

## **What Do Catholics Expect of Priests Today?**

Traditional Understandings and Modern Expectations of the Priesthood

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For more than twenty years, I was admissions director as well as professor at St. John's Seminary. Being admissions director involved reading the applications of students, interviewing them, and making a recommendation to the rector. One of the first questions we always asked of applicants is “Why do you want to be a priest?”

Most who apply to the seminary are pious and idealistic. When asked why they want to be a priest, they typically say that they want to honor God, to follow Christ, and to serve the Church and their fellow human beings. Those are all excellent reasons. But in more than twenty years, I never heard an applicant connect the word “priest” to its Hebrew origin, the word *kōhēn*. We're familiar with it as a last name, Cohen. If a seminary applicant told me that he wanted to be a *kōhēn* or priest because he wanted to offer sacrifice like the Hebrew priests of old, I would have fallen off my chair.

And yet what I want to suggest tonight is that the concept of priesthood remains deeply connected to the idea of sacrifice. The priest serves by helping us make ourselves a priestly people. Our sacrifice is the spiritual sacrifice of our lives.

I will begin by sketching the traditional understanding of the Catholic priesthood. We usually connect it with the power to say Mass and to celebrate the sacraments, because only the ordained priest has those powers. But the priesthood is certainly not limited to sacramental actions. In recent years, several popular books and theological studies have portrayed the priest in a wider sense. The ideal priest, they suggest, is a community builder and pastoral leader. That's what Catholics expect of priests today. So I'd like to explore the relation between today's priest as a community builder and pastoral leader (on the one hand), and (on the other) the “classical” vision of the priest as celebrant of the Mass and the sacraments. In a few minutes I will ask you to weigh in on the question as well, the question of the essence of the priesthood today.

### The Classical Vision of Priesthood

The Bible teaches us about priesthood in the ancient world that surrounded the Hebrews. Abraham, for example, met Melchizedek, a “priest of Salem,” and broke bread with him. Moses drew water for the flock of the daughter of Jethro, a “priest of Midian,” and married her. Then the Book of Exodus describes the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests. They were set apart for ministry. And the Book of Leviticus describes the ritual of animal sacrifice that they performed. They were to select a bull that is “without blemish,” butcher it, and sprinkle its blood – the sign of God's gift of life – on the people.

It's easy to see why no seminary applicant ever says, “I want to be a priest in order to offer sacrifice.” He would not only be in trouble with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals – we would think he's crazy.

Yet at a profound level, sacrifice belongs to the essence of priesthood. I'm not talking about violence to animals, but about something altogether spiritual. We speak of

the Mass, for example, as an “unbloody sacrifice.” We don’t mean, of course, that we put Christ to death in every celebration of the Eucharist. It is, after all, “unbloody.” We are not sacrificing Jesus to the Father as if the Father had to be continually appeased by blood. The very thought sounds blasphemous. Traditional theologians say that we “prolong” the sacrifice of Jesus, but that too lends itself to misunderstandings. The sacrifice of Jesus is not ongoing and never-ending, but was “once and for all.” So when we talk about Christian sacrifice, we mean something different and profound. We are remembering the death of Jesus and offering our own lives to God in union with his.<sup>1</sup> God wants us to be “faithful unto death.” We offer our lives to God who is our origin and our final end. We obey God. In that sense, priesthood is precisely about sacrifice.

This was expressed in the 1560s at the Council of Trent. It affirmed that the Mass offers to God a sacrifice that is “propitiatory for the living and dead.”<sup>2</sup> We do not have to interpret the word “propitiatory” as meaning that the sacrifice of the Mass “appeases” an angry God. We are not speaking of a temperamental and threatening deity. The Mass is rather a “propitiatory sacrifice” because it is an offering of our very selves to God. We offer ourselves in union with Jesus. It is a gift of self, a sacrifice that is “propitiatory” in that it pleases God. St. Paul told the Romans: “I urge you therefore, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). That’s what God wants, the spiritual sacrifice of our lives.

To sum up our progress so far, we believe that priesthood, starting with the models of the Old Testament, is about offering sacrifice. But our understanding of that has changed over the centuries. Today we would agree that the sacrifice of bulls and goats is pleasing neither to PETA nor to God. No one thinks that the death of animals can restore us to grace. God is not won over by the spilling of blood, and we should never understand the death of Jesus as a form of appeasement. Instead we understand sacrifice in spiritual terms. God wants us to offer our own lives, to make them spiritual sacrifices. That is the reason for the priesthood. Jesus Christ was faithful unto death and made his life an offering. The priest helps us unite our lives with him.

