"A Walking Sacrament"
An address to the St. John Vianney Chapter of SSC by Fr. David Curry
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Christ Christ, Windsor, Nova Scotia

Thank you, *Fratres*, my brothers, for being here at Christ Church, Windsor, Nova Scotia, and, especially, to those who have travelled such long distances in these seemingly 'perilous times' to come to what might seem to some of you to be, if not *ultima thule*, then at least very much next door to the farthest ends of the world!

SSC is a spiritual fellowship of Catholic Priests within the churches of the Anglican Communion, itself situated at least historically and traditionally within an understanding of how Anglicans, itself a later term, understand themselves as "an integral portion of the One Body of Christ composed of Churches which, united under the One Divine Head and in the fellowship of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, hold the One Faith revealed in Holy Writ, and defined in the Creeds as maintained by the undivided primitive Church in the undisputed Ecumenical Councils; receive the same Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as containing all things necessary to salvation; teach the same Word of God, partake of the same Divinely ordained Sacraments, through the ministry of the same Apostolic Orders; and worship One God and Father through the same Lord Jesus Christ, by the same Holy and Divine Spirit who is given to them that believe to guide them into all truth," to quote at length one of the most remarkable statements of catholicity and doctrinal restraint that is the legacy and living force of things in Canada, the Solemn Declaration of 1893 (Cdn BCP, viii). Yet, in my view, it speaks to something much deeper and much more profound and which relates to the aims and objectives of the SSC in the face of the various disorders of polity, moral, and doctrinal understanding that beset the churches in our age.

The task and challenge is to locate the spirituality of the priesthood within such a catholic vision that the Solemn Declaration envisions. That means finding ways to think about our priestly life, what it means in *a reformed catholic understanding,* and how it speaks to the spiritual confusions of our age. To be a priest is to be a servant of Christ in the midst of the body of Christ. What is *impressed inwardly* upon our lives of the sacrificial love of Christ is to be *expressed outwardly* in our work "to the glory of thy Name and the edification of thy Church" (BCP, p. 546). We do not live for ourselves but for others.

Yet we do so as a spiritual fellowship of priests, as those who have been called and chosen, set aside, dedicated, and charged by God's grace to be "messengers, watchmen, and stewards of the Lord" (BCP, p. 648). It is not us *per se* but what is given to move in us. SSC at its best, historically and prophetically, is about the radical nature of the call to service in Christ. It is not political or worldly; it is meant to be transformative spiritually. It speaks to the very heart of the ministry: another lives in us so that Christ can live in those whom we serve.
One of the distinctive features of the SSC is the idea of the sanctification of the priesthood. This has to do with a constant reflection upon the meaning of our ordinations for the sake

of those whom we serve, namely Christ and his Church. Without that focus, ministry so easily and so quickly turns into anti-ministry, into a focus on ourselves and a collapse into the secular cultures of managers, of CEOs - read Bishops, of priests as mere functionaries of a centralised technocracy, at best, secondary and cheap mental health care providers of the dominant and domineering therapeutic culture. That culture is itself derivative of the traditions of pastoral and sacramental care that were once the life of the Church but which is now increasingly hostile to the principles of life and the sanctity of life. The technocratic culture is anti-life.

The contemporary purpose of SSC as a spiritual fellowship of priests would be to reclaim and re-conceive the sacramental nature of the priesthood in terms of priest and people together. That is itself an overlooked feature of the classical understanding of the priesthood especially in our Anglican tradition.

I would like to offer a brief meditation on the idea of the sanctification of the priesthood which we all share, a way of reminding us of the inward and outward expression of our lives in Christ. This is itself an obvious reference to the sacramental principle embodied in classical Anglicanism as grounded in a Chalcedonian understanding of the necessary interplay of things divine and things human, what Fr. Robert Crouse has called "Chalcedonian sacramentalism".[1]

Richard Hooker's explication of the Chalcedonian Definition is paradigmatic for classical Anglican sacramental theology. "There are but four things," he says, "which concur to make complete the whole state of our Lord Jesus Christ: his Deity, his manhood, the conjunction of both, and the distinction of the one from the other being joined in one". They are summed up in four words: "ἀληθως, τελέως, ἀδιαιρέτως, ἀσυγχύτως, truly, perfectly, indivisibly, distinctly, the first applied to his being God, and second to his being Man, the third to his being of both One, and the fourth to his still continuing in that one Both," by which, he says, "we may fully by way of abridgement comprise whatsoever antiquity hath at large handled either in declaration of Christian belief, or in refutation of the foresaid heresies,"[2] namely, Arianism, Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism. Indeed, for Hooker, all heresies concerning the person of Jesus in any age are comprehended in these terms.[3]

Austin Farrer reminds us that the priest is "a walking sacrament".[4] It is a wonderful image. Yet it is not about "us" but what and who we are for. There is, as Farrer says,

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[1] Robert Darwin Crouse, The Biblical and Patristic Foundations of Anglican Sacramentalism as Understood by the English Reformers, Mere Anglicanism Conference, Charleston, SC, 1 February 2008.

