

From the Epiphany to Golgotha

A Reflection on the Royal Priesthood of the Faithful. Part I

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The mystery of the incarnation of the Logos is the key to all the arcane symbolism and typology in the Scriptures, and in addition gives us knowledge of created things, both visible and intelligible. He who apprehends the mystery of the cross and the burial apprehends the inward essences of created things; while he who is initiated into the inexpressible power of the resurrection apprehends the purpose for which God first established everything.

St. Maximus the Confessor.

In 1995, in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope Saint John Paul II said that "The Church must breathe with her two lungs". The lungs he refers to of course are the Western (Roman Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) churches. Today I am breathing with two lungs. For the past few years I've been studying the writings of Russian Orthodox philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev, and many of the ideas in this retreat reflection have been inspired by him and by Sergei Bulgakov and Father Alexander Schmemmann (former Dean of Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, New York).

I'd like to begin this reflection with Paul's letter to the Colossians:

He [namely Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him.

It is this last line in Colossians that is so important. All things were created through him, through the Logos, the Word, and all were created *for him*, in view of him, for the sake of him. What this means--"all was created for him" - is that everything finds its ultimate meaning in him, in Christ, just as the meaning of anything is discovered in its final cause, its ultimate end, what it was made "for"--in other words, if I want to know what something is essentially, it is enough for me to know its purpose, why it was brought into being, its function. Christ is the ultimate meaning of creation. And, of course, history is a part of that creation, and so the ultimate meaning of history is Christ. Man's ultimate meaning is Christ. Creation's ultimate meaning is Christ. For we were created through him and for him.

Christ is the Second Adam who sheds light on the very existence of the First Adam and his offspring (us), revealing our original vocation, what we were intended to be from all eternity. But what is that original vocation? The solemnity of the Epiphany, which we celebrated this year on January 9th, provides a clue: The Magi (who were priests of Persia) following the star which leads them to the Christ child. That a star led them to the Christ child is so fitting, because the cosmos exists through Christ and for Christ. The world that God created and sustains in creation, the cosmos in its entirety, is really an epiphany. We know that the word 'epiphany' means manifestation. The created world manifests the divine; it speaks of God, of his divine generosity, his benevolence. It praises the beauty of God through its own proper beauty, and it speaks of the mind of God through its own order and inexhaustible intelligibility and complexity. In Psalm 19, we read:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the firmament proclaims the works of his hands.
Day unto day pours forth speech; night unto night whispers knowledge.

There is no speech, no words; their voice is not heard; A report goes forth through all the earth, their messages, to the ends of the world.

He has pitched a tent there for the sun; which comes forth like a bridegroom from his bridal chamber, and like a hero joyfully runs its course. From one end of the heavens it comes forth; its course runs through to the other; nothing escapes its heat.

This is a great text; and it really says so much. *The sun comes forth like a bridegroom from his bridal chamber and joyfully runs its course...nothing escapes its heat.* But in the prologue of the gospel of John, we read that the Word (the Logos, the 2nd Person of the Trinity) was made flesh and “set up his tent” among us; the word 'tent' refers to the tents which were erected on the feast of booths; the literal reading of the text is that he tabernacles among us (the tabernacles in the desert were booths or tents). Creation is an epiphany; the sun is a hierophany, a manifestation of the divine. The ultimate meaning of the sun and its entire movement from one end of the sky to the other is the very life of Christ the bridegroom, who made his tent, his dwelling, among us, and who is the light of the world, the true light that enlightens every human who comes into the world (Jn 1, 9). The sun is an image of the Son, the Logos, as is everything in the cosmos.

Everything in creation in some way announces, proclaims, speaks of the mystery of God, and the mystery of the Incarnation. This world is full of words of the Word (Logos). In other words, creation is a genuine liturgy, and like the liturgy it moves towards an end, which is communion, just as the six days of creation depict a movement towards the sabbath rest. The end of this liturgy of creation, of course, is communion with Christ.

Just consider the third chapter of the book of Daniel:

Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord,
praise and exalt him above all forever.
... You heavens, bless the Lord,
praise and exalt him above all forever.
All you waters above the heavens, bless the Lord,
praise and exalt him above all forever.

...

Sun and moon, bless the Lord;
praise and exalt him above all forever.
Stars of heaven, bless the Lord;
Every shower and dew, bless the Lord;
All you winds, bless the Lord;

Fire and heat, bless the Lord;
Cold and chill, dew and rain,
Frost and chill, hoarfrost and snow, nights and days,
Light and darkness,
Lightnings and clouds,
Let the earth bless the Lord,
praise and exalt him above all forever.