How does the priest unite us with Jesus Christ? The obvious answer is that the priest offers the sacrifice of the Mass. For centuries that has been the defining feature of the priesthood. Only the priest can offer the Mass and the sacraments. We see this expressed in 1563 at the Council of Trent. It stated that the sacrament of Holy Orders

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Lumen gentium, Nov. 21, 1964), Chapter III: “The Church Is Hierarchical,” trans. by Cornelius Williams, OP, in Austin Flannery, General Editor, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1975), no. 28: “In the person of Christ and proclaiming his mystery, they [priests] unite the votive offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of Christ their head, and in the sacrifice of the Mass they make present again and apply, until the coming of the Lord, the unique sacrifice of the New Testament.”

<sup>2</sup> Pope Pius IV, “Profession of Faith” in the Bull *Iniunctum nobis* (1564), in J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, Editors, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, revised edition (New York: Alba House, 1982), no. 34 (p. 21): “I also profess that in the Mass there is offered to God a true sacrifice, properly speaking, which is propitiatory for the living and the dead.”

imprints a “character” on the priest and grants an eternal power.<sup>3</sup> Trent defined the “essence” of the priesthood as the power “to consecrate, offer and administer the body and blood of Christ, and also to forgive or retain sins.”<sup>4</sup> That is the ordinary way – the “classical” way – in which the priest unites the people with Jesus Christ.

### Pastoral Leadership in Entrepreneurial Christianity

It is worth noting, however, that Vatican II and the 1983 Code of Canon Law laid the foundations for a rediscovery of collegiality in the priesthood, which has its social roots” in the concept of the people of God.<sup>5</sup> three recent books by Catholic authors – two of whom are priests – do not specify the priestly power to celebrate the Mass and the sacraments as the highest expression of pastoral practice. Instead, these authors make the priest’s community leadership primary. The three books are:

- *Rebuilt: The Story of a Catholic Parish*, by Father Michael White and his associate Tom Corcoran;
- *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission*, by Father James Mallon; and
- *Great Catholic Parishes: A Living Mosaic – How Four Essential Practices Make Them Thrive*, by a Catholic layman, William E. Simon Jr.

Each of these books emphasizes the importance of evangelization to parish life. Indeed, they represent a new genre among popular Catholic literature, “entrepreneurial Christianity.” The pastor, they suggest, must be an entrepreneur who increases the size of his congregation by effective leadership. Such a pastor makes enlarging the congregation a goal and leads the parish so as to achieve it. The priest’s celebration of the Mass and the sacraments is subordinate (in these books) to a broader pastoral role.

Rebuilt. Let’s begin with *Rebuilt*, a book published in 2013 by Father Michael White and his lay associate, Tom Corcoran. *Rebuilt* is a success story about the growth of Nativity Church in Timonium, Maryland. According to the authors, “The church almost tripled in weekend attendance from 1,400 to over 4,000” and “commitment to the mission of the Church has grown.”<sup>6</sup>

The authors accomplished this feat by setting out, as they put it, to “reach the lost.” They began by defining what it means to be “lost,” that is, unchurched and indifferent to Christian faith. They targeted a particular demographic group within their

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<sup>3</sup> Council of Trent, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Order*, promulgated during the Twenty-Third Session (1563), in Neuner and Dupuis, Editors, *The Christian Faith*, no. 1710, p. 497: “In the sacrament of Order, as also in baptism and confirmation, a character is imprinted which can neither be erased nor taken away.”

<sup>4</sup> Piet Fransen, “Orders and Ordination,” in Karl Rahner, Editor, *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, trans. by John Griffiths, Francis McDonagh, and David Smith, under the direction of John Cumming, Executive Editor (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 1122-1148, p. 1138 cited here.

<sup>5</sup> Fransen, “Orders and Ordination,” p. 1140.

<sup>6</sup> Michael White and Tom Corcoran, *Rebuilt: The Story of a Catholic Parish – Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost, Making Church Matter* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013), p. 299.

zip code – young married men – and designed an evangelization strategy around them. Their goal was to make them disciples. If they could attract a young married man to Nativity Church, the authors wrote, and if they could “put him on the discipleship path,” then “his wife will happily join him and his kids have a far better shot of staying active through their teen and adult years” (74). The strategy of the authors was very pragmatic. They wanted husbands to become disciples, starting with church attendance. That also is the most effective way, they found, to reach the man’s wife and children.

