

Pastor's Pen: The Call of Baptism Within the Family

Italicized Sections come from a Facebook post made on 1/6/2020 or from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

This week we celebrate the Feast of The Baptism of the Lord. This marks the beginning of Ordinary Time in the Church Liturgical Calendar. The Christmas Season used to end with Candlemas on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord on Feb. 2nd. I bring both of these up because they are intimately tied together. When we talk about the family, you as parents mimicked St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary when you brought your children to Church for baptism; Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple to consecrate Him to the Father's will and you did the same when you had your children baptized. That relationship that began that day was to have a profound and continually transformative effect in their lives. Transformation, continual transformation, is part of the Catholic life. This was something pointed out in a conversation I recently had:

I had another one of those conversations that just stuck with me. I was at parishioner's house last night. We had a pleasant conversation. The husband said something that has been the cause of much food for thought: A lot of people have a problem with Catholicism because (when done right) it requires the person to change. A lot of other churches are like, "Sit back, we will entertain you, tell you what you want to hear as long as you put some money in the plate." Certainly the secular world does this.

This has been sitting in my mind as I prepare the homily for next weekend on the three- fold ministry and mission Christ undertakes in his baptism then connects it to the same mission we undertake when we are baptized (made especially clear through the anointing with Sacred Chrism), or we have our children baptized into the Church. That three- fold mission is, by its nature, sacrificial by nature.

The three fold ministry and mission of Jesus is the kingly, the priestly, and the prophetic. Each is essential to God the Father's plan for us coming to fruition. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us:

"The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through Baptism, have been constituted as the people of God; for this reason, since they have become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each one. "In virtue of their rebirth in Christ there exists among all the Christian faithful a true equality with regard to dignity and the activity whereby all cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ in accord with each one's own condition and function."

The very differences which the Lord has willed to put between the members of his body serve its unity and mission. For "in the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his name and by his power. But the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ; they have therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God." Finally, "from both groups [hierarchy and laity] there exist Christian faithful who are consecrated to God in their own special manner and serve the salvific mission of the Church through the profession of the evangelical counsels."

Sections 871-873

The Kingly Mission

Jesus was baptized into a kingly mission. He is the Messiah and Christ...the anointed one. Unlike worldly rulers who use their kingship to exercise their authority so as to force their people into submission, Jesus exercises his kingly authority as the servant of servants, who uses His authority to subjugate His people's enemies (Satan and the demonic) and to lead into eternal freedom those who accept His rule. He leads in order to serve, not to rule (which, by the way is the motto of Camp Maccabee). When we who are in the Church are at our best, we serve with the same sacrificial love...overcoming fear and selfishness...adapting whatever personal changes needs to take place. Grave harm is done when we, lay or cleric, hijack the kingly role for personal gain or sinful exploitation of the flock.

We share in this Kingly mission by selflessly serving as Jesus did. In how we raise and educate our children, teaching them the value of selfless service over the relentless pursuit of getting their own way is part of fulfilling what you promised as parents at baptism.

The Priestly Role

Jesus was baptized into a priestly mission. The Book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is the Great and Eternal High Priest, who offers not the blood of other beings as sacrifices, but offers up himself as victim for our good. Like His kingship, it is not self-serving or a power grab. Our priestly call has stewardship at its heart; a willingness to offer of ourselves, not allowing self-interest or fear to hold us back. We, like Christ, offer who we are for the good of others. There is a self-sacrificial love at the heart of our priestly call, just as there is in Christ's priestly mission. Grave harm is done when we, lay or cleric, hijack this priestly role to offer up others, demanding they give to make our lives pleasurable, wealthy, or fulfilled. No one entering the priestly role can be a vampire.

I understand that parents have it tough if they are trying to teach their children selflessness when most everything they and their children consume in our media and entertainment provoke a sense of selfishness and consumeristic materialism. There is an ever-present push to 'get ahead.' The priestly role we are to engage in informs us differently.

The Prophetic Role

It is the last part of the mission, though, that is the hardest and riskiest: the prophetic role. Of the three roles, if this one is ignored or diminished, it can lead to the abuse of the other two. To be a prophet means to be God's spokesman. In the words of St. John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, "He (Jesus) must increase and I must decrease." In the proclamation of the Gospel, there were words of great comfort and joy to those who were burdened but great words of challenge to the lukewarm, and scathing words to those who abused their kingly or priestly roles. It is the prophetic role of Christ that stirred up hatred and fear among the priestly class and the learned. Jesus shows a continual fearlessness motivated by love in saying what needed to be said so as to inspire conversion.

This goes back to the point the man was making last night. As a pastor, out of love for my flock, I bring up teachings of the Church whether they are popular, accepted, or not. I present a Catholicism that requires change, self-reflection, and a deepening of our relationship with God. I talk not just about doing good things, but of teachings that have been treated as unwanted or antiquated relics of an out-of-touch dinosaur of a Church; mortal sin, confession, personal conversion, Real Presence, the embrace of the devotional life, and so on. In fact, I preach that same call that the Church and Scripture has consistently preached for two millennia. Some like it, some do not. It would be very easy to take the tact of tickling your ears, trying to entertain you just so long as you keep my coffers full.

To do this, though, is an abrogation of both the kingly and priestly roles into which I was baptized and ordained into. If I as a priest still the sometimes bitter taste of the prophetic role, I model the same behavior for the flock: a kingly and priestly call devoid of the risky sacrificial love that the three-fold mission of Christ requires. It is a difficult road, but the only one that be truly owned as following in the footsteps of Christ.

So yes, as the man from last night observed, we can well have more people in the pews and more money if I concentrated on entertaining and feel good fluff. There might be more ease if I diminished the full Gospel. But is risking my eternal fate and the fate of my flock worth it? I love my flock far too much to offer any less than the fullness of Christ's call.

Life is much easier in the short term if tell people what they want to hear. However, it creates incredible problems in the long term as formation that didn't happen starts to clog the ability of a person to grow in relationship with God. It is like continually deferring maintenance, sooner or later things must be addressed, but it will harder to fix what needs to be fixed. This is why the prophetic role, as bitter tasting as it might be, cannot be ignored.