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# Robert E. Barron

## PRIEST AS BEARER OF THE MYSTERY

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Published by the National Pastoral Life Center,  
299 Elizabeth Street, New York, NY 10012-2806  
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→ the CE, liberty  
an "awaken!"

This is an extremely difficult time for priests. With the revelations of clergy sexual misconduct with children and adolescents and with the resignations of prominent bishops after scandalous violations of the celibacy vow, some priests have gone beyond the point of shock and surprise to a state of numbness. Many wonder whether permanent damage has been done to the priesthood, whether we will ever recover the trust and confidence that have been lost. Some speculate that vocations will plummet or that this is the beginning of the end of the priesthood as we know it. My own view is that such problems are symptomatic of a much more fundamental loss of confidence in the priesthood, a loss that can and must be regained.

not the time for handwringing but for renewed thinking, dreaming, and imagining. We must return to the sources—to the heart and soul of priesthood—if we are to recover the meaning and power of the priesthood in the life of the church.

### The Priest as Bearer of Mystery

Let me propose a model, or better, an image which, I believe, captures something of the unique and indispensable quality of the priesthood. The priest of Jesus Christ is, first and foremost, a mystagogue, one who bears the Mystery and initiates others into it. At the heart of the Christian faith is a confrontation with the all-grounding and all-encompassing mystery of Being itself, which is God. The believer is grasped, shaken, overwhelmed by that powerful force, which in Jesus Christ is revealed as wild, passionate, unconditional love. Without a sense of that ever fascinating and uncontrollable power, the church becomes, at best, a social welfare organization or a self-help society.

**T**oo many priests feel at sea without focus and orientation, without spiritual moorings, unable to articulate for themselves who they are and why they remain faithful to their commitments. In the postconciliar period, myriad new ministers have appeared on the church scene, and there has been much enthusiastic definition and clarification of their roles; the laity have been enabled and commissioned—brought to much greater involvement. All of this change has been healthy and revitalizing for the church. But many priests feel that, in the process, their role has been diminished and their unique contribution undervalued. The feeling has led, at least in part, to the general malaise so much in evidence today.

The priest is the one who bears that strange power and who leads the people of God into an ever more intimate contact with it. In carrying out this task one is most authentically a priest, that is, the one who performs the sacrifice, linking heaven and earth, mediating between the Mystery and those who have been grasped by it. Christ is the High Priest because, in his own person, he is the reconciliation of creation and Creator, the mediation between Lover and beloved. In the depths of his being, the mystagogue is conformed to Christ the priest, shaped according to the icon of Christ; the priest's whole existence is to become transparent to the Mystery.

I write this article from the profound conviction that the crisis of confidence should lead not to speculations about the collapse of the priesthood but to a renewed commitment to the priesthood and to a deeper understanding of its nature, purpose, and spirituality. This is

The primary function of the bearer of Mystery is to hold up to the people of God the great images, stories, and pictures of salvation that lie at the heart of the Christian tradition. The mystagogue is the one who has been entrusted with the sacred symbols and given the responsibility of making them speak. He is the artist whose task is to make the liturgy a great dance expressive of God's grace, a stunning saga at the heart of which is God's embrace of every aspect of our fallen humani-

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ty. Through manipulation of color, line, and texture, the painter unveils some truth about nature or about the human condition and invites the viewer to enter into that truth. In a similar way, the mystagogical artist, in image, symbol, and story, presents the truth that is God's love in Christ and draws the worshiping community to share in it. In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, is grasped by a vision of the beautiful and feels compelled to abandon everything in order to become a creator and mediator of beauty. The mystagogue of God's beauty is grasped by the same power and has the same vocation.

This artistic or iconic role presupposes that the priest is deeply in touch with the genius of the Catholic imagination. The Catholic vision is based, philosophically, on the *analogia entis*, the analogy or continuity between the being of the world and the Being that is God. Theologically, the vision is rooted in the Incarnation, God's radical union with Jesus of Nazareth and his entry, by implication, into the whole of the cosmos. According to this view of things, God is present everywhere in the universe; hints and traces of divine love are "spread out on the earth" for those who have the eyes to see them. Bernanos's country priest was seized by the Catholic imagination when he announced, in the face of his enormous suffering and disappointment: "Everything is grace."

The priest, if he is to mediate the Mystery, must be gifted with the Catholic imagination and must be a lifelong apprentice of those throughout the centuries who have been in the grip of the Catholic sensibility. He must develop an eye that can see the Incarnate God in the dome of the Hagia Sophia, in the spires of Chartres cathedral, in the athletes and prophets on the Sistine chapel ceiling, in the light that illumines Caravaggio's figures, in Giotto's frescoes of Saint Francis, and in the stained glass of the Sainte Chapelle. The mystagogue must be an artist filled with the light and energy of the Incarnation, and his vision must be contagious. G.K. Chesterton said that, to see the world properly, one must stand on one's head. Seeing everything as hanging upside down, one sees it as it is, literally dependent on

the Creator God. The mystagogue is the one who dedicates his life to standing upside down in order to share that peculiar vision with the church.