With this pragmatic approach, Michael White and Tom Corcoran were taking seriously the recommendations of a Protestant megachurch pastor in Orange County, Rick Warren. They had attended Warren’s workshops, and found his “five biblical purposes” relevant to their own Catholic situation. In short, Warren taught them to “reach the lost and grow disciples through a focus on worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and evangelization” (54). By making Warren’s purposes their own purposes, the authors “rebuilt” and revived their parish.

What makes *Rebuilt* relevant to our question of the priesthood, however, is the way the book treats the sacraments. The authors wanted to set people “on the discipleship path.” Being a disciple, they wrote, differs from “just showing up” for Mass. Moreover, being a disciple has a complex relationship to the sacraments. Some people view the sacraments as a kind of “magic” that makes no demands on the disciple. The authors took a critical view of the *status quo* at Nativity Church. They wrote:

Nativity was a sacramental machine: Mass every day, twice a day in Advent and Lent and eight times each weekend, baptisms, confessions, weddings, funerals, daily devotions, anointing, and adoration. It’s all good stuff, it’s how some Catholics grow spiritually. For others, it’s what they do *instead* of grow. And sometimes it can begin to look like magic. Many mistakenly think, ‘If I just work it [work the sacramental devotions] long enough I’ll earn what I’m after: a spouse, a job, successful surgery, kids who *finally* listen to me, eternal life’” (77).

This passage makes an ironic point. For some people, church participation is a matter of going through the motions. Reception of the sacraments can be, not authentic spirituality, but a substitute for spiritual growth.

At a deeper level, the passage implies something about the priesthood. I said earlier that the classical view of the priesthood links it to the power of saying Mass and celebrating the sacraments. But in the words of the authors of *Rebuilt*, many people falsely understand the sacraments as a kind of magic that will earn heavenly rewards. Pastoral care means more than providing, as the authors wrote, “a sacramental machine.”

That phrase might scandalize some readers. So the authors hastened to concede: “The Eucharist is central to our parish” (93). Their main argument, however, undercuts the view that the essence of the priesthood rests in the celebration of the sacraments. “Cultural Catholics” – meaning those baptized as infants but far from discipleship – are no longer engaged with the Eucharist. The authors put it this way: “They have tuned the Church out, and no matter how beautifully or faithfully we celebrate the Eucharist . . . it’s not getting them back” (92). In short, the essence of the priesthood and pastoral care is more than sacramental authority. In the *Rebuilt* vision, priesthood means evangelization.

Divine Renovation. A similar viewpoint can be seen in a 2014 book by Father James Mallon entitled *Divine Renovation*. Mallon is a pastor in the Diocese of Halifax, Nova Scotia, and he calls himself a “proud John Paul II priest.”<sup>7</sup> His book, *Divine Renovation*, summons the Church to focus on what Mallon considers most important, namely, the cultivation of “missionary disciples” (40). For that reason, Father Mallon asks his parishioners to enroll in the Alpha evangelization program, originally developed in the Church of England and now used in Catholic parishes. Instead of preserving the *status quo* and reinforcing a “culture of maintenance” (17), Mallon’s missionary disciples go out and evangelize. They have had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and want to share it.

Mallon, in his critique of the sacramental attitudes of parishioners who have yet to become disciples, was not as harsh as White and Corcoran in *Rebuilt*. He did not suggest, as they did, that some Catholics view the reception of the sacraments as a form of “magic” that substitutes for authentic spiritual growth. He criticized, however, what he calls sacramental “minimalism.” Such minimalism views the reception of the sacraments, in Mallon’s words, as “getting my card punched so I can meet the basic requirements for salvation” (70). He argued that we should not tolerate “lifelong parishioners who are stuck . . . spiritually” (81). To that extent, Mallon’s view is akin to that expressed in *Rebuilt*. The essence of the priesthood consists not just in the power to celebrate the sacraments, but in the purpose for which they exist – the purpose of strengthening discipleship.

In *Divine Renovation*, Mallon rightly emphasized the priest’s sacramental ministry. Sunday Mass, he wrote, deserves the priest’s best efforts. In his words:

The priority of any parish, and any priest, ought to be about preparing for and celebrating the Sunday Eucharist to make it the best possible experience for the maximum number of people” (96).