And of course, the liturgy goes on in this chapter of Daniel—I wasn't even half way through it. But the liturgical blessing, the praise and exaltation of God, includes beasts, wild and tame, sons of men, Israel, priests of the Lord, servants of the Lord, spirits and souls of the just, holy men of humble heart, and Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, the three in the furnace who are uttering these praises, who are not being consumed by the flames of the furnace, just as the fire on Mount Horeb did not consume the bush. This chapter outlines the true picture of creation, and all these aspects of creation can bless the Lord because they were created in view of the Lord, they were created through him and they were created for him. They exist to announce Him.

That is why the deepest meaning of water is nothing other than "holy water". Father Alexander Schmemmann points out the following:

To bless water, making it "holy water", may have two entirely different meanings. It may mean, on the one hand, the transformation of something profane, and thus religiously void or neutral, into something sacred, in which case the main religious meaning of holy water is precisely that it is no longer mere water, and it is, in fact, opposed to it, as the sacred is to the profane. Here the act of blessing reveals nothing about water, and thus about matter or world, but on the contrary, makes them irrelevant to the new function of water as "holy water". The sacred posits the profane as precisely profane, for example, religiously meaningless.

On the other hand, the same act of blessing may mean the revelation of the true "nature" and "destiny" of water, and thus of the world—it may be the epiphany and the fulfillment of their "sacramentality". By being restored through the blessing to its proper function, the holy water is revealed as the true, full, adequate water, and matter becomes again a means of communion and knowledge of God. (*For the Life of the World*, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018, p 156.)

In the same vein, we can say that the deepest meaning of fire is revealed in the paschal fire of the Easter vigil, which represents the light of Christ and the fire of the divine love visibly manifest on the cross, a fire that is the light of each one who enters into the darkness of this world. God who is present to Elijah in the gentle breeze on Mount Sinai is the very meaning of the winds of the earth. Rain and snow have their deepest and ultimate meaning in the word of God that descends and penetrates the earth, from which proceeds the bread of life. In Isaiah 55, 10, we read:

Yet just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it.

And the end for which the Lord sent rain and snow is to give seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats. And, of course, the perfection and completion of this process is going to be the bread of life and communion with Christ himself.

Irish poet Joseph Plunket had eyes for this original liturgy:

I see his blood upon the rose
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,

His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies.

I see his face in every flower;
The thunder and the singing of the birds
Are but his voice-and carved by his power
Rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
His cross is every tree.

Creation is an ongoing liturgy. Just as a work of art is in many ways an epiphany of the artist, revealing so much about the artist, creation in all its diversity and complexity manifests and praises God. And the content of this manifestation becomes increasingly Trinitarian the closer we look. For example, light proceeds from the sun in the sky, but the light by which we see the sun cannot itself be seen. Similarly, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son, but the third Person cannot be seen. As Bulgakov writes: "The hypostasis of the Spirit does not have its own Face, as it were, but is only the Face of the Son in His Glory....in the light of this Glory we can discern the glorified Face of the Logos-Christ, but not the proper Face of Glory itself." (*The Comforter*, translated by Boris Jakim. Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing, p. 188)

But there is more. In the first story of Creation in the book of Genesis, God says to man:

Have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; *you shall have them for food.*

In other words, God created the world as a banquet for us, to feed us. For the Jews, a meal has much more significance than simply a means of sustaining biological life; a meal is a source of communion with all those at table, because food is a source of life, and if we all partake of the same source of life on the same table, we become one life, one blood, one family. Thus, *creation, which is given to man for food, is a source of communion with God.*

Whatever God created, He created through the utterance of His Word, as we see in Genesis: God said: let there be, and so it was...., but to speak words is to communicate, and to communicate is to enter into communion. We speak in order to bring about a communion with the person we are addressing. And of course, God speaks all things into being, and so creation in all its diversity are words of the Word, words uttered in order to bring about communion, in this case, communion with God.

Priesthood

A priest is one who offers sacrifice, in particular the sacrifice of thanksgiving. The word Eucharist is from the Greek *eukharistia*, which means "thanksgiving, gratitude". Man's task is to receive the food that is creation and give thanks for it, and we give thanks *by blessing the giver*. Now, a blessing is a benediction, and benediction, as the etymology of

the word indicates, is the act of speaking well of something. God blesses each day of creation, for each day has its origin in a benediction, i.e., God said: Let there be light, and there was light. God's speaking is creative, effective, it brings into being, but what He brings into being blesses Him in return, that is, it speaks well of Him, as we see in the book of Daniel and the Psalms: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the firmament proclaims the works of his hands. Day unto day pours forth speech; night unto night whispers knowledge".