#### Priest as Teacher & Preacher

The one who bears the Mystery must be both teacher and preacher. In Christ, God has spoken the definitive word of love. Conformed personally and existentially to that word, the priest speaks of and from the experience of being grasped by God. Paul Tillich says that one cannot help but speak about what concerns one ultimately. The priest is the seer and poet who cannot help but speak the ultimate concern which is God's unreasonable and excessive love. Like Isaiah, his lips have been seared by the fire of God's mind, and like Ezekiel he has tasted the word, taken it into his flesh and bones, and has found it at once sweet and overwhelming. Study after study has shown that the people in the pews want, above all, good preaching from their priests (see page 23). It seems to me that this altogether reasonable demand reflects a hunger and thirst for mystagogy, a desire to be told of the Mystery and drawn into it.

The preacher of the word must be conformed to the Word, which is Jesus Christ, and must therefore be a lifelong student not only of the Scripture but of the great literary expressions of Catholic sensibility. He must be able to appreciate the incarnational spirituality in the autobiographies of Augustine, Merton, and Teresa of Avila; he must feel with the other-world journey of Dante and with the bawdy worldliness of the Canterbury Tales; he must be able to share the anguish in the verse of Gerard Manley Hopkins and T.S. Eliot; he must enter into the visions of Peguy and Claudel and climb the mountains that are Dostoevski and Joyce.

#### The Priest Set Apart

If the priest is to be a mediator between heaven and earth, if he is to speak symbolically of the all-embracing and ever elusive mystery of Being itself, he must be in habitual contact with the Mystery, he must stand stub-



**Satisfy your demand for reason always but remember that charity is beyond reason, and that God can be known through charity.**

Flannery O'Connor  
*The Habit of Being*

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

*Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk*

bornly in the presence of God. He must take with utmost seriousness the command of Saint Paul to pray continually, to orient the whole of his being to the love of God. In short, the priest must be a mystic, a contemplative, a person of prayer. This is hardly the unique vocation of a monk; it is the parish priest, the privileged mystagogue, who must be, in every fiber of his being, formed by prayer.

**S**Simply put, the priest must be an authentically religious leader for his people; he must be, in the richest sense possible, spiritual director, mystical guide, shaman. I think that one of the greatest postconciliar mistakes was to turn the priest into psychologist, sociologist, social worker, counselor—anything but a uniquely religious leader. The authentic task of the mystagogue, as I've outlined it, is incomparably rich and constantly challenging. It is the career of the prophet, poet, and visionary. Why would we want to abandon such a role for that of psychologist or social worker?

Is such a view of the priesthood elitist, too intellectual, or rather monkish? Is all this literary and artistic refinement fine for the seminary or university professor but unrealistic for the parish priest? Not in my view. For it is precisely the parish priest who has most contact with, and influence upon, the people of God. Therefore, it is precisely the parish priest who should be best equipped to know, mediate, and express the Mystery. Sophistication of mind, heart, and sensibility is no luxury for the parish priest. Rather, it belongs to the very essence of who he is and what he does.

In the preconciliar period, the official theology of the church spoke of an "ontological change" that occurs at ordination: the priest does not simply receive the commission to perform specific tasks, he becomes someone different. This language, understood as elitist and exclusionary, has unfortunately fallen into desuetude. Rather than misinterpreting the terminology of ontological change as clericalism, one should embrace the truth enshrined in the formulation. For the mystagogue is not

primarily a functionary, not someone entrusted with tasks to perform. He is priest, someone who in his very being is the mediator between heaven and earth. Called and formed by God for the service of the community, the mystagogue is separate, unique, set apart—in the language of Scripture, holy. Priesthood affects one in one's very being, else it is a sham. Understood as a job or a ministry, priesthood becomes a shadow of itself and loses its fascination and appeal.

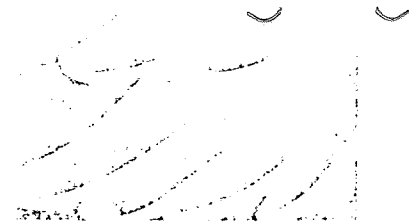
Andrew Greeley is correct in saying that priests are irresistibly fascinating and that the fascination flows from the uniqueness and peculiarity of their being. Those who want to demythologize the language of ontological change and conceive of the priest as only one minister among many are flying in the face of something which lies in the blood and bones of the race, something in the deepest religious instincts of human beings. Across cultures and throughout history, people have always designated certain of their number as "holy ones," as mediators of the Mystery. And it has always been precisely that separateness, that uniqueness of existence, which has enabled the "holy one" to be transparent to God or to the gods.

