior of the human race, and source of grace that alone can save. It is always only his priesthood, his sacrifice, his seven sacraments through which he is the principal agent, working in his Church both visibly and invisibly. Here is the remarkable thing: the gift has already been given. Our redemption has already been obtained, objectively, in the death and Resurrection of the Lord. The Church has already been instituted, as have the sacraments. And there is no worldly power, human or angelic that can dissolve that mystery that will continue to be until the end of time, and indeed for all eternity. What all this means is that the respon-

sibility of the ministerial priest is quite real and quite grave. Indeed the stakes could not be higher. Priests are concerned with the salvation of the world. Indeed, they are bound up with it. And yet, this responsibility of the ministerial priest to be an instrument of God, is also entirely relative. He is entirely relative to the living presence and activity of Christ, who has already overcome the world (Jn 16:33) by the mystery of his Cross, and who is present and alive in his Church and in the seven sacraments, from now until the end of time. This is consoling to us, or at least, it can and should be. The basis for seeing rightly what it means for a priest to be an instrument of Christ is to see that the priesthood is founded on the Rock who is the Son of God. "Behold, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Mt 28:20).

II

Second, we should treat of *sacramental* instrumentality as the most basic form of priestly work. This follows from what has been said. Christ promised to the Church in perpetuity his presence and activity, especially in the sacramental economy, and the minister of the sacraments is primarily the priest. It would almost be theologically sufficient to say that the priest exists for the sacraments. He is the unique confector of the Most Holy Eucharist who offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and the delegated representative of the bishop in confession and confirmation. He alone can give the sacrament of anointing. He is the ordinary minister of baptism and even if he is not the minister of marriage, which is confected by the two spouses, he is the guardian of this sacrament and its teacher, in whose presence and with whose blessing the couple must consent to their sacramental union in faith.

In short, then, the sacramental work of the priest is fundamental to the spiritual life of the world. We could say that the place or visible site at which the life of Christ touches the world is the Eucharist above all because the glorified Christ is present there substantially. But in another way, we could say that it is the priest that is the living place where the grace of Christ is present in the world. He is, as in the Chesterton poem, a kind of beast of burden, the donkey of the passion narratives, bearing Christ on his way to Golgotha and the Resurrection, through

the winding roads of this world.² To encounter the priest on the road is to encounter Christ, always and everywhere present to his Church. The people of God know that. Much of what we may take for clericalism or exaggerated respect for priests is in fact a form of piety that is not about priests as individuals, but about Christ in priests. It is not based upon human merits, or even the sanctity of any particular priest but exists absolutely in spite of all this. In the priesthood, the people of God sense the sheer grace of God: his unfailing choice to remain active in priests on behalf of the whole Church, in all things, despite all things, and for all time. The people of God are thankful for this above all, and they are right to be. After all, priests themselves know this. As sinners in need of forgiveness and salvation, as those who seek to find God and to be consoled by him, priests themselves profit from this sacramental presence just as much as others.

When Aquinas speaks about the sacrament of holy orders, like all western medieval theologians, he divides the sacrament into three parts, the *sacramentum tantum*, the *res et sacramentum* and the *res tantum*: the sign itself, the reality and the sign, and the reality itself.³ The sign itself is the laying on of hands. From the time of the Gospels, including in the Acts of the Apostles (6:6, 8:17) and the First Letter to Timothy (4:14) we find references to the laying-on of hands, and this gesture continued throughout the history of the ancient Church. Already the medieval sacramental theologians realized the historical diversity of prayers of consecration and ordination. Accordingly they argue typically that the laying on of hands is the “matter” of the sacrament, of “divine right,” instituted in the apostolic age, while the invocation of the Holy Spirit is the

² G. K. Chesterton, “The Donkey,” in *The Collected Poems of G.K. Chesterton* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1927), 297: “When fishes flew and forests walked / And figs grew upon thorn / Some moment when the moon was blood / Then surely I was born. With monstrous head and sickening cry / And ears like errant wings, / The devil’s walking parody / On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth, / Of ancient crooked will; / Starve, scourge, deride me: / I am dumb, I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour; / One far fierce hour and sweet: / There was a shout about my ears, / And palms before my feet.”

³ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.* d. 24, q. 1, a. 1, qua. 1–3. See also Gilles Emery, “The Ecclesial Fruit of the Eucharist According to Thomas Aquinas,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 2 (2004): 43–60.

“form” of the sacrament, a verbal act of “ecclesial right” that is subject to diverse formulations down through time and across the distinct of rites of the Church.

