

**The Salesian Center for Faith & Culture
Studies in Salesian Spirituality
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Priestly Presence in the World:

A Salesian View

Conference to the Toledo-Detroit Province of the Oblates of St.
Francis de Sales, on the occasion of the feast day on January 24,
2010

In his first Preface to the Rule of the Visitation, Francis de Sales begins by quoting the Book of Genesis: “God created man in his image and likeness; he created him in the image of God, male and female, he created them.” And then goes on to emphasize that: “Woman, no less than man, has the grace of being made the image of God” (OEA, 25:291). In this regard, it must be remembered that Christ is called by St. Paul the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Since he is the perfect image of God and we are made in this image, then we are, all of us, made in the image and likeness of Christ, of Christ the Priest, Prophet and King. Vatican II reminds us that we share in all three of these ministries by our baptism, namely, to sanctify, to teach and to govern (*Lumen Gentium*, 10-13).

This Preface enables us to better understand and discuss Christ’s priesthood in de Sales’s eyes and its implications for our humanity. In other words, we are able to examine the priesthood of Christ in terms of what it means for us as human beings, and thus to de-clericalize it.

The uneasiness or the malaise that grips modern man was deeply understood and powerfully portrayed by the twentieth-century French writer, Albert Camus, particularly in his interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus, who for all eternity is condemned to push a rock uphill only to have it fall down again. The situation of Sisyphus in Camus’s view is the perfect expression of man’s hopelessness and absurd condition of trying to give meaning to an absurd world that has no meaning. Whether we agree with this view of man or not, we will have to admit that Camus has laid bare the soul of many human beings in the world today. Strangely enough, he considers

Christ to be the “perfect man” or perfect human being but not in the sense we usually understand this expression. In speaking of Christ’s suffering and death, he describes him as the symbol of human misfortune, one of the many innocent people put to death by the descendants of Abraham. According to Camus, the incarnate Christ is not God but “perfect man” because he realizes the most absurd situation by dying for an illusion. His life and death illustrate and exemplify the human condition whose nobility consists of giving oneself for an ideal which only has the values which one is willing to give to it by his sacrifice.

Whatever malaise man experiences is bound to find its echo in the life and work of priests who are chosen from among men to work with and for them. A number of years ago, I read in a French publication a rather disturbing article on priests in France: “They No Longer Know Who They Are.” From the many defections from the priesthood, especially in the 70’s and 80’s, it has been brought home to us that the health of the priesthood, both the common and ministerial, is not only necessary for the Church, but for all humanity as well. This, I think, is what Cardinal Danielou meant when he said, “It is certain that there is something which is becoming more and more for modern man a point of contact with the sacred, that is man himself.” What he is saying is that today’s world will discover the sacred in and through man, through human beings.

This, I’m convinced, is one of the major ideas of Salesian thought, particularly if we analyze his conception of the priesthood in the broad sense. He had rather advanced ideas on the priesthood of the laity that appeared very early in his priestly career. He’s not the least bit thrown off-balance by the fact that the early Christians exercised their priesthood by saying the canon, or as it is called today, the Eucharistic Prayer along with the presiding prelate at Mass:

Justin Martyr [*Apol.* II, (alt. I, 67)], describing the ancient office which the Christians performed on Sundays, among other things, says that, after the general prayers, they offered bread, wine and water. Then the prelate made earnest prayers and thanksgivings [*Eucharistias*] to God; the people gave thanks (*bénissait*) saying: “Amen. These things being consecrated with thanksgiving (*Eucharistia*), every one participates, and the same things are given to the deacons to be carried to those who were not present.” Several things are noticeable here. Water was mingled with wine; they offered; they consecrated; they carried it to the sick. (OEA, I:355-56, where he argues that preaching is not the form of the sacraments.)

This citation and the saint’s observation point to the fact that he fully understood the priesthood of all Christians. We will see that this is rather important for what I’m going to explain.

