

From the Epiphany to Golgotha

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

A Lenten Retreat Talk given at St. Augustine's Seminary, March 4, 2023, to Members of the Catholic Teachers Guild of Toronto and the St. Monica Institute.

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The first assignment that I give to my Niagara University students in January is to have them write out a short essay on how it is they got to where they are now, that is, how they got to teachers college. I also get them to write down two questions that they anticipate the students will ask, questions that they believe they would have a difficult time answering. The idea is to try to cover those in the course of the semester.

But I have to say, reading their personal stories of how they got to this point is really an exhilarating experience. Their stories are so unique and so rich in content, and there is often some hero in their lives, either their parents, who came to Canada under adverse circumstances but struggled and overcame these obstacles through faith, trust in God, and hard work, or a great and unknown teacher in their lives who had a profound influence on the student as a result of the way that teacher related to her students, with great patience and perseverance, etc. Each story from each student is so different, but this year especially, each one was so uplifting and exhilarating. And it is so easy to see the hand of divine providence in their lives, leading them to where they are now.

It reminded me of the one morning when Francis Hill and I went to visit our best friend Father Don Sanvido in Kitchener, Ontario. I would typically wake up early, and this one morning I went down to the living room to pray the Breviary, and after finishing, I just looked up and saw this large bookshelf and noticed that he had the latest edition of Butler's four volume Lives of the Saints. I got up and went over to it, closed my eyes, picked a volume at random, and I kept my eyes closed and opened the book, and put my finger on a page. Wherever my finger landed, I would read the life of that saint. The first one I landed on was an unknown saint from the third century. I read the summary, which was about a page. But I remember, immediately after finishing it, feeling exhilarated. Her life was so interesting and inspiring to read. So, I did it again, closed my eyes and randomly picked a volume, opened it up, put my finger on a page, and this time I got a sixth century saint, totally unheard of, a male saint this time. It was an entirely different life than the previous, but once again, I felt it in my body. It was like I just drank a glass of good quality orange juice.

But it is not just the lives of saints that are so interesting. I find that almost everyone's life is profoundly interesting, when you stop and actually inquire of their lives. Although we live in the same world, the life of each one is made up of myriads of unique permutations.

This brings me to an important point I'd like to make. I've known a lot of priests in my life, but there are three in particular who stand out; they were widely loved. Popular is not the word. Widely loved expresses it better. The first priest was from the archdiocese of Washington D.C., who back in 1979 picked me up hitchhiking outside of Columbus, Ohio, and who was the turning point in my life. He was a great friend from that point onwards. He witnessed our marriage, baptized our daughter, etc. He was murdered on June 8th, 2000, in Germantown, Maryland. The rectory was robbed and the housekeeper found him dead the next morning, stabbed to death. I remember that day looking at the Washington Post online and seeing, on the front page, the face of Father Tom Wells. I was told that this was the only time that the anti-Catholic Washington Post spoke highly of the Church. The headline read

“Widely beloved priest Murdered”. And he was widely loved. Going anywhere with him was always a bit of a pain, because no matter where we were, someone would know him and come up to him.

The other priest friend of mine, Father Don Sanvido, whom I just mentioned, is also widely loved. He is retired now, but he is still pestered by all sorts of former parishioners to do weddings, funerals, Masses, etc. And the third priest in my life who is also widely loved is Father Frank Kelly, a Salesian of Don Bosco, originally from Brooklyn, NY. When I reflect back on these three priests, I often wondered what it was that made them so widely loved. It certainly was not any kind of theological or moral liberalism, for they are very faithful to Catholic teaching and were always willing to preach the hard and difficult truths, much more than I am. The reason they are so widely loved is that *they have a genuine interest in people*. When you meet them, they are genuinely interested in you. They want to know about you. They ask about you, they listen to you with great interest, about your life, what you do, how you got there, your unique gifts, and they are genuinely delighted in you. And that’s a rare quality. This is just not typical. There have been many priests who have been in and out of my life, for example, who know virtually nothing about me, or my wife, or daughter, or friend in the parish, and the reason is they don't ask, and they don't ask because they are not interested. Of course, this is not just true of some priests but all sorts of people in life. I used to make this point to my Theory of Knowledge students. You could be standing in line at a Tim Hortons and you see this old guy sitting alone with a coffee, and he’s a non-entity to you, and you are a non-entity to him, but if you were to sit down in front of him and ask him to tell you about himself for the next hour or two, a whole new world would open up before you and you wouldn’t see that person the same way again. He’d have a definition and a life that would radiate.