The *res et sacramentum* is that which is communicated primarily by the sign of the laying on of hands: that is to say the character of the priesthood, that marks the soul of the priest irrevocably. We posit a character because the priest is never reordained. Whether after serious sin or apostasy, if a priest returns to the life of grace, the sacrament is never repeated. At ordination a change has occurred once and for all that is the condition for the exercise of the ministry. However, one can of course be ordained a priest and still remain fundamentally inattentive to the vocation to the priesthood, whether in small or great ways. After all, there are priests who remain ordained but who forsake the faith entirely. The character of the priesthood, then, is something fundamental and necessary, but it is certainly not everything.

And so the third category: the *res tantum*. For Aquinas, this term signifies not the essence or formal cause of the priesthood, even though the Latin suggests this (“the reality itself”). Rather, it is something like the purpose or final cause of the sacrament. The priest who has the character is formally or essentially ordained, whether he lives in the grace of Christ or not, but when he lives in the grace of God and seeks sanctification through the regular activities of the priesthood, then he lives out the priesthood as a work of grace. In sanctifying others, he is himself sanctified. This is the *res tantum*, or the sanctifying activity of the priesthood.

So in effect we can draw a parallel. I’ve distinguished the *sacramental* instrumentality of the priest that is fundamental, which never abates, if you like, and the *sanctifying* instrumentality of the priest who acts in the person of Christ not only for the sanctification of others, but in such a way as to live profoundly within the grace of Christ. This distinction corresponds in a way to the *res et sacramentum*, or the character of holy orders, and to the *res tantum*, or the sanctifying grace of holy orders. It is one thing to be always an instrument of Christ as a minister of the sacraments. It is another to be an instrument of Christ by living in his grace and charity, ever more deeply. The two are of course meant to go together, and it is this relationship that we are trying to consider more profoundly. It is helpful, however, to think first about the mere sacramental instrumentality that God guarantees the Church, even in what

Thomas Aquinas calls the wicked priest. We do not like thinking about this: the sheer commitment of God to work sacramentally even through the priest who is not in a state of grace. However, it helps us understand what the character of the priesthood is in its ineffaceable nature. In a sense, it is a deeply consoling truth, because it allows us to see that God is closer to priests than they are to themselves *in the order of grace* . . . that he is intent to work through all things in the life of the Church even to the point of the scandal of giving grace through the medium of sinful and limited human beings. Such is the love of Christ crucified, alive in the Church, victorious in her despite everything, in all times and places.

When he discusses the character of holy orders, Aquinas argues that it is not first and foremost a mark or quality left upon the moral agency of the soul. That is to say, the priest does not become a better person morally by the simple fact that he is ordained. The character is a quality of the spiritual soul, but it does not immediately modify the will or the heart. This is a sensible affirmation: the heart of the priest is not irrevocably improved once and for all by ordination. Rather, Aquinas argues, the character is given primarily into the intellect.⁴ The reason the priest acquires a new power, or capacity, is to act in accord with Christ's wishes, especially in performing the Church's sacramental rites. If and when the priest does what the Church intends to do in the sacramental economy, he becomes *de facto* an instrument of Christ, through which the grace of God is conveyed to the world, through the medium of his priestly action.

Aquinas's view is anticlimactic, and not very romantic, for all the reasons that we have stated, but it is marked by a fundamental realism. God is minimally committed to work through a validly ordained priest always, no matter his degree of sanctity. This is worth recalling spiritually as a point of humility. It is not primarily the priest's work. Priests are coworkers with the Lord, who always takes the initiative before them and whose mission they serve. Priests did not invent the priesthood and they cannot innovate in regard to it, but this lack of originality is also their true deliverance. Priests give grace to others, because they first receive it from Christ: "What do you have that you have not received?" (1 Cor 4:7). Nothing, says St. Paul. But also, once a priest has accepted

⁴ ST III, q. 62, aa. 3–5.

truly to receive all that he has, what can he then receive? Everything: God himself and all things in God. And the greatest of these things is the Eucharistic sacrifice, in which priests are privileged to participate by being conformed to the image of the Son. If humility is the foundation of truthfulness in the moral life, then this foundation for the priest is very noble. Priests are called upon to acquire the noble humility of those who receive from God the ultimate gift: to participate in the offering of Christ himself.

III

This leads us to our third and last subject, the instrumentality of sanctification, the living out of the *res tantum* or sanctifying grace of the sacrament of Holy Orders. This is what it really means for the priest to be a living instrument of Christ, but it is also the most complicated of topics. For we are really speaking about priestly holiness, and it has several elements. Notice that all the elements I will name are something distinct from the character of holy orders. All of them contribute to the sanctification of the priest.