Mass should be uplifting, in Mallon’s words, “a ‘production’ in the best sense of the word” (96). But the Mass is not an end in itself. It should be an “experience” for “the maximum number of people,” the ones who are to be transformed into missionary disciples. The good shepherd, Mallon said, aims “to feed the sheep so they can grow and mature” (81). In short, the essence of the priesthood does not consist exclusively in the power to celebrate the Mass and the sacraments. Even more essential, according to Mallon, is to do so within a context, that of forming missionary disciples.

Great Catholic Parishes. A good example of a priest who forms such disciples is Monsignor Lloyd Torgerson of St. Monica’s Church in Santa Monica. Torgerson is the hero of *Great Catholic Parishes*, a book published in 2016 by William E. Simon Jr. You might remember that Simon was in 2002 the Republican nominee for Governor of California who was defeated by Gray Davis. In 2012 Simon founded “Parish Catalyst,” a non-profit corporation that has adapted a strategy pioneered by evangelical churches in order to build up Catholic parishes.

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<sup>7</sup> Fr. James Mallon, *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2014), p. 51.

In *Great Catholic Parishes*, Simon described his pastor of thirty years, Msgr. Torgerson, as “Beethoven in my backyard.” Torgerson is as great a pastor, in Simon’s view, as Beethoven was a composer. This helps explain, said Simon, why he goes to Mass every Sunday. “If you knew Beethoven performed down the street,” Simon asked, “and every week he played a new piece he composed, do you think you’d go?”<sup>8</sup> Torgerson is Simon’s model for priesthood.

In describing his pastor, Simon began with the liturgy. Torgerson’s Mass is an experience for Simon of “Beethoven in my own backyard,” and Torgerson’s church is what Simon calls a “destination parish” – a parish that draws attendance from multiple zip codes (105). Simon interviewed 244 other pastors whose churches meet the criterion of greatness, and they said, “The Sunday liturgy is one of their parish’s greatest assets” (100). People come to church because of the liturgy.

It is worth noting, however, that for Simon, the liturgy is one asset among others, and not the most important. This bears on our topic, namely, the essence of the priesthood. We recall that, in the “classic” or Tridentine definition of priesthood, the essential feature is the priest’s power to celebrate Mass and the sacraments. But for Simon, priestly sacramental power – the power to make Christ available in the Eucharist – is not by itself the essence of the priesthood. Simon implied it with these questions:

How does a parish become more than a posted sign that reads “Jesus Available Here”? How does it become an inspiring community that buzzes with life and gives off a welcoming energy that attracts people? (100).

The Eucharistic presence alone, for Simon, is not sufficient. To attract people, he said, the parish must “buzz with life” and “give off a welcoming energy.” This puts new expectations on the pastor, and indicates how we understand the priesthood today.

The “great” Catholic parish, according to Bill Simon, has four marks: shared leadership, discipleship, a “vibrant Sunday experience,” and evangelization. Especially relevant to our theme of the priesthood is the first of the four marks, namely shared leadership. The 244 pastors interviewed by Simon share leadership, saying that they collaborate, delegate, and consult (20). That is specifically how Simon’s hero, Msgr. Torgerson, regards himself. “I rely hugely on our lay staff,” Torgerson said, adding, “We have a parish council and a financial council and a whole variety of other ministry councils” (21). When we ask what Catholics expect of priests today, it is not enough to celebrate the Mass and the sacraments. They should be leaders who steer their parishes from “maintenance to mission” and who promote discipleship.

### Discussion

The three books that I have discussed – *Rebuilt*, *Divine Renovation*, and *Great Catholic Parishes* – present the pastor as an entrepreneurial leader. He takes it upon himself to evangelize, that is, to increase the size of his congregation by good leadership. In each of the three books, the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments is important,

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<sup>8</sup> William E. Simon Jr., *Great Catholic Parishes: A Living Mosaic - How Four Essential Practices Make Them Thrive* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2016), p. 15.

but is subordinate to a different goal, that of inspiring discipleship and promoting Christian maturity.

- For White and Corcoran, the authors of *Rebuilt*, the sacraments can be misunderstood as a magic that can extract rewards from God.
- For Mallon, the author of *Divine Renovation*, the sacraments can be misunderstood as fulfilling an obligation, “getting my card punched,” and people must be moved from merely maintaining the church to missionary outreach.
- For Simon’s *Great Catholic Parishes* the liturgy draws people to church, but the church must offer people more than a sign that Jesus is “available here” – it must offer leadership, evangelization, and opportunities for discipleship.