And think of a cemetery, so many tombstones, but each one represents a rich world that is beyond us. Even if a thick biography were written about one of them, the biography would not capture all there is to know about this person, but only slivers of that person’s life. And yet there are millions of tombstones. There is no doubt in my mind that the first few eons of heaven, which will be joyful beyond our imagining, will consist in the reading of biographies, not necessarily in print, of course. We will spend ages of ages, eons, (the Greek word is *aionios*) revealing our world to others and receiving their offering of their world to us. Just think of how much fascination there is in reading a good biography, and yet the ones we read are always so incomplete. We don’t even know ourselves, except very imperfectly. And think too of the joy of being understood, of having someone pay serious attention to us.

Human beings have a need to offer their world to you; for their world is a gift, given to them, and it is rich in meaning and content, and they have a need to share it, to offer it, to have it received. And these three priests I mentioned are so widely loved for a very simple reason: they take great interest in your world, in you, they find you interesting, far more interesting than themselves. And it’s a genuine interest, not a feigned interest.

But this is what the Logos, the second Person of the Trinity, offers to the Father in the very heart of the Trinity. What he offers sacrificially to the Father is his divine nature, which is inexhaustible, yet it exists through a single reality or concreteness. As Bulgakov points out, it is not only absolute reality, but also absolute subsistence, the self-revelation of God, what he calls the Divine Sophia, the most real of being. It is life and light, the fullness of all in all. This is what the Word, the eternal Son, offers to the Father. The Son is the perfect Image of the Father, and an image reflects back, like a mirror. A reflection in a mirror offers us ourselves, but these images in our case only reflect back a part of us, not the whole of us; they are imperfect images, and they leave so much out—I can only see my front, not my back. But human beings naturally love images, photos even. Give a person a photograph of

themselves in a group and the first thing they look for is themselves. There I am. So, we delight in that offering, which the image is, but it leaves so much out—it is necessarily a deficient image. It is deficient because a material thing is only capable of imperfect self-reflection.

But we love the image that a great artist produces, because it opens up a part of his world, how he sees and interprets the world around him. The Eternal Son of the Father is a perfect Image, and so He reflects everything that the Father is, which is inexhaustible and genuinely infinite. The Father delights in that offering, because He delights in perfection, and He loves the Son, and the mutual love between the Father and the Son is of course the Holy Spirit.

Christ's offering on Golgotha is that same inter-trinitarian offering made visible. Christ offers everything he is, along with humanity and the cosmos to which he joined himself in joining a human nature, he offers this to the Father, for his food (broma) is to do the will of the Father, to glorify the Father. And the Father receives that offering, and we see that in the Resurrection of Christ. He offers the divine nature and his human nature, two natures in one hypostasis, and so he offers his divine world along with our world, which has become his world.

But my individual world is finite and limited, so too your world, even though it is practically inexhaustible. But it is yours to offer. Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Anthony Bloom points out that the more we pray, the more we enter the heart of God, but there in the heart of God, we discover our neighbor. We discover the mystery of our neighbor, because he has his origin, or she has her origin, in the unutterable mystery of God. We only really understand something when we understand its cause or causes, and so we only really understand our neighbor to the degree we understand his or her cause, his or her origin, which is the mystery of God, and so when we discover our neighbor in the heart of God, we discover the mystery of our neighbor, that is, our neighbor from a new angle. And we are then moved to return to earth to seek out that neighbor.