To bless is to receive what God gives, recognizing it for what it is, namely sheer gift. Gratitude begins with a recognition, and thanksgiving arises out of a true recognition of what it is that is given. Recognition gives rise to a spirit of thanksgiving, or Eucharist. And since a priest is one who offers the sacrifice of thanksgiving, *man was created to be a priest of creation*—he was created to offer, to thank, to praise, to adore. He is to take what is given and raise it, lift it up to God, which involves a recognition of its origin; this raising up to God is benediction, blessing, a speaking well of... , and it is offered that it may become what God intended for it to become, namely, a means of communion with him.

This priestly pattern is visible at every level of creation. The lowest level of the hierarchy of being in the physical universe is the mineral level, the level of non-living matter. But non-living matter is food for the level above it, which are living things, i.e., plants, which take non-living matter and consume it, but in consuming it, plant life raises it up through the power of nutrition and transforms it into living matter (this is what happens when we water plants). But brute animals eat plants, and through the process of metabolism change plant life into living animal tissue, a higher mode of life. It does this, however, *by killing it first and then raising it up*. Plants must be sacrificed first, that is, reduced to non-living matter, in order to be lifted up to serve something higher. But man exercises dominion over the animal kingdom, raising it up to serve human needs, in a number of ways, not always for food (dogs can pull sleds, horses can pull carriages, as well as providing meat). But, when animals become food for man, the animal must first be slaughtered, and so the communion of a meal is once again preceded and made possible through a sacrifice, a dying.

Man, who contains within himself the entire hierarchy of being within himself and who surpasses them all in that he is created in the image and likeness of God, is to take all that he is and has become, and all that he possesses, and offer it to God, in the service of God, in a spirit of thanksgiving or Eucharist. In doing so, he offers to God the entire order of creation, which he contains within himself. In short, man is a priest of creation. He is a mediator between the cosmos and God, joining the two.

But the fall of man was a rejection of this priesthood. Adam chose to make himself his own god. As a result, he, including his offspring, the entire human race, gradually became deaf to the praises sung by creation, he no longer possessed the eyes and ears to understand the universe as an epiphany; he no longer had the mind to see the entire cosmos as gift that points to the giver, as food given to him by God out of his superabundant generosity, for the sake of communion with Himself. And so, he no longer gave thanks. His life ceased to be Eucharistic. His life gradually ceased to be sacrificial. However, God made a covenant with Abraham, the father of Israel, in order to make her a holy nation, a priestly kingdom (Ex 19, 6). And so, Israel is a light to the nations, a holy people, set apart from all others, a priestly people. God says in Exodus: "Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation."

Now, I'd like to take this a bit further. In Genesis 1, God is depicted as building a "house". "My father's house" is the Hebrew expression for family. On the first day, God creates time, blesses it, speaks it into existence. Then he creates space, and then a foundation arises out of the chaos and darkness of water, and then he begins to furnish that foundation with living things of all kinds. Creation is God's palace, his kingdom, his house, "my father's house", his family in other words. But, to build is to take raw materials and raise them, give them a new and elevated form, as in the building of a beautiful house, or the creation of a work of art. And so, creativity has a priestly character to it. It emulates God, and the artist is speaking, communicating what he sees, and he is trying to speak well of what sees and admires. Genuine creativity is benediction, or blessing. But this house, this family, is divided, when Adam chooses to make himself his own god, by choosing to eat or commune with himself, to become sufficient unto himself, to taste independence from God, to be the measure of what is true and good.

The Word was made flesh to restore the world to its status as God's kingdom (house, palace, covenanted family). Christ, who is God, is everything that the human person hungers for, his kingdom is everything that man searches for, everything that the great religions of the world are searching for— namely, God become man. And what man was and is called to be is right there in the image of the Magi, priests of Persia, who begin a procession from the east, who follow the lead of a star, which leads them right to Christ, and they do homage to Christ. We were created "through him and for him", ultimately for Christ's priesthood, which we enter first in baptism; we were created to worship, to adore, to offer. *Homo adorans, worshipping man*, expresses man's deepest nature.

If we were created through him and for him, then we were created to become Christ, which is what happens in an ordinary Mass. Our entire life, every day, is to be a sacrifice of thanksgiving, a constant lifting up all we have and are to God, to receive what the Lord gives us and to offer it to him in thanksgiving. This lifting up of what we have includes the lifting up of our work, our labor, which takes place throughout the six-day workweek, and this labor is a "building up", a raising up, which includes the raising of our children, for this is also a lifting up and an act of "building". Every moment of our lives, every day of the six-day workweek, is to be an imitation of God in the act of creating, the act of blessing, and so each day is a benediction that we carry out. We bless God in the work we do. In both creation stories, work is revealed to be holy. The work week is a priestly existence.