In a sermon on the Feast of the Presentation, De Sales makes a detailed comparison between the tabernacle of Moses and the Church. The truly remarkable thing about this is not the comparison to the Church but to its application of the liturgical or ecclesial terms to man, to the human

person, to his destiny and sanctification. This is why it is rather important to discuss the first several pages of this sermon in detail.

He explains that when Moses was told by God to make the ark, he was given instructions to put a tent or tabernacle over it. De Sales draws our attention to the copper basin that was to be placed between the exterior tabernacle where the people came to offer sacrifice and the “interior tabernacle where the priests of the Law dwelled; or else between the two altars, that is to say, the altar of holocausts and the altar of incense (see Exod 30:18-20). The copper basin was placed there so that the priests could wash their hands and feet before offering sacrifice. He mentions that several interpretations were given to this basin by the Fathers – a symbol of baptism, of repentance, of the teachings of the Gospel. In his customary way, he accepts and synthesizes all three. “This basin placed between the two tabernacles represents baptism, repentance and the teachings of the Gospel, These are the bonds by which the Church militant is united to the Church triumphant” (OEA, 9:382, 11/21/1620).

Speaking of the basin as the symbol of baptism, he comments: “No one can enter the interior tabernacle, which is nothing else than heaven, without passing by the exterior which is the Church, to whom this basin of baptismal waters belongs and in which one must be dipped and washed.... In order to offer sacrifice to our Lord of a victim or holocaust, it is necessary to be washed by this water, actually or at least by a desire for it, that without it all offerings and oblations are not offerings but execrations” (OEA, 9:381).

The basin is also the water of repentance placed between the exterior tabernacle of the Church militant and that of the Church triumphant. It’s impossible to pass from one to the other without going through these waters. Finally, the basin is the teachings of the Gospel. Let’s not kid or deceive ourselves, he warns, without molding ourselves according to this teaching and by passing through these waters “for no one can be saved by making laws according to his own caprices and fancy or by being satisfied with the natural law” (*Ibid.*).

Immediately after this observation, he describes man as being made of two tabernacles – one exterior, which is the body, the other interior, which is the soul. What he is saying here is that our bodies are like the Church militant, the exterior tabernacle, and our souls like the Church triumphant or heaven. It is through priestly activity, through the exercise of our priesthood that we enter the inner tabernacle. De Sales points out that in the Old Testament the interior tabernacle is where the priests of the old law dwelled and it is also heaven. Everyone who passes from one tabernacle to the other by means of the law of the Gospel or the law of love becomes a priest of the new law and also a “heavenly man” (heavenly man in the Pauline sense – one living the resurrected life of Christ). “The first man, being from the earth, is earthly by nature; the second man is from heaven. As this earthly man was, so are we on earth; and as the heavenly man is, so are we in heaven. And we, who have been modeled on the earthly man will be modeled on the heavenly man” (1 Cor 15:47-49). So a priest par excellence is the heavenly man,

not one who is in the clouds but one who is very deep within in himself, in the area where he is completely and totally himself. In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, he compares the reasonable part of the soul to the Temple of Solomon (see Bk. 1, ch. 12).

De Sales's idea of man or of humanity is based on his conception of Christ as the perfect man, the perfect human being, but in a different sense than Albert Camus. He came to a deep understanding of Christ's manhood or of human nature in general by analyzing his priestly activity. The inner struggle of Christ in the Agony in the Garden, which so intrigued Camus and other French writers like Pascal and Vigny proved to De Sales that there is a division in the higher or rational part of human existence. "It must not be said that [Christ] suffered only in body, or only in the soul as sensitive. As a most reasonable consequence, he sought flight and escape from them [these sufferings] and he asked this of his Father" (*Treatise*, Ryan I:84). From all this, it becomes evident that the inferior part of the soul is not identified with its sensitive degree, nor the inferior will with the sensitive appetite" (*Loc. cit.*).

