

PRIESTS: SERVANTS OR SHARMANS?

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ALL THE PEOPLE of the Church have been shamed by the clerical sexual abuse scandals that have ravaged the Church over the last two decades, and none more so than the priests. So maybe it is time to look at one of the possible strands that may contribute to the phenomenon of the pedophile priest. This particular strand has many names, but for the present we might call it 'angelism', a term to cover the pietistic miasma and practices descending from Jansenism to the present day and that have passed themselves off as Catholic spirituality. But most alarmingly, a resurgent attempt to elevate the priest to a status of being above all others in the Church, demonstrates that life-denying Jansenism is alive and well in Catholic seminaries and houses of priestly formation.

When Pope Benedict XVI opened the year for the priesthood on Friday 19 June 2009 he endorsed the idea that priests are fundamentally different spiritual beings from the rest of humanity. This idea is gaining momentum and is still being taught in seminaries and from the point of view of the eastern Churches, and the Apostolic tradition for that matter, is as close as it gets to being crypto-heretical.

It the same week of Pope Benedict's pronouncement, Nicholas Lash cited Newman's warning that 'the Church is never in greater danger than when a Pope becomes the spokesman for his own party.' (*The Tablet*, 27 June 2009) This is exactly what is occurring in Rome and a particular theological issue, embedded in Rome's announcement of the 'Year of the Priest', raises the alarm. It also is surprising that the theologians of the wider Catholic world have not reacted to this a

decade past. Perhaps this was more from embarrassment than fear of censure?

Let it be clear from the outset that, particularly in the face of recent events, the exercise of the priesthood in the Catholic communion is in need both of *aggiornamento* and support. Whether the 'Year of the Priest' achieved this is quite another matter. Indeed, the statements on priesthood inaugurating that special year may indicate that Rome has theologically shot itself in the foot.

In a speech in Rome on 24 June, Pope Benedict declared that 'The priest is a slave of Christ in the sense that his existence, ontologically configured to Christ, takes on an essentially relational character'. On the same day, citing his own observations from years past, the Pope identified what he believes to be the two contrasting and even opposed concepts of priesthood that are employed in the formation of clergy. 'On the one hand a social-functional understanding... on the other hand there is the sacramental-ontological understanding.' Priesthood declares the Pope, is 'anchored in the being of the minister.' As it happens, neither of these concepts represent the Tradition, but the 'ontological change' theory is that espoused increasingly from the latter part of John Paul II's pontificate. Cardinal Ratzinger was one of its chief ideologues. Then, as Pope, he was very much 'spokesman for his own party'.

However, the honour for the most extravagant insistence on ontological change has to be that of John Cardinal O'Connor in an address in Fatima on June 18, 1996, 'The Necessity of Continuing Formation for the Priest'. The Cardinal uses the word ontological five times in almost as many sentences and

finishes with ridiculous analogies drawn from the mystery of the Holy Incarnation and from the transforming consecration of the eucharistic elements. He deserves to be cited in full. The saddest thing about this Fatima address is that not one of the clergy or faithful present on that day cried out, 'nonsense!'

Above all, formation, the Pontiff tells us, must be rooted in 'awareness of the *specific ontological bond* which unites the priesthood to Christ the High Priest and Good Shepherd'. [n. 11] In my judgment, this concept of the ontological nature of the priesthood, is critical. We don't just put on vestments; we don't just receive an assignment. Neither makes us priests. We *become* priests at ordination. There is an 'ontological change' in our spiritual nature. Such is a profound mystery. Is it too bold an analogy to compare the change to Christ the Son of God: retaining His Divinity while becoming a man? Or to observe that after bread becomes the Sacred Body of Christ, it still tastes like bread and feels like bread, but is now the Body of Christ? There has been an ontological change. A cup of wine still smells like wine and tastes like it, but it is now the Blood of Christ. At ordination an *ontological* change takes place.

The use of the term 'ontological' and 'ontologically' is novel and risky. The Fathers of Nicaea in 325AD agonized over the use of *homoousios* realising that it was a risk to introduce a philosophical term with no biblical or theological pedigree into the deliberations on the question of identity of being in the Holy Trinity. Introduce it they did because there was no other way of expressing orthodoxy. Scripture could not provide the term. The same degree of caution should be exercised before using 'ontological change' which strictly means a change in being, that something new has come to be in the world.

