

## Priestly Spirituality

The conciliar “Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests,” opened the door to a ministerial or apostolic spirituality (*Presbyterorum ordinis* 13-14). This theme was clearly stated in principle in the decree of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, *The Ministerial Priesthood* (21), and developed for the American scene in the *Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood* (1972, henceforth SRAP). This last document received wide acclaim among priests as a fair account of their own experience and a realistic approach to a spirituality appropriate to their lives.

**The Development of SRAP.** The bishops commissioned SRAP as a follow-up to their research projects on the priesthood in the late 1960s. A mass of material was made available through psychological, sociological, historical, scriptural, and theological investigation. SRAP was conceived less as a further study on either an empirical or research basis than as a reflection on the actual experience of priesthood in the context of spirituality. It was intended to be a practical tool to help Priests deal with the new understandings of their life and ministry uncovered by the studies.

A subcommittee was appointed by the Bishops’ committee on Priestly Life and Ministry to prepare a statement. Most of the members were part of the team of priests who had given workshops on prayer renewal for priests during the two previous years under the sponsorship of the National Federation of Priests’ Councils. The whole subcommittee agreed that the new document should not be a theoretical treatise but an invitation to action. It was to be a call, not the final word, and priestly spirituality would unfold as lived experience in answer to challenge rather than as a ready-made program of spiritual exercises. The projected text was to endeavor

to uncover the already existing sources of spiritual growth inherent in the daily lives of priests and encourage them to develop their own individual spirituality.

**Interaction and Prayer.** The call in SRAP is to interaction. For today all Christians this is par excellence the means of growth. Interaction is interpersonal involvement. It means dialogue, sharing, doing things together. It takes place in the interplay with contemporary culture, in the relationships in ministry, in friendships and community, and in prayer. These four areas are the first four chapters of the book.

Interaction flourishes when it originates in true friendship and the felt experience of community based on faith principles. The quality of life that emerges out of these deep relationships and small vibrant community tends to transfer itself to other sectors of life. For this reason chapter 3, which discusses depth relationships, is the key chapter. The emphasis on the human and the horizontal is of a piece with the times and makes SRAP very contemporary.

This approach represents a shift from the tendency of the recent past to oppose action and spirituality and to identify spirituality with prayer. SRAP sees prayer as the heart of spirituality insofar as prayer is a person's whole relationship with God; personal action, i.e., action which springs out of lives that have matured through the give and take of multiple relationships, nourishes this prayer. Formal prayer is precisely one such personal action: highest on the scale of interactions, it is an important priority in the life of a priest.

The fifth and final chapter relates interaction to prayer in this deeper sense. Interaction, whether in acts of prayer or encounters with people, flows out of “the love

of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us" (Rom 5.5). As the expression of that love it nurtures the original gift. Spiritual renewal moves between these poles of interaction and love of God; together they form a spiral movement reaching up to God.

In ch. 2 to 4 SRAP discusses liturgical prayer, shared prayer, and prayer alone. But its interest goes beyond prayers to prayer itself, which it sees as the underlying relationship to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All interaction contributes to the deepening of this union with God and explicit reference to God is by no means the most significant factor. The mysterious depth dimension of existence is transcendent and eschatological; it might be called spirituality in its pure state. But it manifests itself in multiple incarnations. All of life is the stuff of spirituality.

**Models of Spirituality.** Spiritual writing constantly struggles to express the relation between the outside and the inside elements of spiritual life. The spiritual journey is a movement from the without of things to the within, not by abandoning one for the other but by allowing the latter to perfect the former. SRAP uses two models to illustrate this passage. One is the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection, and the other is the action-contemplation dyad of Western mysticism.

The priest's whole life reveals the dynamic of death and resurrection. He grows by dying to selfishness and indifference, to slavery, passion, and prejudice, to weakness and fear and by coming alive in love and freedom, in openness, courage and healthy interdependence with his fellow human beings. These are some ways he experiences "the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering" and thereby comes to "know Christ," the center of all things (Phil 3.10).

Knowing Christ experientially is contemplation, whereas action is the outer

expression of that loving knowledge. The essence of spiritual growth is the raising of this contemplative quality of human life. Interaction contributes to this, both because of its ultimate rooting in God and because it touches the profound interpersonal character of the human that has surfaced currently. Rugged individualism has proved bankrupt and interdependence is the recognized human condition. SRAP tries to structure the spiritual life on this insight. Contemplative union remains the ideal, but it is attainable when a person becomes humanly whole through wholesome relationships with fellow men and women.

The inter-relational activities that are the door to spiritual growth are responses to the Spirit at each moment. Discernment of how to organize life, where to act, what to do is a personal issue; discernment of spirits can no longer be relegated to extraordinary cases; it becomes an ordinary need.

**Conclusion.** The approach to priestly spirituality in SRAP has notably influenced other NCCB publications. Thus *The Program of Continuing Education of Priests* (1973) articulates the same principles as does *Spiritual Direction for Priests in the U.S.A.* (1977) in particular areas. The latest document, *As One who Serves* (1977), reflects on the priesthood as rooted in the risen, indwelling Christ and as expressed in the Church as *communio*; these two foundations undergird the two principal thrusts of SRAP's spirituality, prayer as union with Christ and interaction as the Christian's life.

To what extent has this spirituality been assimilated by the clergy and the seminaries? At this point it is perhaps too early to say. But impressions from retreats, study days, and workshops in spirituality, all of which have undergone a second spring in the last few years, indicate that the new spirituality speaks to the times. The priestly spirituality that is current today is a return to sources, to the priest's basic condition as a

man and as a Christian, the resultant effort and reflection tend to be less particular, less privileged, less sacred, more authentic and down to earth. Here as in other areas of church

life and teaching today, the priest stands beside and not above his brothers and sisters in the Lord.

**Bibliography:** American Association of Theological Schools. Task Force on Spiritual Development, *Voyage, Vision, Venture. A Report on Spiritual Development* (Dayton, Ohio 1972). Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry. *The Program of Continuing Education of Priests* (USCC Publ. Office, Washington, D.C. 1973): *As One Who Serves: Reflections on the Pastoral Ministry of Priests in the U.S.* (USCC Publ. Office, Washington, D.C. 1977). L. J. Cameli. *Spiritual Direction for Priests in the United States* (USCC Publ. Office, Washington, D.C. 1977). E. E. Larkin and G. T. Broccolo, eds., *Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood* (USCC Publ. Office, Washington, D.C. 1972). Synod of Bishops 1971. *The Ministerial Priesthood* (USCC Publ. Office, Washington, D.C. 1972).