That's why the more a person grows in holiness, the more interested he or she is in concrete individual human persons, interested in their world—that is, the more he or she is interested in biographies. This in turn means that such persons will become intercessors. We are mediators and intercessors. We are moved to intercede for those we know and love, and the greater our love, the greater will be our interest in concrete human persons, as opposed to a general 'humanity' or ideas about humanity.

And so, we can see both the Trinitarian aspect of human relationships, and the priestly nature of these relationships. Christ is a priest forever. His is an eternal priesthood. He is mediator and intercessor. He offers the Father his world, everything he is, and our inclination and need to offer our world to another, to others, is rooted in the very fact that we were created through him and for him. The priesthood of Christ is the mystery that reveals the mystery of ourselves, the meaning of my own individual existence, each person's individual and personal existence. To live in a world in which no one is really interested in you, a world in which you have no importance, is a miserable and dark world.

Whenever I give talks to teachers, whether that's on a faith day, or to my students on a particular topic, I often mention a recurring dream I had early on in my teaching career. It involved my grade 7 French teacher. I never did learn French, just barely passed it and forgot it soon afterwards, but he was in my dream. It was not a Catholic high school. But in the dream he was just looking at me, with his casual smile, not overly joyous, just his gaze. I'd wake up in a spirit of joy. And that happened a number of times. I figured that this meant something, so I prayed about it

at the Monastery of Marylake, in the chapel on the hill. Eventually it came clear to me that there is something that has lived within me all these years. A sense of importance that was reflected back to me through his gaze. It was an eye to eye relationship. I came to the realization that he looked at me with a certain reverence. I can't say that about every teacher. Some have a look that leaves you feeling like a non-entity, others perhaps with uncertainty. But his look did not. You had a sense that he saw you as a person, an equal, a mystery, someone that cannot be completely circumscribed intellectually. In theology a mystery is a reality that is inexhaustible and infinitely knowable. God is the unutterable mystery. Each human person, created in his image, is a mystery unto himself. Even in heaven, we will not be completely known by others. God reserves a space for Himself alone, so that it is just you and God.

When we have discovered our neighbor in the heart of God, that will appear in our eyes when we look at him or her. That's what was in the face of this teacher. I came to consciously understand what I had always unconsciously knew, or pre-consciously knew. One who looks at an individual person that he or she has discovered in the heart of God and now sees standing before him in a classroom, looks upon that person as upon someone who is important, who has an immeasurable importance, a divine importance. Not important insofar as they are going to do tremendous good for society, by virtue of their academic achievements, but important insofar as they live in the heart of God, and have done so for eternity. They have an immeasurable value in itself.

The one thing that the human person desires, fundamentally, is to be important. That's a fundamental desire of all persons. To recognize someone as important is to recognize him or her as a value in itself, an intrinsic good. Every young person has a fundamental need to be important to others, which is another way of saying that each person has a need to offer their world and have it received by another or others. When a child does not feel important, problems will arise, as you know. The child will experience this as a fundamental injustice.

Every person knows immediately, intuitively, knows himself/herself to be important, which is an interesting thing to think about. How is that possible? I think it has everything to do with a preconscious and confused but natural knowledge of God, an awareness of our own contingency—that we exist but do not need to exist—which presupposes an awareness of the Necessary Being, the non-contingent being, or God—I cannot know my own contingency except against the background of what is non-contingent, or necessary, just as I cannot see a white piece of chalk except against the background of what is not white. Children know they are from God, even though they may not be able to articulate that.

But each child knows that he or she has a right to live in a world in which others recognize that unique importance, that personal value in itself, again, not your value insofar as you are useful to others, by virtue of your skills, or your intelligence, etc. Rather, your intrinsic and transcendent value. A child who is not regarded as important soon becomes angry; the development of their personality is impeded. The result is a very screwed up child, and a world of screwed up children is a very chaotic world. We live in a broken world because most people have a very limited value response. Their love tends to be limited to goods that have some reference to the self. They love others not for their own sake, but primarily for what they do for them. And that is a fundamental injustice.

