

Photographer's Statement

At a recent coffee hour, my friend Sue, a person of few words, told me that during the liturgy it occurred to her that photographing the parish was Frank's priesthood.

This led to two questions.

The first was could something so trivial and mundane really be called a priesthood?

We know what sacred art is. It is the painting of icons, the ancient and ritual art that has been the subject of wars and councils and theological refinement of the deepest penetration. Photography is in every way the opposite. To quote an ancient ad "You push the button, and we do the rest."

Parish photography has some things to be said for it. It is missionary in the sense that photos on the web site proclaim to those interested what our community looks like. It is, in a minor way, a communal activity, in that the lens invites to a sharing of love and perception. And it is joyful, since it delights the little ones so dear to Jesus to have their picture taken. And, since each of us is an image of God, and infinitely precious to him, sometimes we capture the shadow of God's shadow in the actual human image. Every so often I hear that so-and-so's true self really comes through in an image. And thus the spirit makes its presence known in the most trivial of labors in his garden and justifies the labor and the craft.

But still priesthood?

We still have, I think, a primitive misapprehension that a priest is a holy person, a priest is the mediator between man and God, he who is admitted to the Holy of Holies in the Temple, who performs the ritual Slaughter and Sacrifice, who pilots the shuttle that runs between sinful humanity and its Redeemer. In this primitive way of thinking, becoming a priest requires a sacramental act that serves to separate and divide and elevate. In that sense there is no way that being a photographer can be a priesthood, since pressing a shutter is no more elevated than breathing out and breathing in.

Moreover, though there is photography that is legitimately called art, taking photos of one's friends is not. It is considered on a par with photographing one's pet cat, among the photographic priesthood.

But Sue was being discerning.

The priesthood of all believers is a cornerstone of the Orthodox Christian faith. We all know this. But what does that mean when we really think about it? There is no point in accepting a doctrine, even fervently, and not allowing it to actually operate in one's life. We are reminded that *the devils also believe, and tremble*. So what does it mean that we are *a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into light*. Does Peter, the chief of the apostles, the first Pope, the rock

upon which the Church was built, that pillar of the Church, call you and me and each and every believer *a royal priesthood* for no reason whatsoever?

That uncomfortable, massively charged, very alien and primitive word of “priesthood” has to be tamed and brought into everyday life so that it loses its current fantasy nature. Their priesthood is usually a fantasy for the people (laoi) who are not ordained. Yet how can they have an active and fully Christian life without their priesthood? Peter himself says they should not. And it also becomes a fantasy for many ordained priests, for how can they live up to their separation from the rest of us and still maintain their humanity? The burden they bear is so dangerous that our prayers for them should be offered up at all hours.

It takes effort to sacrifice the great and comforting thought that the priesthood of all believers bears no consequences in our lives. Priests continue to be priests. Bishops to be bishops. And we continue to be absolved of all responsibility except to be meek spectators at this great medieval pageant of worship. Sometimes to sing. Sometimes, if genetically qualified, to serve around the altar. But let’s face it. All our ritual falls in the hands of the priest and the choir director. Most of the time, the lay people (laoi) of God could just as well be robots.

But in the father’s house there is no mansion for robots.

“Liturgy” comes from the Greek words for work/energy (ergon) and for the people (laoi). It signifies the public work the people do after they gather in the public assembly (ecclesia.) At its base root, liturgy means the public work of each and every person. In Athens, it was performed by volunteer private citizens, not by paid public officials. After centuries of hierarchical structure, the Orthodox words for church (ecclesia) and liturgy are still the very words first used by the extreme participatory democracy of the Greek city state. As bishops and monks came to define the Christian life in all its respects, was it not strange that the Church and the Holy Spirit kept alive, in the very words used to define church and liturgy, the idea of the full democratic participation of all citizens of the City of God?

Thousands of beautiful words have glorified the ordained sacerdotal priesthood. But these two words, leiturgeia and ecclesia, continue unchanged to remind us all of our hidden calling.

So is a protestant revolution needed? Not at all. The relative sacerdotal or administrative insignificance of one’s priesthood makes no difference in the eyes of God. One’s priesthood, however tiny, is one’s priesthood, just as if one were a pope or patriarch or even an apostle. And just as necessary in God’s eyes for the edification of Christ’s body. For in this structure, the lowest brick is as essential as the highest tower, none will be lost. Every branch is indistinguishable from the entire vine.