First, for the priest to become holy in Christ, the priesthood must be exercised in a state of grace. If the priest is alive in faith, hope, and charity then all of his priestly acts contribute in some way not only to the sanctification of others, but also to his own inward conformity to the mystery of Christ. This process takes place in the darkness of faith and is a mystery largely hidden from our plain sight, but it is real nonetheless. Under the veil of faith, Christ dwells in a special way within the priest who lives in charity, in friendship with Jesus. This living grace can of course grow, and it takes on diverse forms in the diverse virtues of the priest: his faith, hope, and charity, his truthfulness, zeal, justice, affability, religious devotion, endurance, temperance, simplicity of life, and so on. The Holy Spirit gives his gifts diversely, and some are conformed to Christ more particularly in one domain than in another, but each person is called to be conformed inwardly to Christ more and more perfectly throughout the course of his life.

Second, the priest is a person of communion, who is engrafted into the larger life of the whole Church. The most concrete sign of this is his communion with the bishop of his diocese, who grants him the faculties

to hear confessions and absolve sins, without which all confessions are invalid. The jurisdiction of the bishop granted to the priest permits the priest to become holy, to live out the mystery of his priesthood by hearing confessions and absolving sins. This shows that the priest can only exercise his ministry in a way that is sanctifying if he remains deeply grounded in the communion of the Church, as a coworker and steward of the bishop.

Third, we must add theological learning, and the capacity to teach the faith. The priest is first and foremost a servant of the sacraments, but he is also a teacher and a catechist, who has the privilege to preach and instruct. This capacity is not received formally from the character of holy orders as such, but has to be cultivated, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, and thus the traditional importance given in the Church to seminary formation and theological education. Evidently, the teaching of the priest takes place primarily in the pulpit or the classrooms of a parish, but it also transpires in the confessional and in daily pastoral advice. The teaching of Christ illumines the human mind with knowledge of the supernatural mysteries of the faith, but it can also be employed to encourage the penitent, to rebuke gently a person who is errant, to give perspective to a person who is in trial. The priest as a teacher seeks to shine a ray of supernatural light upon every human situation, taking it up into consideration under the light of the Cross and the Resurrection of the Lord.

Last and relatedly, the priest is called upon to be a person of prudence or good counsel. It is amazing just how much of priestly life is about this: giving advice about how to live wisely in day-to-day affairs. The priest advises, often in ordinary situations, about how to live well for Christ, as a Christian, in the midst of the secular world. Often he also advises in very delicate matters, where one is called upon to apply absolute principles to complex cases. By developing his evangelical prudence, the priest becomes a kind of moral lamp or light of Christ, who seeks to advise others with the true counsel of the Holy Spirit, to help each person avoid evil and tend toward the good. We could put it more simply by saying that the priest is a person who seeks to teach people to grow in charity and holiness, and to be faithful to the truth of Christ in their concrete lives. For this, he needs to be a man of sound practical wisdom.

All of this, grace and virtue, communion with the Church, teaching and pastoral prudence: it is all distinct from the character of holy orders as such. One can be ordained and lack all of it, but if a person is ordained, he should first have acquired some of it, to some degree. The life of each priest entails a progressive tending toward perfection in all these domains, according to one's state in life and the form of ministry one is called to particularly. Some are confessors, some are pastors, some are teachers, and others are responsible for the administration of the Church's daily life. All priests do at least a little of everything, however, and it is in doing so that they are called upon to be sanctified as human beings alive in Christ, through whom Christ is active and present in the world in his holiness and his truth.

When we start to consider all of this together, then, we can see more clearly the mystery of the holiness of the priest as a sanctifying instrument of Christ. The grace and virtues of Christ are alive in him. The teaching of Christ is alive in him. The practical wisdom of Christ is alive in him. The living unity of the Church and her communion is embodied in him and in his action with the bishop. In all this, the priest acts mysteriously as a discrete but real presence of Christ in the world. Jesus suggests a kind of organic continuity between himself and the Christian, one that can apply in a particular way to the priest: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit" (Jn 15:5). Notice, of course, that the fruitfulness is Christ's.

To be sure, this presence of Christ in the priest is not a substantial presence, like that of the Eucharist. In being the graced instrument of Christ, the priest does not become Christ personally. They remain two distinct persons. The Lord is the eternal Son made man, the priest a mere creature and a sinner redeemed by Christ. His limits and faults are only too evident. Instead, we might say that the presence is *operative* instead of substantial: the Lord acts in and through the priest, but he acts habitually, operating through him upon others continually, in truth, charity, and mercy. This presence is quasi-personal. That is to say, the personality of the living Christ can come to invade or inspire the personality of the priest, as the truth and love of Christ shine more deeply in the mind and heart of the priest. He then becomes progressively holier by assimilating himself and his own personality more and more entirely to the mission of Christ for others in this world. "It is no longer I

who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). "He must increase, and I must decrease" (Jn 3:30).

This transformation, to the extent that it takes place, does not destroy the personality of the priest. It is meant to liberate him, to fulfill him, actually. His inner life of sanctification, no matter how modest or hidden, is meant to become a habitual presence of the holiness of Christ personally present in the midst of the world. The priest is a kind of window, as it were, where the light of Jesus's own personality shines out into the darkness and calls human souls to union with God.