One of the shortest routes to the desacralization of the Catholic community is the "functionalization" of the priesthood. The great Protestant preacher and hymn writer John Wesley once described his preaching style: "I set myself on fire, and people come out and watch me burn." That could also serve as a description of the ontological nature of the priesthood. The priest is not, primarily, someone who works, preaches, ministers, counsels; rather he is someone who—at the core of his being—has been set on fire by God, and who invites others to catch the flame.

#### **Celibacy as an Act of Love**

Only against such a vision of priesthood can the celibacy of the priest be properly grasped and appreciated. When one tries to justify celibacy on functional grounds, the arguments sound tinny and unconvincing. For example, it is suggested that celibacy frees one for a greater range of ministry. This might be true in some cases, but

The Word of God is a red hot iron. And you who preach it 'ud go picking it up with a pair of tongs, for fear of burning yourself, you daren't get hold of it with both hands. It's too funny! Why, the priest who descends from the pulpit of Truth, with a mouth like a hen's vent, a little hot but pleased with himself, he's not been preaching: at best he's been purring like a tabby cat. **Georges Bernanos, Diary of a Country Priest**



**This notion that grace is healing omits the fact that before it heals, it cuts with a sword Christ said He came to bring.**

Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*

It could be argued just as persuasively that the support of spouse, children, and home life enables the married minister to serve more effectively than any celibate. Some have claimed that the celibate can love more universally and disinterestedly than the married clergy. And while it might be true for some, one could argue that the especially rich love of family that characterizes the married minister intensifies and augments love for the congregation and for others. By comparison, the pastoral affection of the celibate for his people could seem superficial.

**T**he issue of celibacy is not convincing when based on practical or even pastoral considerations. It is only when celibacy is seen as altogether impractical and absurd that we can begin adequately to understand it.

Paul Tillich offers a fascinating reading of the scriptural account of the woman who breaks open the jar of perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus, in the face of the reasonable objections of the disciples. Tillich says that the woman represents the unreasonable or excessive element that must be part of the response to one's ultimate concern. Tillich's view makes ridiculous Kant's suggestion that religion could be understood "within the limits of reason alone." When one has been seized by the infinite and unconditional love of God, one responds in an excess of love, in an unreasonable, disproportionate, even scandalous self-offering. According to reasonable and sober reflection—like that of the disciples—the woman's excessive act can seem inappropriate or bizarre, but it is her excessive love that is praised and welcomed by Christ.

Celibacy is unreasonable, unnatural, and excessive, which is why it has been chosen, across cultures and throughout history, as one of the ways in which lovers of God have traditionally expressed their love. To try to understand this self-gift or explain it is to miss the point. Its very strangeness and incomprehensibility is the point. Not surprisingly, mystagogues, those who have been chosen by the Mystery to speak of the

Mystery, see the appropriateness of this excessive stance and lifestyle. Called to stand on the horizon between heaven and earth, set afire by the presence of God, the mystagogue rather naturally chooses the unnatural option of celibacy. People in love do strange things.

This very strangeness is what gives celibacy its witness value. In the Incarnation, the ultimacy of the world was thrown radically into question. The presence of God in Christ shook and uprooted the "self-complacent finitude" of sinners, turning us toward that power which is ever-greater than we can think, feel, or imagine. The Christ reveals that the deepest love a human being can experience is the love for the infinite Being, who grounds the universe and transcends time. Our destiny is not limited to the enjoyment of goods or pleasures in this life; rather, the most basic and powerful orientation of our spirits is toward the undreamed of richness of God's life.

The celibate priest is someone who, in the strangeness of his choice of lifestyle, reminds the people of God of their profoundest destiny, so easily lost sight of in our secularistic and materialistic culture. The celibate priest is that poet and prophet who, in his being, speaks of the uncanniness of the Reality which has seized us, who reminds us that perhaps "something else might be the case."

This brief reflection offers no solution, per se, to the crisis of confidence in the priesthood. What I offer here is an image of the priest as mystagogue, an image which comes close to the heart of what the priesthood, at its best, has always been. Were he conformed to Christ and confirmed in his role as mystagogue, it would be difficult for the priest to be bored in his work and way of life. The authentic bearer of the Mystery, the one living on the frontier between God and creation, the "hero" who journeys from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth, is not likely to find his life tedious or void of meaning. I believe passionately in the centrality and indispensability of the mystagogue in the community gathered around Jesus Christ. What could kill us as a church is losing the sense of Mystery. What could contribute mightily to that loss is the weakening and dissipation of the priesthood. The time has come not for dismantling the priesthood but for building it up. □