Whatever one’s minor and insignificant priesthood –singing, reading, publicizing, planning events, caring for the premises, tending to vestments, setting up coffee hour, money raising, teaching, visiting the sick, giving alms, writing, greeting

strangers, writing icons, visiting each other, contributing one's widow's mite --what matters is that one enter into it with abandonment of self and with joy and love in the Lord. --with openness and kindness --to each other and the Spirit of God, however he wishes to express himself in us and through us. In the cloudy region of theology, this is called kenosis.

Administratively, and sacerdotally, we have one priest who represents one bishop. But the inner life of the Church, the saving liturgy that goes on with each breath in and each breath out of our entire being in Christ, knows no such distinctions. We are each united in priesthood and in love. For Christ is the only High Priest, we are told, and each of us is in him and he is in us. And fulfilling this in a practical way, together, is of the utmost importance --not for getting the work done (Martha), but as a way of living in the presence of Christ (Mary.)

I think it's a mistake to make a distinction between the private lives of believers and the corporate life and to say that lay priesthood only extends to the private area. In fact, if one thinks deeply about the meaning of liturgy as the labor of the people, one could call this doctrine non-liturgical. In Orthodoxy sacraments we tend not to have sharp legalistic definitions. It is desirable for each believer (laos=leites) to have some work (ergon) to perform in the corporate sphere of our worship in order for our calling to be fulfilled.

As that great Doctor of the (western) Church, Therese of Lisieux, put it, there is a little way, and sometimes one can save a soul just by picking up a pin. Perhaps we can paraphrase her and say sometimes one can be a priest by making sweeping the parish floor.

I encourage everyone in our parish to be bold in exercising their priesthood, no matter how mundane or insignificant it seems. The story of sixth century English poet Caedmon, is an example of how we are often held back, not by coldness or indifference, but by simple stage fright, which is a great enemy of faith even when our heart burns to serve the Lord.

The man was of advanced age, and he had never learned any songs. Often at a drinking gathering, when there was deemed to be occasion of joy, where all in turn must sing with a harp, when he saw the harp nearing him, he then arose for shame from that feast and went home. Thus it happened on a certain occasion, that he left the banquet-hall. When he fell asleep, a man stood by him in his dream and hailed and greeted him and addressed him by name: 'Caedmon, sing me a song.' Then he answered and said: 'I do not know how to sing and that is why I left this feast and came hither.' Again he who was speaking with him said: 'Nevertheless, you must sing.' Then he said: 'What must I sing?' Said he: 'Sing to me of the first Creation.'

After he heard this, he began immediately to sing in praise of God the Creator:

Now should we praise	the heaven kingdom's ward
the measurer's might	and his mind's purpose
glory-father's work	making each wonder
lord eternal	firmly established.
He shaped earliest	for earth's children
heaven's wide roof	holy creator,
middle-world next	ward of mankind
lord eternal	later created
land under foot	master almighty

(This is perhaps the earliest surviving poem in English.)

So we must not be shy as Caedmon was, but ever aware, as he became, that there is one standing beside us at all times, longing to grant us our deepest and most intimate desire, which is to serve him with a heart that is warm, active, creative and alive with self-emptying love.

"Easy to say," the realist replies, "But how does one get there." The story of Caedmon gives us the answer. The beauty of God's creation surrounds us every single moment of our lives. Even when the energies of God are not dazzling our eyes, as they did Paul of Tarsus, nor turning our praying fingers into flames, they are touching our hearts and filling us with God's love. But *we do not know how to sing*, and our hearts tell us that we **must sing**. And the awareness of this paradox can turn the very warmth of our hearts into a private little desert. For we cannot sing as we ought, when our thoughts are of our own singing, even though to others it seems we sing with the voice of Pavarotti or even the angles of heaven. It is only when our minds are open to the energies of God's love in his creatures, in all his creation, and in our hearts also, that vanity, anxiety and inhibition are conquered.

The second question, of course, given one is exercising a priesthood, how well and fully has one responded to the calling?

That is a story for another day.