Bearing this responsibility is an overwhelming burden for each priest, to be sure, and sometimes a kind of crushing one. Part of him would rather not hear about it. He is not capable of bearing the weight of Christ in the world. And yet, because of his ordination, this sense of weight does not desist. When does one really stop being a priest? There is no real evasion of the task, even though it can frequently seem like something that is utterly beyond any human being to aspire to. But this same responsibility is also a kind of liberation. It gives the life of each priest the deepest, most consequential meaning, in the darkness of faith; to be at the perpetual service of the Cross of Christ, the Cross of the Lord, the redemption of the world.

Believing in this requires great patience for a multitude of reasons, not least because it requires each priest to struggle against the darkness that is within himself and to believe in the power of God progressively to transform us. As St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, the Christian must believe that he or she can be transformed (Eph 4:22–24, 31–32): "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt . . . be renewed in the spirit of your minds, put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness . . . Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

The scandal of the priesthood is in this way, both like and unlike the scandal of the Eucharist. In the case of the Eucharist, the transformation is immediate and total: *Hoc est corpus meum*. The bread and wine are transformed entirely into the body and blood under the appearances or properties of bread and wine that remain. The darkness of faith is clearly felt. We know Christ is present but cannot see or touch him under the

appearances of his glorified flesh. That is a profound mystery, but it is one we become habituated to, that we live with. The deeper difficulty or scandal, if one may be allowed to speak this way, is with the silence of the Eucharist. Christ is truly present, but he is present in silence, in the midst of warfare, political persecutions, deadly storms and fires, secular indifference, profanation and a plethora of other acts of physical and spiritual violence. Why does he not change the world? Or, rather, why does he change the world every day in such a profound way, but seemingly only in this way? Clearly the answer can only be related to the mystery of faith that the Eucharist does not abolish, but *deepens* by its presence and its silence. This faith finds its resolution in the eschaton, toward which we are on pilgrimage, for which the Eucharist nourishes us, like bread in the wilderness.

The priesthood is different. Here the transformation is not immediate or entire. It takes place slowly, and not without great struggle. Also in contrast, the scandal does not stem from the seeming silence or inactivity of this sacrament. The priest is active in the midst of history. He is able to be present in the midst of war or disease, violent persecution or physical disaster, and of course to accompany Christians through the experience of death. And in the midst of all this, he is able to cast the light of Christ, the ray of truth, in his words and his charity and his mercy. He is able to bring Christ into the midst of the world in an amazing way. However, he does so in and through the weakness of his own person. That is the trial of this sacrament. The priest is not transformed as the elements of the Eucharist are. He is transformed as another believer, who struggles to persevere in the night of this world in faith, and hope, and charity. He gives absolution, *ex opere operato*, infallibly, we might say, by the words of absolution. And yet he remains himself a sinner, subject to the same weaknesses, called to the same profound and lasting conversion. If the priest is a monstrance of light, he is a more dynamic and unstable sort of monstrance: a work in progress, in which the clarity of the truth is meant to shine over time, more and more brightly. In the saints who are priests, we see this light conquer.

Why does God will such a mystery for his Church? We can think of many reasons, but here I will offer only one. It pertains to the pedagogy of mercy. By having such profound mercy on a poor human being so as to make him a priest, God gives us an unerring sense of the depths

of his love for the whole human race, as he seeks to find friends even among sinners, and as he communicates the mystery of the Beloved Son to the world through the medium of ordinary human beings. In short, the scandal in question is a scandal above all of mercy, and of the encouragement of God who chooses imperfect human beings as priests, precisely because he wills that we, the Church, might believe in the vehement love of Christ.

Thus priests are called to be instruments of Christ: each one another Christ, *alter Christus*, in the midst of this world that is complex, and with the terrible complexity and limitation that is within each ordained minister. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Yes, Lord, we are weak, but your grace is powerful and victorious, and in you alone can we find the fullness of life, and lasting peace. "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

This grace of Jesus is the seed of eternity, growing up silently in the heart of this world, sprouting up in the hearts and minds of Christ's priests, expressed in their everyday words and actions, as disciples of Christ who communicate his presence out into the world. St. Leo the Great famously writes in his oft-cited Christmas homily, "Oh, Christian remember your dignity . . . Remember the Head and Body of which you are a member!"⁵ And so we should say similarly "Oh priest, acknowledge what you are, another Christ, an instrument of the Lord, a living tabernacle of the presence of Jesus in your very person." This is the greatest challenge but it is also the great dignity and privilege to which each Catholic priest is called. May the Lord make good in us that work that he has begun. Amen. 

⁵ Leo the Great, "Sermon 21, On the Feast of the Nativity," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 12, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, trans. C.L. Feltoe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1895), 1.