Developing this original insight which he got from St. Augustine, de Sales sets forth in a rather unique way his anthropology by comparing the reasonable soul to the Temple of Jerusalem. Like the Temple, in the superior part of the soul there are three courts or three degrees of reason: 1) the first reasons according to sense knowledge, 2) according to human knowledge, 3) reasons according to faith. Over and beyond these courts is the summit of the soul, the center of one's personality, the core of one's being which only the high priest can enter. He compares this to the Holy of Holies. This is the area in which love operates. When a person enters this innermost depth of his being, it is then that he really finds himself and is able to integrate his existence. This center of the soul is not a source of isolation or estrangement. It is in this sanctuary that the virtues of faith, hope and charity dwell naturally. "From it, as from a joyous source of living water, they spread forth by different springs and streams over the inferior parts and faculties" (*Treatise*, Ryan I:86). So the Holy of Holies or the core of our personality is intended to reshape and integrate all levels of our being.

Priestly Activity, Paschal Mystery and Humankind

In order to reach the Holy of Holies of our being, one has to pass over from one level of consciousness to another until one reaches the innermost recesses of his being. The paschal mystery is bound up with the mystery of man. This is exactly the way that Vatican II speaks of Christ as a pattern for all: "But linked with the paschal mystery and patterned in the dying of Christ he will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope" (Christ as the New Man, no. 22; cf. Phil 3:19). But this is a vocation proper to all human beings:

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known

only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22: “Our priesthood is not reserved to the sphere of the sacred but vitally concerns all men”).

This is precisely the way that de Sales views our priesthood. Baptism for him is essentially a Pasch, a Passover: “Pasch signifies nothing more than passage or Passover, and men make this very happy Passover in their baptism, for they pass from tyranny and servitude of the devil to the grace of the adoption of the children of God” (Sermon 1618 in OEA, 9:150). But remember in the sermon cited above, he pointed out the necessity of baptism, either of the sacrament of the desire for it to exercise a priestly office and to effect this Passover within our very beings. Baptism or the desire for it inserts us into the priestly paschal mystery of Christ. Without it, it is impossible to function as a priest, to effect through God’s grace the Passover in our lives. This Passover is essentially understood in terms of the law of love. “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers” (1 Jn 3:14).

The priestly dignity of a human being was a truth appreciated in De Sales’s day. Pierre Charron, who through his work entitled *La Sagesse* (Wisdom), had a tremendous influence on the liberal thinkers of his day as well as on those of the eighteenth century (Rousseau, Voltaire, Bayle, Montesquieu). Speaking of the wise man (i.e., the perfect human being) in liturgical terms, Charron describes him in the following way: “The wise man is a true priest (*sacrificateur*) of the great God. His mind is God’s temple, his soul is his image, his affections are the offerings. His greatest and most solemn sacrifice is to imitate, serve and implore him” (*Sagesse*, livre. II, chap. V, tome II, p. 147).

This is the observation of a writer who helped to shape the liberal conception of modern man. We actually see here the roots of a secular theology. There seems to be no ecclesial or liturgical dimensions to this kind of priesthood. It could have just as easily been written by a pagan. In point of fact, Charron was a priest himself. If we penetrate beyond the terms of the ancient temple and of Jewish liturgical practices in the epistle to the Hebrews, we see that Christ’s priestly sacrifice took place in his humanity.

When we think of Christ, it is not difficult for us to conceive of him as a priest “according to the order of Melchisedek” stressing generally the notion of his eternal priesthood. What is evident to us was not too evident to the early Christians or rather to the early Jewish Christians. The main purpose of the Letter to the Hebrews was to show that Christ was in fact a priest but a different kind of priest. The epistle to the Hebrews was written to show that Christ was a priest but not like the ordinary priest of the Jewish religion – those who because of their birth belonged to a priestly class, exercised their priesthood in the temple and had all the external trappings. Christ had none of these. In the eyes of his contemporaries, he was an ordinary layman. Some called him teacher or Rabbi because of his knowledge of the law and the Scriptures. But Rabbis were not priests.