In baptism, after the pouring of the water, baptizing the child in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, the child is anointed with Sacred Chrism, that is, anointed priest, prophet and king; we are members of the Royal Priesthood of the Faithful. In his first letter, Peter says: You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (2, 10). In the book of Revelation, we read: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen" (1, 6). This anointing is the revelation of the true "nature" and "destiny" of human existence; it is the epiphany and the fulfillment of man's nature. This anointing at baptism restores man to his proper function.

The workweek is holy, an emulation of God who gives benediction, who creates, but the week moves in the direction of the sabbath rest, and on the sabbath day itself, we begin our procession as we leave the house and get into the car to make our way to the altar. At the altar, we offer our sacrifices, our daily stresses and frustrations, all our efforts and the love behind that labor, and all this is represented in the bread and wine, which are universal signs of nourishment. They are food, the fruits of our labor, the matter of the earth. What the ordained ministerial priest does is he takes what we offer, that bread and wine, which is the fruit of our labor throughout the week, and lifts it up on our behalf, and Christ, who is the priest at the altar, receives that bread and wine, the matter of

creation, the food of creation that we have offered to him and changes it into himself, his own body and blood, which in turn is the eternal sacrifice that the Son offers to the Father. And that is returned to us as food, but it is no longer bread and wine, but rather what the matter of this world is destined to become, namely the actual food of his body and blood: "...for my body is real food", he says, and "my blood real drink" (Jn 6, 55). The Eucharist is the completion of creation. Through this exchange, we are deified, united to his sacrificial and Eucharistic offering. The ordained priesthood serves the Royal Priesthood of the Faithful; it perfects and completes our baptismal priesthood. Like food that is metabolized, we are raised up to a higher life, a divine-human life.

We see this priesthood in the details of the first two chapters of Genesis, for example, in the command to creativity, to raise up creation to serve the needs of man, in particular to cultivate the garden. We see this in the command to leave mother and father and cling to one another in the one flesh union of marriage. This "leaving" of mother and father receives its full significance in the paschal mystery, in Christ's leaving of this world in order to go to the Father, as we read in the high priestly prayer of Christ (Jn 17). And St. Paul points out that the mystery of marriage is revealed in the mystery of Christ's redemption for the sake of his bride, the Church. And we see this original priesthood in the directive given to Adam to name creatures; for to name is to bless God. Father Alexander Schmemmann writes:

... in the Bible, a name is infinitely more than a means to distinguish one thing from another. It reveals the very essence of a thing, or rather its essence as God's gift. To name a thing is to manifest the meaning and value God gave it, to know it as coming from God, To name a thing, in other words, is to bless God for it, and in it. ... (*For the Life of the World*, p, 21-22)

And so man's true nature is priestly in character. Our existence in the world is a priesthood. Father Schmemmann continues:

The first, the basic definition of man is that he is *the priest*. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God, and offering it to God—and by filling the world with this Eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with him. The world was created as the "matter", the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament. (*Ibid.*, p. 22.)

And now our entire life is subordinated to God; for we are his servants, and servants follow orders. We live under his commands. That's our fulfillment, and that's what we were created for. In the gospel for the feast of the Epiphany, Herod represents all those who refuse this priesthood. To preserve his power, he sacrifices the innocents, those children called to be priests of creation, but whom he sees as a threat to his status and power, because among them is a king. Herod is his own god; he does not worship. He is a liar and a murderer for the sake of making his own life more convenient. And this world is still divided accordingly. I was watching a debate on abortion recently, which lasted 2 hours and 20 minutes. This is unusual, because abortion is no longer debated; people won't talk about that. But the debate was very civil. Both sides were very intelligent and articulate. A young female medical student was arguing for abortion rights, while a young man was arguing against abortion, for the rights of the unborn child. But what I found interesting is that despite the brilliant points made by the young man arguing for the rights of the unborn child to live, he was not making any progress; it was like sound waves bouncing off a brick wall. And there was indeed a wall that divided them, the same wall that divides the world, which Christ in fact came to erect: "Do not think I have come to bring peace; I have come not to bring peace, but a sword of division." (Mt

10, 34). For the young woman, the issue is all about my consent, my will, my rights, my body, my decision. In other words, my life does not belong to the Lord, it belongs to me. But for the young man, the issue was about obeying, submitting to a higher law, that is, not my will, my rights, my consent, but "Thy will be done". Although she was very civil, not to mention bright and persistent, she was in some ways a daughter of Herod. His attitude, on the other hand, represented the priesthood of the faithful, our original vocation that was restored in Christ, as well as a genuine kingship--for a true king goes to battle, for he protects those who are vulnerable and who need protection. A priestly king is willing to face battle and even sacrifice his own life for the sake of those who need protection, which is what we see in the Person of Christ.