

Introduction: Moving from Church in general to people in the Church.

We start with the common state of all the baptized and confirmed: Priests.

The Church is “priestly” because Jesus is the great high Priest. If the Church is his Body, then based on what we said last time (body-soul are always together) then the Body of Christ is a priestly body.

In the 1st preface for Sundays in Ordinary time we pray:

**For through his Paschal Mystery,
he accomplished the marvelous deed,
by which he has freed us from the yoke of sin and death,
summoning us to the glory of being now called
a chosen race, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, a people for your own possession,
to proclaim everywhere your mighty works,
for you have called us out of darkness
into your own wonderful light.¹**

Here we hear again that basic theme of what it means to be a “church.” We are a people “called out” of darkness into the wonderful light of Christ.

But, moreover, we are called a royal priesthood! You, by virtue of your Baptism and Confirmation are made 3 things, as part of being conformed to Christ. These are Priest, Prophet, and King. The royal priesthood that is mentioned is a reference to the promise of the Messiah, in the sense that

¹ *The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II*, Third Typical Edition (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 572.

kingship and priesthood are tied together in the promise to send the messiah and further, Jesus's priesthood and kingship are prefigured in the figure of Melchizedek (the king-priest).

As members of the Church, conformed to Christ through the Sacraments, we take on these three offices, by virtue of the fact that Christ possesses them and perfects them.

Tonight we will focus on priesthood, but the other two are going to be thrown in because it is very difficult to separate them.

This "priesthood of the Baptized" is properly called the "common priesthood." This is one of the great theological insights of the second Vatican Council, but sadly (in my opinion) is often one of the most misunderstood or overlooked aspects of Vatican II.

A direct quote from *Lumen Gentium*:

10. Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men, made the new people "a kingdom and priests to God the Father". The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them.

Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise

that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity.

As we focus on the common priesthood, it is important to keep in mind that it is distinct from the “ministerial priesthood” (in kind and degree). We will focus next week on the ministerial priesthood and how it works in the life of the Church. Ultimately what we are saying is that there are two distinct ways or modes of participation in the priesthood of Jesus. And we will see next week, the reasons for this go back to Jesus Himself.

Part I: Starting with the Liturgy

The Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist, is (in the words of Vatican II) the “source and summit” of the Christian life. From this perfect prayer we learn how to pray and how to live. Why?

The Mass is Jesus’s prayer to the Father. We, gathered as the Mystical Body of Christ, pray to the Father as the Son. This is why, if you listen closely to the prayers of the Mass, it is very rare for them to address Jesus. They almost always, address the Father.

The rules and regulations of the Church’s liturgy are there to insure that this very fact is persevered at all times. The Liturgy is not our prayer, it is Jesus’s prayer. It is Jesus’s priestly prayer and the re-presentation of His single sacrificial act which we call “the Paschal Mystery.”

One who is not baptized into the Body of Christ cannot participate in the Mass because they lack the Sacramental character, the change in nature, that unites the person to the priesthood of Jesus and makes them, with Jesus a priest, prophet, and king.

We are reminded of our participation in these three “offices” of Jesus by the furniture and layout of the church building itself.

Ambo, Altar, Chair – each office is tied to the symbol, each symbol is the locus for the acts and prayers associated with that office.

“presidential prayers” from the chair

“priestly prayers” from the altar

“prophetic word and proclamation” from the ambo

Each time we go to Mass, we can be reminded that we ourselves, by Baptism and Confirmation, hold these offices *in* Christ. And our state, our common priesthood, is supposed to enable us to sanctify the world.

In the Mass we see the perfection of these offices – and we are to be formed by them so as to “go out.” This is why Vatican II was also insistent that the laity have “full, active, and conscious” participation. We must be formed to the depths of our being in Christ in order to take Him into the world.

Part II: Living common priesthood

Okay, so we are priests. The question is: how does that work?