Admittedly many use the word *ontological* very loosely and in areas other than theology and generally mean *different*, which is the word with which *ontological* is often paired in a kind of tautology. However, that is not how it is being used by the Pope and the Vatican theological school responsible for the



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dissemination of this novelty. A good example of how this word is generally understood in theological circles came to light during the first visit to the United States of His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew of Constantinople in 1991. In a speech at the University of Georgetown he said that the separation between the Eastern and Western churches was not merely one of geography, structure, or religious law. Rather, he declared, 'the manner in which we exist has become ontologically different.' Ecumenical panic ensued on both sides. The Patriarch later declared he did not intend this literally. He meant something like *very different*.

On the question of priestly ordination there is indeed solid tradition, from the time of the Fathers variously expressed, concerning the character bestowed upon the one ordained. Words such as 'indelible', 'mark' and 'grace' spring to mind, but ontological change is a bridge too far, much too far. Priesthood is not merely functional, nor does it involve ontological transformation. The Eastern Christian approach to the matter, always liturgical in nature, may help clarify the issue, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. At the Great Entrance in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy the priest or bishop prays,

By the power of the Holy Spirit, make me worthy—since I am clothed with the grace of the priesthood—to stand before your holy altar and consecrate your sacred and immaculate body and precious blood.

An ontologically changed being is not speaking here, but your sinful and unprofitable

servant to whom the Holy Spirit is faithful because of the grace bestowed, by that same Holy Spirit, at ordination. The ordination prayers say this clearly. The Christian priest is no shaman, which the use of *ontological change* can imply. Rather,

Divine Grace, which always heals, that which is infirm, and completes that which is wanting, elevates, through the laying-on of hands, the most devout (Subdeacon to Deacon, Deacon to Priest). Wherefore, let us pray for him, that the Grace of the All-Holy Spirit may come upon him.

The second prayer at ordination makes it even clearer.

Do you, the same Lord, fill with the gift of your Holy Spirit this man whom it has pleased you to advance to the degree of Priest, that he may be worthy to stand in innocence before your

Altar, to proclaim the Gospel of your Kingdom, to minister the word of your truth, to offer you spiritual gifts and sacrifices, to renew your people through the bath of regeneration.

Clearly it is the Holy Spirit who will make up whatever is lacking in this unworthy candidate.

Pushed too far, Rome may be generating yet another ecumenical theological obstacle with the Orthodox Church which most definitely does not subscribe to the theory of ontological change. It will also cause little surprise to learn that the Vatican theological school also uses this novel theory to bolster the argument for clerical celibacy. That is another story. However, the connection between the angelic, ontologically changed man who falls from grace into shameful sexual abuse is a strand in the tangled skein that deserves to be examined.

And then, He does something that the disciples don't understand: washing the feet. In that time, this was usual, it was customary, because when the people arrived in a home, their feet were dirty with the dust of the road; there were no cobblestones at that time.... There were dusty roads. And at the entrance to the house, they washed their feet. It was not done by the master of the house but by the slaves. That was the task of a slave. And like a slave, Jesus washes our feet, the feet of his disciples, and that is why He says: 'What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand' (Jn 13:7). Jesus' love is so great that He became a slave to serve us, to heal us, to cleanse us.

Today, in this Mass, the Church would like the priest to wash the feet of 12 people, in memory of the 12 Apostles. But in our hearts we must be certain, we must be sure that, when the Lord washes our feet, He washes us entirely, He purifies us, He lets us feel his love yet again. There is a very beautiful phrase in the Bible, the prophet Isaiah says: 'Can a mother forget her child? But even if a mother could forget her child, I will never forget you' (cf. 49:15). God's love for us is like this.

And today I will wash the feet of 12 of you, but all of you are in these brothers and sisters, all of you, everyone. Everyone who lives here. You represent them. But I too need to be washed by the Lord, and for this you pray during the Mass, that the Lord also wash away my impurities, that I might become a better servant to you, a better slave at the service of the people, as Jesus was.

—Pope Francis, Holy Thursday, 2015.