[2] Richard Hooker, Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity, Bk. V, ch. Liv in The Works of Richard Hooker, ed. by John Keble (Oxford, 1841), pp. 237-238.

[3] See also David Curry, Reasoning upon the Essentials: Chalcedonian Sacramentalism in Andrewes and Bramhall, in Christ Unabridged: Knowing and Loving the Son of Man, ed. by George Westhaver and Rebekah Vince, (SCM Press, 2020), pp. 134-148.

[4] Austin Farrer, The Essential Sermons, ed. & intro by Leslie Houlden, (SPCK, 1991), p. 102.

nothing "special about the priest … except just that he is a priest".[5] I remember walking down a street in Boston in clericals and being approached by someone who was obviously distrubed in mind and who proceeded to curse me as "a priest of satan" for an entire city block while I simply walked along with him. But then the ranting stopped as suddenly as it had begun and the person quietly walked away. It was as if the demons had departed and were gone from him. It was like an exorcism. It had nothing to do with me as a person exactly but everything to do with the office of a priest.

George Herbert's poem called "Aaron" explores wonderfully, I think, the idea of the sanctity of the priesthood. Herbert (1593-1633) is one of the great poets of sacramental theology in our classical Anglican tradition. His poems as well as his much neglected treatise on the pastoral work of priests, The Country Parson, are necessary reminders to us about our priestly vocation in the current confusions of our times. His poem "Aaron" helps us to reclaim what belongs to the essentially sacramental nature of the ministry, about the intimate relation of Word and Sacrament, about the inner and outer aspects of our lives in ministry; in short, the priest as a "walking sacrament" of the grace of God.

On November 1st, the Feast of All Saints, in 1883, the vicar of Little Saint Mary's in Cambridge, England (a church which my daughter and son-in-law often attended while studying at Cambridge), the Revd William Guillemard knocked on the door of a house not far from the Cavendish Laboratory to pay a pastoral call to a parishioner who was dying. Fr. Guillemard entered the house and robed himself; he was very much an adherent of the Oxford Movement, whether SSC or not, I am not sure. "He was astonished to hear from the bed a Scottish voice with a trace of a Galloway accent, reciting from memory all five verses of Geroge Herbert's poem about the robing of Aaron".[6] He discovered not only the deep faith of the man but that he "seemed to know the whole Bible by heart" (385).

The man was James Clerk Maxwell, in some sense the father of modern physics, the discoverer of the theory of electromagnetism, one of the four fundamental "forces" belonging to the Standard Model of Particle Physics. For him there was no conflict between science and religion. He was responsible for the building of the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge and for the Latin inscription carved on the oak doors. "*Magna opera Domini exquisita in omnes voluntates ejus*", the Vulgate version of Psalm 111.2. "The works of the Lord are great,/sought out of all them that have pleasure therein" (BCP, p. 477) in Coverdale's version.

It is a wonderful story which speaks to the sanctity of the priesthood and to the purpose and nature of the ministry. The poem itself is a profound meditation on the priesthood as grounded in Scripture and as realised in Christ.

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[5] Ibid, p. 102.

[6] The Penultimate Curiosity: How Science Swims in the Slipstream of Ultimate Questions, Roger Wagner & Andrew Briggs, Oxford, 2019, p. 383. See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4H7UyMjd410

Holinesse on the head,
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest:
Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profanenesse in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest:
Poor priest thus am I drest.

Onely another head
I have, another heart and breast,
Another music, making live, not dead,
Without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well drest.

Christ is my onely head,
My alone onely heart and breast,
My onely music, striking me ev'n dead,
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new-drest.

So holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my dear breast,
My doctrine tun'd by Christ (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest)
Come people; Aaron's drest.[7]

Entitled "Aaron," it refers to the first high priest of the Hebrew Scriptures and explicitly to his priestly robes, presented in exquisite detail in Exodus 28.2-38. Why? Because of something which is ultimately sacramental. It has very much to do with how we come into the presence of the Holy through outward signs pointing to inward truth. Aaron's holy garments are for a purpose: "to consecrate him for my priesthood," God says. His priesthood not ours; ours only as in him. "These are the garments … a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a coat of chequer work, a turban, and a girdle" (Ex. 28.4).

Herbert concentrates mostly on the robing of head and breast, by way of the gold-plated turban - what Mark Oakley, Dean of St. John's College, Cambridge, calls a mitre![8] - engraved with the words "Holy to the Lord," and the ephod - perhaps, a chasuble, following the same line of anachronistic yet suggestive ecclesiological and Christian imagery? - emphasising the skirt of the ephod embellished with bells of gold - and the

[7] The Poems of George Herbert, From the text of F.E. Hutchinson, (Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 165.

