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The Church We Are and the Priesthood to Which We Belong—Some Reflections

*Based on an address given at Buckfast Abbey on a Day of Intercession for Priests,
Nov. 9th, 1995 by Christopher Budd, Bishop of Plymouth*

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to turn our concern for the Church and our own priestly ministry into a purely intellectual task. Once we have the right ideas in the right order all is well. We know deep down how wide of the mark this is. Accurate and rich ideas are important but unless we go to prayer, to present ourselves in the presence of God, we will make no sense of our experiences of being in the Church and the priesthood as gift to us and we can also appreciate the depths and generosity of God's presence to us in his Church and in the priesthood. Only in prayer do we fully express the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of being on a pilgrimage of faith with each other on God's business. God's policies can be very unclear and we clamor for clarity and security. Prayer is also a great leveler - we are all on the same footing We come into God's presence as unfaithful faithful people (cf. Lk 18, 9-14) Priests and people have to own their infidelity in the presence of God - from such a confession our Christian life and our ministry draw their strength.

How this is shared by many of our own people and our confidence can be undermined. The temptation to hide or to take flight to the respectability of married love is strong. Our conviction that marriage and celibacy are profoundly complementary and need each other to give an integrated witness to the meaning of sexuality can seem hollow and empty.

5 Conflicting expectations of ourselves and each other can also give rise to tensions. Some people expect that we should be doing for them exactly what our forebears did fifty years ago and yet others will expect us to be low-profile, provide some sacraments, and let them run the show. These and other differing expectation are also within the presbyterate and make brotherly solidarity more difficult than formerly. Our expectations of each other may be very different. We still do not feel safe enough with each other to air these things because we expect judgment rather than understanding.

6 While noting all these difficulties, there are also joys and reassurances. Some people are remarkably faithful to Christ and his Church despite grave problems. Some wish to become full members of the Catholic Church - their coming to faith is a great joy. Some wish to be reconciled - the joy of that is immense. It is a great joy to share and listen with respect and honesty to the faith of other Christians and other faith traditions, a joy that was not encouraged in past eras.

7 If we tend to be more aware of negatives than positives, it may be because we are in the middle of an overdose of scandals, past and present. We are haunted by misgivings about how bad or dishonest we are or may have been. Too much of that is bad for our individual and collective self-image It is also untrue.

Acceptance of this mixed situation is important for our well-being. We can only go forward from where we are. We need a sense of history to understand our present situation in regard to both ourselves and our Church community.

Towards a Response

1 At the centre of our faith lies the mystery of God's presence in our history in Christ which we call the Paschal Mystery. This needs to held central all the time. Its message is that God is with us; that God is present



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transforming death to life and that this God-directed process in Christ has a secure and totally reliable outcome. For priests, this has to be the centre of our personal spirituality, the centre of our preaching and teaching, as it is the centre of the sacramental life of the whole community. It is particularly true at and in the Eucharist, which is both what the Church is and does.

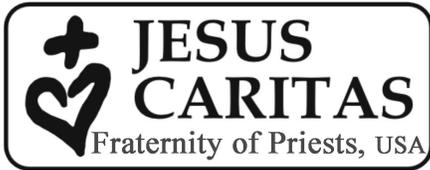
2 At their recent in-Service meeting at Cricklade, the Bishops of England and Wales proposed for the Millennium an image of the Church we should aspire to become - They note There are four marks of a jubilee Church which struck us deeply- We need to become a Church more conscious of our own need for repentance: we realize afresh the radical truth proposed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the measure for all that we are. We too easily become comfortable; we find ourselves sometimes excluding people whom Christ may well have invited into his company. We want to become a Church able to recognize the wounds of our own body, confident that repentance will bring us joy. From our repentance, we can discover afresh the compassion we desire to offer in our world. There are many who are victims or who become voiceless. It has always been God's call to the Church to suffer with such people and to speak for them. When we turn to those who are victims, we will discover the presence of the crucified and risen Lord. The body of Christ must be present in the places where reconciliation is most needed. Above all, the Gospel message proclaims that all sin can be redeemed. Jesus, the sinless one, has taken upon himself all sinfulness. Whatever our past failures, our lives can be re-created. We know all too well that this is a costly process; forgiveness is not easy or painless. If we are willing to seek the risen, wounded Lord, we and our world can be transformed. To become a repentant, compassionate, reconciling Church, we need to deepen our spirituality. We need to value the diversity which brings richness to our communion. The fabric of our common mind and heart must be deepened and re-formed in prayer. We must open ourselves more fully to each other in faith. In these ways, we will reflect the life of the Trinity. They also picked up again a phrase from their Glenridding meeting - The Bishops invited themselves to be Bold and faithful shepherds. Here goes!