Teaching is a sharing in the prophetic ministry of Christ, but the prophetic ministry is not separate from the priestly ministry, but the one embraces the other—just as priest and prophet are not separated in Christ. And so our work as teachers has an overall priestly character to it. The work week, as I said this morning, is really an emulation of God, a kind of co-creation, a building. In the first creation story, God is building a temple, the first temple: it begins with the creation of time, then a place is selected, then the foundation is built, and then the builder furnishes the house

or temple with plants and other living creatures. And so, time is holy, and the workweek is the time in which this building or co-creating takes place. The place where we work is holy. We are building, we are taking matter and raising it up to a higher level. Teachers are building a foundation. In doing so, we raise up. We assist parents in the raising of their children. This raising up is an offering up. Pseudo-Dionysius describes the very activity of the angels, within the hierarchy of angels, as an outpouring of all they have to the angels of the hierarchy just below them. In pouring out all they have, they raise up those angels, who in turn pour out all they have to the angels below them.

But the workweek moves towards the Sabbath, and the procession begins, as I mentioned, when on the Sabbath, we leave the house and make our way to the altar in the Church. The formal entrance at the start of the liturgy continues that procession, represents that procession, which makes its way to the altar. And of course, as I said earlier, we offer our labors, our frustrations, our sufferings, difficulties, joys and sorrows, at the altar, and this offering takes the form of bread and wine, universal signs of the food that is creation, all that God has created and *all that we have begun to create in our labors*. And the ordained ministerial priest takes that offering and raises it up, lifts it up, and the result is that our offering becomes Christ, his body, blood, soul and divinity, and it is returned to us as food. Creation is already food, but at this point that food becomes the Bread of Life. Creation has become Christ; our work has become Christ. The food that is creation has become the food that is Christ, and that Bread is given to us for the sake of communion with him, and communion with humanity to which he is joined.

Our life is a royal kingly priesthood, and the life of the ministerial/ordained priest serves the priesthood of the faithful and is to be an image of what we really are, the deepest truth about ourselves. His celibacy has an eschatological significance, pointing to the kingdom of God. If there is no kingdom of God, or if the kingdom of God is reduced to a utopia that we are to build here, then his celibacy makes no sense. But the kingdom of God is not a utopia, and the celibate priest sacrifices the great goods of marriage and family for the sake communion, that we may enter into the deepest communion with Christ, in the Mass. His celibacy is a witness to the kingdom of God, which is not of this world, although it is in this world, through Christ and through his Mystical Body.

And this is an important witness for married couples, especially the joyful priest who is relatively good looking, because he witnesses to the fact that happiness is Christ, happiness is found in a wholehearted devotion to the kingdom of God, and that happiness is not found in intimate sexual relationships. But married life itself is a sharing in the paschal mystery of Christ. Just as Abraham was called to leave the land of Ur of the Chaldeans and go to the place that the Lord will show him, and just as the Israelites were to leave Egypt and enter the desert on the way to the land of Canaan, Christ leaves this world behind and goes to the Father, and in the gospel of John (17), he refers to this as a consecration, and to consecrate is to make holy. He says:

And now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are. ...I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. *And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth.*

This is interesting because to consecrate is to make holy, but how can Christ say “And I consecrate myself for them?”. He is the fount of all holiness. But if we keep in mind that ‘sacred’ means ‘set apart’, Christ is here setting himself apart so that we also may be set apart or consecrated in truth.

The point I want to make is that this paschal mystery of Christ reveals the true nature of marriage. In Matrimony, two people leave behind a world closed in upon itself. They are consecrated, they are set apart, called to leave their comfortable world of independence and self-sufficiency, to be given over to another, to belong to one another, to belong to something larger than their own individual selves, namely, their marriage bond. The couple relinquish their individual lives; they are no longer two individuals with their own independent existence; rather, they have become one. In giving themselves entirely to one another, irrevocably, exclusively, without knowing what lies ahead, they die to their own individual plans, they die to a life directed by the individual will, governed by self-will. In doing so, they find life; they have become larger; they live a life that is not merely an image of the Paschal mystery, but a life that is made possible by the Paschal mystery. Matrimony is a sign that contains what it signifies. It is a sharing in that Paschal mystery, in the priestly ministry of Christ. That's the original meaning of marriage, hidden for all ages, to be revealed in the fullness of time through the Paschal mystery of Christ.

