

Biblical-Theological Reflections

In regard to the **priestly ministry of the Church**, it is natural to ask what was the priesthood of the Old Testament like? When we read about individuals such as Aaron, Levi, and Ezra, we notice first of all, that the priest **offered sacrifice to God**, both for himself and for the people. He offers back to God a small portion of that which they had been received from God. Obviously the priest **prays** both for himself, and for the people, imploring God for forgiveness, and asking God for all those things necessary for life, including all that is required for their material and spiritual welfare. Secondly, the priest **blesses**, that is he bestows blessings in the name of the Lord. In all he does, the priest acts as a **intermediary** between God and the people. A good priest **experiences the love of God**, a personal love for God, and a love for the people of God. He realizes that in order to be able to approach God's Majesty, he needs to foster holiness, and live in purity.

Jesus Christ consciously and openly employs various characteristics of the priesthood. For example, when speaking of Himself, he says; "There is one here greater than the temple!" (Mk. 10: 45). In the New Testament, **Jesus Christ is depicted as the ideal priest**. This is mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews, which we read every Saturday and Sunday of the Great Lent. Jesus Christ is the ideal Archpriest, because He is at the same time the Son of God, and also one of us. In other words, He is the **ideal intermediary** between God and the human race. (see Heb. 4: 14-16). The evangelist John also represents the image of Jesus Christ as a Priest. He proclaims that Jesus Christ is the **one Way to the Father** (see: Jn. 14: 6), and by His own free will, **offers Himself up to die on the cross**. We hear about this great detail on Passion Week, during the reading of the Passion Gospels on Holy Thursday. In on text Jesus Christ **prays** for us (in the prayer referred to (called) as the Priestly Prayer), where He thanks God for the gift of believers, for us, "I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word... I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." (see: Jn. 17: 6, 20-23).

The Ordained Priest and the Holy Eucharist

Every ordained priest, including every parish priest, along with all their human weaknesses and imperfections are called, to accomplish something which no one is truly worthy to be, that is **to be an image** of Jesus Christ, the perfect Archpriest in the community which has gathered together for prayer in His name, **to be an intermediary** between God and the People of God. In fact there is only **one Priest** – Jesus Christ Himself. There is only one Sacrifice – that which Jesus Christ offered on the cross **once and for all time**. During the singing of the Cherubic Hymn, the priest prays: "For it is You **Who offer** and You **Who are offered**; it is You **Who receive** and You **Who are given**, O Christ our God ..." As the church gathers around the altar, this single Sacrifice of our Lord becomes present HERE (in this parish), NOW (at this time in our lives), FOR US and (for this community). Gathered together "at the breaking of the bread", that is at the Eucharistic Sacrifice, we are mystically united among ourselves, and are also united with Christ's sacrifice, offered to God the Father for us and by us. The Eucharist is the center of the Christian life. The parish – the community which gathers for the "breaking of the bread", that is for the Eucharistic service (sacrifice). The Eucharist is at the same time the culmination of the parish life and also the source of all its spiritual blessings.

The Parish – a community of priests

For the parish community, the presence of an ordained priest should be a reminder and a sign of priestly ministry, received through the action of the Holy Spirit, **inherent for every Christian** at Baptism. In the book of Exodus we read: "Israel is a kingdom of priests, a holy people." (Ex. 19: 6). Again, this becomes a reality in the Christian Church and this should be a reality in every parish community. The priestly

ministry of every baptized Christian is manifest in everything connected with community life (especially liturgical) and the personal prayer. Not only the priest, but **every Christian is called** both personally, and as a member of the community to pray, for oneself, and for others, to offer one's self as a sacrifice to God, to forgive others and to ask God for forgiveness, **to bless** God and **to be a blessing** for others.

What is most important: all of us together are called **to strive for holiness**, to be a truly holy people. What does this mean? In parish life, every liturgical service and all of our eastern Christian liturgical practices and prayer life is to promote the sanctification of the time and the place where we are, and we ourselves become sanctified as well, as a gift **consecrated to God** (For You are our sanctification and we give glory to You ..."). That is why every Christian should guard oneself from sin, and strive to grow in the virtue of moderation, purity of body and soul, according to one's state in life. The apostle Paul explains: "Do you not know (I Cor. 6: 19-20).