Christ, unlike the Levites, was a priest who never served at the altar. He was a secular priest, if you will, who secularized worship in as much as his worship and offering of himself took place outside the temple and outside the cultic rites and in the mainstream of life. It was a priesthood lived in the world, offering up a life, a victim that clashed with the secular and religious powers of his day. As Fr. Schillebeeckx points out so well, Calvary was a piece of human life which Jesus experienced as worship. “The death of Christ is not a liturgical orchestration of a flight from the world, but a plunging of his person to the innermost part of himself, into human life lived in the world and for it.” It was a result of a conflict with the leaders of his people. In as much as it was an earthly event, it could be conceived of as a secular liturgy that took place not on the periphery of human existence but in the mainstream of man’s life and history. We are called to experience our whole life as liturgy, as worship, in a word as a priest. “Every human activity must be integrated into the paschal mystery, for only this mystery can teach the Christian that life for others and building of the city of man is not an idle dream” (Schillebeeckx).

In the ecclesial liturgy, we celebrate with great joy and gratitude this earth-shaking event which Christ accomplished for all men. Speaking of the universal dimensions of the Paschal mystery, Christ says of himself: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). In this regard, it is well to remember that De Sales tells us that by baptism we become the ark of the covenant,¹ the sign of God’s solidarity with all men because all men have been bathed in the blood of the new covenant shed for all men.

Against this background of the Salesian view of priestly activity, the notion that De Sales had of the devout life becomes all the more understandable. All human endeavors are to be consecrated and experienced as liturgy, as worship to God. It is our priestly activity and mission on earth. This is why De Sales states unequivocally and emphatically: “It is an error, or rather a heresy, to try to banish the devout life from the regiment of soldiers, the shop of mechanics, the court of princes, or the home of married people” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, I:1, Ryan, 6). Through a devout life, all can live and exercise priestly activity. Our priestly baptismal character destines us to create a community of love among men by first attempting to unify and integrate the various levels of our own personality, drawing within ourselves by entering at great sacrifice the Holy of Holies of our being. Only then can our priesthood be truly effective to create communion among men. This is precisely what de Sales sees as the essential of priestly activity when he comments on Jesus’ Priestly Prayer in John’s Gospel:

At the last Supper, when he gave this incomparable testimony of his love for men by instituting the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, he says, “My dear Father, I

¹ “Both of these [the gift of hope and its action] remain, although in great affliction and sorrow, but they remain in us the ark of the covenant, that, is the character and title of Christian acquired for us by baptism” (*Treatise*, Bk. 4, ch. 3: Ryan I:209).

beg you that all those you have given me maybe one, as you and I, Father, are one.” And to show that he was not only talking about the Apostles but for all of us, “I do not pray only for these,” as he said before, “but for all those who believe in me through their word.” Who would have dared, I say again, to make such a comparison and ask that we be united as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united to one another (OEA, 10:266-67).

If we simply remain on the level of human reason and like Albert Camus tear out the last few pages of the Gospels that speak of his resurrection or of his Passover, then man’s condition will remain absurd and meaningless. Unlike Albert Camus, we have to have courage, the absurdity, if you will, to make the leap of faith.

Vatican II reminds us that “man can only find himself through a serious gift of himself” (*Documents of Vatican II*, p. 223), a gift which has cosmic significance. The priestly mission is to humanize the world, to help man achieve the awareness of himself as a person. We all share by our baptism in the high priesthood of Christ, capable of penetrating the Holy of Holies of our being. “Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Heb 5:1). To be a priest you have to be a human being, to be a good priest, you have to be a good human being, to be a perfect priest, you have to be a perfect human being. In Christ we see that humanity and priesthood are inseparable. This is precisely how de Sales viewed his own priesthood and that of all Christians.