3 The Church is not primarily ours; it is Christ's! We claim to hold that truth, but we need to own it again. The place we to do this is in prayer, not study. I say this because until we rediscover the Church and all her riches as gift, we will not be able to move forward from the slavery of our own importance. Our priestly importance (as indeed our whole reality) is gifted to us and we can only get in touch with this in prayer.

It is only in prayer that we can be challenged by God who is master of all. It is only in prayer that we really accept the truth about God/our world/the Church and ourselves; not just the truth expressed in our doctrine, but the truth of our current situation. Prayer is the remedy for my prejudices and one-eyed perception. It opens me out to God who stands at the source of all truth.

4 It is a primary and crucial insight of Christian faith that everything we have and are is GIFT. Our own personal reality; the relationships of kith and kin; our wider social and faith relationships and the whole reality of the Church with all the riches that Christ has given to us in the Church - Word of God/Faith/Sacrament/Priesthood/Authority. If this perception really controlled how we see things and what we do, we would be able to live more easily with the negative things we have already noted. We may be enabled to make the difficult adjustment to more collaborative styles of ministry among ourselves and with our people. Our ministry is defined by our relationship to our faith-communities and their welfare. A constant return to texts like 2 Tim 1,6- Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying-on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-control; may help us to realize that Timidity can only come from sin; that all power comes from God; that love is the heart of God and that self-control means I am seeking God's things and not me. The very powerful gift I have received is a gift of service, available from the Lord for his community.

5 The gift of Christ's Headship lies at the heart of our ministerial priesthood. Only Christ is head of the Church. He alone has trodden the road to Calvary and burst forth from the tomb. Only he could do that. However, like most other essential features of his ministry, he has gifted the headship to his Church through the Apostles and



this is made available to each generation through the sacrament of Orders and the ministry of bishops, priests and deacons. This headship is gifted to the Church and will always remain a gift. It is also important to note the nature of the gift - it is a service to and for the community and it has been quite radically shaped by Calvary and Easter. The sacrament of Orders specifies what we are - sacraments or icons of Christ the Head to his people, His Body, into which we are all incorporated at Baptism. What we do, stems from what we are - we are empowered to break Christ's word for the people (preaching and teaching); to celebrate the sacraments for and with the people, especially the Eucharist; to hold the people together in a community of faith and love. The ways in which we have shaped Christ's Headship for his people have varied through history. Unfortunately, they have often been secular (e.g. Prince - bishops; officer class; and elite etc.). The only perpetually valid model is the One who hangs on the cross - from him, a whole spirituality flows which we are invited to adopt as

6 Mutuality or Interdependence in the Community of Faith is a consequence that flows from our common unity given in baptism. If the gift-nature of everything becomes a primary perception of what and who we are, the way we relate to each other within the community will necessarily be expressed by respect for and acceptance of each others gifts and personal reality. Respect and acceptance are quite complex attitudes to develop. They bring together truth, honesty, love, the will to nurture and empower, the ability to appreciate and challenge. In community, especially in a structured community like the Church, there has to be a two-way traffic of respect and acceptance. One can almost call it a structured respect and acceptance, except one is very firmly in the realm of persons in relationships. From those who have been ordained to the ministerial priesthood, respect and acceptance of all the members of the community of faith involves an acknowledgement of their personal dignity and gifts and the affirmation of both person and gifts. The love that binds us together requires honesty about ourselves, our situation and the issues of the Church and the world. Such love also expresses itself in our willingness to nurture the gifts of others and to empower them to use them, by developing appropriate structure and order in the community. For the baptized, lay member of the community, respect and acceptance involves a similar set of attitudes. Although the gifts of baptism and ordination come from the Lord, they can only be used when we facilitate their exercise. A congregation can inhibit the priestly ministry of their pastor, as indeed a priest can inhibit the Christian life of the people in the community. The people of the community need to affirm the personal dignity and priestly ministry of their priest. Their love needs to show forth both honesty about ourselves, our situation and the real issues. This love needs to nurture the gifts of priestly ministry and leave the priest free to be their priest.