When Christ leaves this world of sin behind, dying like a mustard seed, immolated on the cross, the new body, the new Israel, is born from his pierced side, as the first Adam's bride was born of his side. Christ's Mystical Body, the Church, is born as a result of that dying and leaving. Holy Matrimony is an icon of that mystery. Divorce is a contradiction of that testimony; it is a counter witness. In marriage, the two grow together through stages. There are moments of darkness and drab, difficulties, and glorious moments; it is a constant dying and rising. Married love is *hesed*, a perpetual and steadfast love.

I mentioned this morning that death is a condition for communion. We have to kill the plant before we consume it, slaughter the animal before consumption or communion. And in sexual union, which is a communion between persons, there must be a free dying to self, a freely given sacrifice to leave the world closed in upon itself in order to become one with another. This is a kind of kenosis, a limiting, an emptying of self. Of all the possibilities open to me, I limit myself, I cut off all possibilities, in order to commit to one, which is marriage, and so marriage in its most complete meaning is "paschal", priestly, sacrificial. There is an offering up of oneself to another, a Eucharistic offering. The woman offers her world, her personal nature, herself, to share with another, and it is risky. He does the same. This is very much Trinitarian. The life of the child proceeds from that mutual love, like the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, or from the Father through the Son, to be a bit more ecumenical. But it begins with that mutual sacrifice. And this is why non-marital intercourse is so wrong. It is a communion without death, without the sacrifice of self, without the giving or offering of one's world. The fact that non-marital intercourse is so widespread testifies to the ecstasy of sexual union, its goodness, but it is missing that element of 'sacrifice' or death to self, and so it is not a true communion of persons. It is not holy.

Very few Catholics see themselves as priest, prophet and king. They see their work as having no authentically religious significance, either their work as parents, or the work through which they maintain their livelihood. Many Catholic teachers are the same way; for they believe that those whose teaching has any kind of religious significance are the religion teachers, but not physics and math teachers. And we've seen where this has led.

But our deepest identity comes from our baptism. Our deepest identity is Christ, a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, prophet, who is a channel of Christ who is Truth Itself, and King, who is a soldier who enters into battle, and who above all governs himself, governs his own disordered passions of anger, envy, fear, and pride, and so forth, in order to battle prudently, not recklessly, patiently and with careful forethought, all for the sake of the souls of the young.

But when human beings do not know their deepest identity, when young men don't see it role modeled in others, especially their teachers, or even their parish priests, both of whom can relinquish that kingly, prophetic, and sacrificial identity by becoming predominantly passive, refusing to enter into battle, leaving the difficult battle for others to fight, when this happens, young people, especially young men, will go looking for an identity that is attractive to them, and they will create one for themselves, and it will be a unique identity, because they have an intuition of their uniqueness and importance, and so they might even go to extreme lengths to procure a unique identity, and that might include sexual surgery and new pronouns and a new name. Or, it may be an identity that does not include "religion" at all, because they find nothing in the Church that appeals to them or really has a bearing on their everyday lives, nothing other than an innocuous kerygma that is timid and does not connect to the world of the young, because to connect with the young requires a missionary spirit like we see in someone like St. John Bosco, who did not remain in the sanctuary, but went out into the streets to interact with unemployed street kids.

And such kids are not entirely to blame for this. There are all sorts of ways that we share in responsibility for the ways things are. But I do believe that healing this situation begins with a serious consideration of our identity as royal priest, a kingly and priestly people (as we were meant to be), and all that this entails, the deeply religious significance of our daily sacrifices, our work, which is holy, the priestly and sacrificial nature of our marriage, and the ability to see and appreciate the priestly character of creation. If we can teach young people this--and we can, they are open to it--, we will do incalculable good. Amen.