[8] Mark Oakley, My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and The Journey of the Soul, (SPCK, 2019), p. 121.

breastplate of what Herbert calls "light and perfections" in which are the names in stone of the twelve sons of Israel as well as the mysterious Urim and Thummim, symbolic of God's perfect will and judgement in contrast to the lottery of human presumption.

Herbert's use of the imagery of light and perfection probably derives from the notes to the Geneva Bible used in Herbert's time until the King James Version of 1611. There it is said that "urim signifies light, and thummim perfection: declaring that the stones of the breastplate were most clear, and of perfect beauty: by urim also is meant knowledge, and thummim holiness, showing what virtues are required in the priests".[9]

"Holinesse on the head," the poem begins, "Light and perfections on the breast, Harmonious bells below." This is more or less straight from Exodus, the Hebrew Scriptural ground, as it were, and yet already the Christian transformation of images in Christ has begun. The sound of the bells "shall be heard," Exodus says, "when he [Aaron] goes into the holy place before the Lord, and when he comes out, lest he die." It has to do with Aaron before the awesome presence of the holy God. "No one can see God and live" (Ex. 33.20). That idea is preserved and yet transformed into a deepening of the principle of mediation sacramentally understood. "Harmonious bells below, raising the dead/ to lead them unto life and rest." The reference is to redemption, to the resurrection of the dead, to Christ as the High Priest in whose name we are drest. The shift is to those for whom we serve in Christ "to lead them unto life and rest." "Thus are true Aarons drest," priests in the plural; in short, to the office of priesthood in general.

The poem thus begins with a sense of the priestly calling: "to lead them unto life and rest." It reminds us of the scriptural ground of our priestly calling, connecting Old Testament imagery with the New, or more precisely, with the gathering of all things into Christ. The first stanza ends with the image of "true Aarons drest," an image of the ideal that already points to a new form of mediation. The mediation is simply and only Christ. This is already a reformed insight and emphasises the necessary interplay between justification and sanctification. The operative preposition is "on," to what is placed on us. Holiness *on* the head, the breastplate *on* our bodies. It suggests what later theology will regard as "imputed righteousness," what Richard Hooker will regard as "justification," that complements "infused righteousness," or "sanctification," which concerns what is increasing *in* us. The distinction is between what is imputed and what is infused and which relates to the forms of our sacramental incorporation into the body of Christ.

In terms of reformation and counter-reformation spirituality, it is really a matter of emphasis that circles around a deeper and common understanding, a catholicity that is truly catholic and thus able to embrace the legitimate differences that are part of the ways in which the finite is gathered into the infinite life of God. This is the counter to the

[9] https://www.reformedreader.org/gbn/gbnexodus.htm

common tendency of collapsing God into our agendas and concerns, of measuring God by our interests rather than submitting ourselves to God.

The second stanza speaks to the reality of the ministry. God has only sinners to send to sinners to proclaim the good news of redemption. And so the second stanza is wonderfully and profoundly a confession of ourselves as far removed from what we know we are called to be in our office as priests. It is *"priest as sinner"* beset inwardly with "defects and darkness in my breast " that render us dead, "the noise of passions ringing me for dead/ Unto a place where there is no rest: Poore priest thus am I drest." What is within leaves us without. Noise *within* supplants the sound of harmonious bells *without*.

This acknowledges the gap between what we would be and what we are in our distractions and preoccupations; in short, our sinfulness. "Between the idea and the reality … falls the Shadow" as T.S. Eliot puts it (The Hollow Men). In place of holiness there is profaneness. *Profanum* literally means what is beside or outside the temple, the holy place. The stanza highlights the gap between what we should be and what we are, not just in our sinfulness but in our awareness of our sinfulness. That, of course, is actually good news. Why? Because we cannot know "profanenesse in my head" and "defects and darkness in my breast" without some sense of the holiness to which we are called. To know ourselves as "poore priest thus am I drest" is the true confession without which there can be no motion of redemption, of transformation, so wonderfully explicated in the next three stanzas.

We are not left with this opposition between what is imputed or put on and what we find in our falleness and sinfulness within us. The third stanza marks the transition to Christ, though as yet unnamed. The last line highlights the preposition "in". "Onely another head/ I have" points to the idea of the uniqueness of Christ as the divine mediator between God and man. "Another heart and breast" are images that recall Paul's teaching in Galatians and Ephesians about putting on Christ inwardly. "Another musick" replaces the cacophony of the passions with the harmony of creation restored in redemption, "making live not dead/ Without whom I could have no rest."