To be a priest, at its most basic level, means to offer something. A priest is one who offers sacrifice. So as sharers in the priesthood of Jesus, we offer Him to the Father at Mass. But, Christianity is not a nice Sunday activity, the Gospel demands every single aspect of your life. You are not called out of darkness from 10:30 to 11:30 every Sunday morning just to return to it at 11:31. No, in the Sacraments, our inmost being is changed. The baptized person is “claimed for Christ” and anointed. Permanently marked as a

person given returned to God the Father through the Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

The common priesthood is exercised in the offering of our lives in union with Jesus.

St. Paul directly addresses this in the letter to the Colossians:

²⁴Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church, ²⁵of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints.²

This should strike us as a little odd. After all, wasn't Christ's offering enough? What more is there to do? Jesus offered Himself for us and that frees us from sin. Yes, but freedom. Paul is "making up what is lacking" by uniting himself to Jesus's sacrifice. What is lacking is you.

What I mean is, Jesus offers Himself for you, but he cannot force you to accept that. At the same time, to be united to Jesus means to also be united to the Cross. No one can force you there, you have to exercise priesthood and *offer yourself*. This is the common priesthood.

Another quote from *Lumen Gentium*:

34. The supreme and eternal Priest, Christ Jesus, since he wills to continue his witness and service also through the laity, vivifies them in this Spirit and increasingly urges them on to every good and perfect work.

² [*The Holy Bible*](#), Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), Col 1:24–26.

For besides intimately linking them to His life and His mission, He also gives them a sharing in His priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of men. For this reason the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ". Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.

35. Just as the sacraments of the New Law, by which the life and the apostolate of the faithful are nourished, prefigure a new heaven and a new earth, so too the laity go forth as powerful proclaimers of a faith in things to be hoped for, when they courageously join to their profession of faith a life springing from faith. This evangelization, that is, this announcing of Christ by a living testimony as well as by the spoken word, takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world.

God desires to sanctify, to make holy, the entire world. There is no part of creation that was not created "good." Therefore, engaging the world in an intentional way as priests, prophets, and kings by Baptism is an integral part of God's work through the Church. The Church's mission is to sanctify the world. To bring the proclamation of the Gospel and the power of God's Love to every aspect of life and society.

Every good work, every suffering, every joy, every hurt, every hope, every fear, all of it, our entire experience is able to be offered up to God. This is our common priesthood, that we actually unite ourselves to Jesus in offering a life to God the Father to be in union with the Trinity forever.

Conclusion: Practical Considerations

So it sounds very nice to say all these things, but actually living them is the challenge. This is the challenge of the Christian life.

Recommendations for starting to exercise your priesthood in an intentional way:

1. Pay attention at Mass:
 - a. Listen to what the prayer is actually saying/asking.
 - b. Notice a few prayers and do what they are saying:
 - i. “Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father.”
 - ii. “Lift up your hearts”
 1. This is the moment where we can truly “complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.”
2. “Offer it up:”
 - a. Sometimes overused/used poorly.
 - b. Actually a good practice.
 - c. Sacrifice requires intentionality.
3. Read Saint Paul’s Letters:
 - a. Saint Paul gets it.
 - b. It’s hard to find someone who suffered more, physically and spiritually.
4. The Sacrifice of Praise:
 - a. To praise another is a sacrifice.
 - b. Affirmation of God is affirmation that we are not Him.
 - c. Praise puts us in right relationship and also makes a true offering of the heart, because we a) don’t have to offer praise and b) don’t gain anything from praise.
 - d. Take time every day to offer praise as a priestly offering to God.

5. Engage your priesthood actively in the act of receiving communion:
 - a. Approach the altar.
 - b. Lay it all down there.
 - c. Be fed by the living bread.
 - i. For the Passover, it is required that you *eat* the lamb that is offered.
 - ii. In our sacrifice and offering up of first Christ and then ourselves, we eat what we offer: the Body and Blood of Jesus.