All of that has consequences for the priesthood, whose essence cannot be confined to the power of celebrating the sacraments. *How are we to describe the essence of the priesthood today?*

### Conclusion

The three books we have discussed this evening belong to the genre of entrepreneurial Christianity. They are not theology, but popular works that express a pastoral vision for Catholic parishes. According to this vision, the pastor is an entrepreneur who evangelizes in a pragmatic way. He aims to enlarge his congregation, and the three books explain why this is important and how to do it. They do not claim to be theological studies of the nature of priesthood, but only expressions of a contemporary pastoral vision. They echo the Church’s teaching about the importance of evangelization. I cite the books, not as definitive teaching about priesthood today, but as an indication of changes in our understanding of the priesthood. The changes noted in the popular books have received, within the last couple of months, an indirect validation from a genuinely scholarly source.

In December, a seminar at Boston College, focusing on Priesthood and Ministry for the Contemporary Church, published a paper that the members had been developing since 2016. Entitled “To Serve the People of God,” the paper appeared in *Origins*, a publication of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.<sup>9</sup> The aim of the paper was to influence seminary formation of future clergy. Seminar participants believe that today’s priest should be someone who, more than anything else, is able to work collaboratively.

The word “relationship” appears often in the Boston College paper. Quoting Vatican II’s *Dei verbum* (no. 2), the authors state that God invites human beings into a relationship through Jesus Christ. The priest serves to build up that relationship. His ability to befriend and collaborate is essential. The document repeatedly underlines the importance of relationships:

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Gaillardetz, Richard Lennan, and Thomas Groome, co-chairs, and the Boston College Seminar on Priesthood and Ministry for the Contemporary Church, “To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood and Ministry,” *Origins* 48:31 (Dec. 27, 2018), pp. 484-493.

- Baptism. The priesthood, wrote the seminar, takes place within “a relationship to the community of faith and the mission shared by all the baptized” (485).
- Bridge. Without such a relationship, the document says, “ordination can appear to create a gulf between priests and other members of the church” (485).
- Service. “What is unique to ministers,” the members wrote, “is their particular relationship to other members of the body of the Church” (487).
- Health. “Fruitful priestly ministry requires sustenance from relationships” (488).

The seminar participants certainly acknowledged the priest’s unique power to celebrate Mass and the sacraments. But like the three books we examined earlier, the Boston College paper subordinates this priestly power to a wider pastoral vision. Yes, the priest has sacramental authority. But his leadership of the liturgy is a means, the seminar members wrote, to “sustain” the church on pilgrimage (487) and to strengthen it as a community. It is not a private power to be exercised apart from the people of God, but only in relationship to them.

The ordained priest undertakes this ministry in a variety of ways. By celebrating the Mass and the sacraments, for example, he enables us to put our lifework into its properly spiritual context. He enables us to see it as a sacrifice or gift to God. But liturgical action by itself is not the essence of priesthood. The essence must include the work of building community and forming disciples. That requires a capacity that may have been taken for granted by the Council of Trent – the capacity to form relationships with the people of God and so to strengthen the Christian community.

When the essence of the priesthood was narrowly defined as celebrating the Mass and the sacraments, we assumed that the priest was invested with supernatural powers that separated him from the people. Years of seminary formation detached him from the world of family and society. The seminarian had to master the Aristotelian doctrine of hylomorphism, for example, in order to understand how the substance of the bread and wine changed into the body and blood of the Lord. Special studies and disciplines initiated him into a wholly-separate realm of purity and piety.

Today we would say that these priestly powers set the priest apart but do not separate him from the people. He exercises the power to consecrate the Eucharistic elements, yes, but he does so within a communal context. Sacred mysteries do not lift the priest above the congregation, but enable him to help it achieve its Christian identity. That is the implicit message of the popular books that we reviewed this evening, as well as the report from the Boston College seminar. We expect today’s priest to be more than a master of sacred and supernatural mysteries. We expect him to be an evangelizer, a community advocate, and a relationship builder (if not an “entrepreneur”).

When I began this evening, I talked about the link between the Catholic priest today and the *kōhēn* or Hebrew priest of old. For both, I said, the concept of sacrifice is essential. For the Hebrews, the sacrifice of a valuable animal was a gift that could reconcile a sinful people to a righteous God. Today’s ministerial priest serves the common priesthood of the faithful by helping us to make our lives a spiritual sacrifice. He does that, not just by celebrating the Mass and the sacraments, but by building relationships of faith and trust within the community.