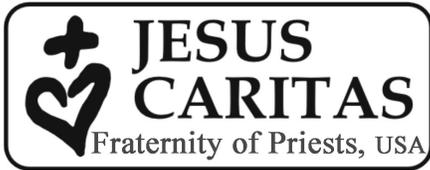
The enemies of this so necessary respect and acceptance are easily identified. If the spirit of domination flourishes, a spirit that always seeks to control, or if we are always manipulating others around our own closed personal agenda, respect and acceptance go out the window. Paralysis is easily generated by any self-absorption which indulges poor me sentiments. The spirit of service is killed once the poor me syndrome has established itself.

Above all, a real killer of community is gossip. A reading of James (3.5ff) should warn us of the catastrophe of gossip. Ultimately it poisons all wholesome relationships and destroys community.

The essential structures of the Church should be a protection against some of these enemies which we have identified. At best, these structures do protect especially when they truly embody a sense of service. However, these structures can be used by us to promote domination, manipulation and self-centered schemes all of which are ultimately against the gospels. The only remedy for this is a permanent metanoia and an openness in the community so that evil and distortion cannot hide. These is an agenda here which needs to be addressed, and it is not a comfortable

Practical Steps

1 Prayer - if we are serious, we may need to organize our lives around an hour a day, a day a month and a week a year. This is a demanding structure but one that will give a clear signal about our seriousness.



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2 Read and study the scriptures and the tradition of the Church. Our faith-vision and our Christian lives need such nurturing. It is useful to reflect that tradition is not a dead-weight from the past, but an impulse of life. It is not the repetition of weary formulae - it is the generation and recreation of life-giving images and ideas.

3 The witness of our lives will always be the most important sign of our Christian commitment. The way we organize ourselves day by day embodies the witness that we need to give to the values that come to us from the gospel. We can be too busy;

Present

1 We are smaller in number than we were and shrinking. This is true of both priests and people. It is not easy to live with this because there is a part of our human reality that desperately needs us to be on the winning side and at the moment any success is not very apparent.

2 We are becoming smaller, not just by natural wastage, but because people are leaving us - both priests and people, especially young people. Some offer analysis of the phenomenon (e.g. work of M Hornby-Smith) and much of their work is valuable. However, the hemorrhage is there and it can reinforce our perception of failure. We need to recall that nowhere are we promised by Christ that we will pack them in!

3 Scandal hurts and it hurts deeply. We can shrug our shoulders about those who take to alcohol or cannot carry through their unconditional commitment to a celibate life for the Kingdom, but we also fret and feel bad about them. Faithfulness seems worthless and devalued. We flinch at the news of sex scandals and the abuse of children and others. We are all tainted by the sheer nastiness of these things and find it difficult to go about our normal priestly ministry without some sense of shame. All these hurts disable us from addressing our ministry with relish.

4 Our own celibate commitment once so highly regarded by those of the household of the Church now no longer seems to be in favor. Society generally has always had a rather skeptical attitude to our celibacy (even if it admired it from a distance can be grossly idle! Both can give a counter-witness, the message being that we are doing our own thing. Above all, in our culture, we need to develop openness, honesty, truthfulness and a genuine love.

5. We may need to mediate often on Mk 4, 35-41 "Do not be afraid" - the show of which we are a part is not our show, but God's. - Thank God!