The fourth line of every stanza ends with the word "rest"; it signals the matter of our abiding in Christ. The last of the so-called seven "I am" saying in John's Gospel is the most sacramental. "I am the vine … ye are the branches. Abide in me" (Jn. 25.5). Thus "In him I am well drest" points to the restoration of the outward and the inward which is realised in Christ and Christ in us.

The fourth stanza builds upon the theme of the uniqueness of Christ as the true mediator and image of the new priesthood with the repetition of the word "onely". "Christ is my *onely* head,/ my alone *onely* heart and breast,/ My *onely* musick" (emphasis added). What does it mean for Christ to be in us? Death and Resurrection. "Another musick" in the third stanza makes live not dead but only through death. It is the very pattern of Christian life in terms of both baptism and eucharist, in terms of the order and harmony of the liturgy, in terms of our life as priest and people. Thus "My onely musick, striking me ev'n

dead;/ That to the old man I may rest." We die to ourselves, to the old Adam, so that we may rest and live in Christ. Only so can we "be in him new drest," renewed inwardly.

The last line of each stanza ends with the word "drest" which is explicated in all its fullness of meaning in the poem. What is imputed to us is also given to be infused and alive in us and that is nothing other than "the saving power of the Cross, + impressed inwardly upon our lives and revealed outwardly in our work" and that for the sake of others that "they may come to know your love and your truth; through Christ our Lord".[10]

The last stanza gathers the dialectical argument of the previous stanzas into its fullness of meaning, the fulness of Christ in us. What is imputed is now meant to live in us as walking sacraments.

We have journeyed from "holinesse *on* the head" to "holy *in* my head," from light and perfections *on* the breast" to "perfect and light *in* my deare breast," and from the general to the personal, from "the head" to "*my* head", from "the breast" to "*my* deare breast" - note the wonderful sense of loving intimacy. This reminds us of the last poem in Herbert's collection of poems called the Temple. The last poem is "Love (III)" where God is personified as love and where the soul moving from contrition to confession to satisfaction and union calls Love "my deare". We are sinners who know ourselves as sinners but even more as God's "dearly beloved" who are called to the banquet of love. "You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat: So I did sit and eat". [11]

The music theme appears in the third line of every stanza and so in the last stanza we have a lovely musical image about the ministry in terms of teaching: "my doctrine tun'd by Christ" who is said, in parenthesis here, to be "not dead,/ but lives in me while I do rest." The sanctification which we seek for our lives as priests is about our lives as attuned to God in Christ. To be recalled to such a sacred calling reminds us of our purpose. It is simply and eloquently captured in the final line. Like "true Aarons drest" but no longer simply "poore priest" drest in our sins, we are now "well drest" in Christ, and "new drest" in him, and thus we can bid those in our charge "Come people; Aaron's drest," the new Aaron who is Christ in each of us. Aaron *is* drest.

The poem serves as a kind of vesting prayer, to be sure, yet "Aaron" is much more. It offers a profound reflection upon the scriptural and theological ground of the sacred calling of priests, pointing to the harmony and balance of things outward and things inward. It recalls us to who we are as walking sacraments even in a "foolish world" that "scorne[s] that profession," as another poet, John Donne (1572-1631), and in another register, notes.

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[10] SSC, The Society Prayer.

[11] The Poems of George Herbert, p. 180.

His poem, "To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders," complements Herbert's poem "Aaron" and contributes to our thinking about the sanctity of our priestly calling in the face of opposition and contempt.

> Let then the world thy calling disrespect,
> But goe thou on, and pitty their neglect.
> What function is so noble, as to bee
> Embassadour to God and destinie?
> To open life, to give kingdomes to more
> Than Kings give dignities; to keepe heavens doore?
> *Maries* prerogative was to beare Christ, so
> 'Tis preachers to convey him, for they doe
> As Angels out of clouds, from Pulpits speake;
> And blesse the poore beneath, the lame, the weake.
> If then th'Astronomers, whereas they spie
> A new-found Starre, their Opticks magnifie,
> How brave are those, who with their Engine, can
> Bring man to heaven, and heaven againe to man?
> These are thy titles and preheminences,
> In whom must meet Gods graces, mens offences,
> And so the heavens which beget all things here,
> And the earth our mother, which these things doth beare,
> Both these in thee, are in thy Calling knit,
> And make thee now a blest Hermaphrodite".[12]

Hermaphrodite is understood here as a metaphor for combining opposites, the joining of heaven and earth, the meeting of God's graces and men's offences. This parallels the idea of our being "well drest in Christ," the true mediator of God and Man in Herbert's poem.

Priests as "walking sacrament[s]" seek to open God's life in Christ to others. May that be our endeavour, God being our helper, in Christ "our salvation, our life and our resurrection."

"Come people; Aaron's drest."

Thank you.

Fr. David Curry, SSC

[12] The Complete Poems of John Donne, (Everyman's Library, 1991), "To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders", pp. 470-472.