

The Common Priesthood: What Does Baptism Demand? Paul Turner

“Lord, hear our prayer.” That’s the typical response the assembly makes during the prayer of the faithful. It doesn’t seem like much. Just four words. But that is a preeminent way in which all the baptized exercise their common priesthood:

In the Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond in a certain way to the word of God which they have welcomed in faith and, *exercising the office of their baptismal priesthood*, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all. It is fitting that such a prayer be included, as a rule, in Masses celebrated with a congregation, so that petitions will be offered for the holy Church, for civil authorities, for those weighed down by various needs, for all men and women, and for the salvation of the whole world (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal 67*, citing *Sacrosanctum concilium 53*, italics mine).

If baptism makes us priests, does it demand anything more of us than the prayer of the faithful? Oh, yes.

The priesthood of the faithful

All the faithful are priests. We are not all ministerial priests, as our ordained ministers are. We are not the high priest, as Jesus alone is. But we all share a common priesthood by our baptism. The First Letter of Peter addresses this concept. We hear this text on the Fifth Sunday of Easter in Year A of the lectionary cycle (Lectionary for Mass 52):

Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

. . . You are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:4-9).

The letter is quoting two Old Testament passages here, Isaiah 43:20-21 and Exodus 19:6. On Mount Sinai God asked Moses to tell the people that they are “a kingdom of priests,” or as 1 Peter calls them, “a royal priesthood.” The concept was already present in the Jewish bones of early Christianity. The First Letter of Peter reinterprets it in the light of the coming of Christ.

Jesus himself was a living stone rejected by others, yet precious in God’s sight. We, the members of his body, are also living stones who suffer rejection, but together these stones form a spiritual house. Within that temple we all function as priests, offering acceptable spiritual sacrifices and announcing the praises of the one who calls us.

Priests of the Old Testament were anointed, as were prophets and kings. Evidence for the anointing of priests shows up in Exodus 28:40-42, which also discusses the proper linen garment for priests; 29:7 and 29, two verses from an elaborate description of the ordination ceremony; and 30:30-33, which stresses the sacred character of the anointing.

The New Testament never tells of a physical anointing of Jesus, but he is called the Christ, or the Messiah, which means the Anointed One (e.g., John 1:41). Peter tells in one sermon that God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power (Acts 10:38), an allusion to the events surrounding his baptism. This is one reason why “priest” is such a fitting role description for Jesus (e.g. Hebrews 5:5 and 10). Our priesthood is but a share in his.

The anointing of children

The Rite of Baptism for Children (RBC) includes an anointing with chrism on the crown of the head (62). The text for this prayer announces that the newly baptized are members of Christ, who is Priest, Prophet, and King. This brief ritual symbolizes - among other things - the participation of the faithful in the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ.

The English translation of the prayer for this anointing changed after the Rite of Baptism for Children was first published. Not all editions of the book have the correct text. Originally, the text ran like this:

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as members of his body, sharing everlasting life.

But a new translation has replaced this one. This version is closer to the original text in Latin:

The God of power and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
has freed you from sin
and brought you to new life
through water and the Holy Spirit.
He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation,
so that, united with his people,
you may remain for ever a member of Christ
who is Priest, Prophet and King.

The new text stresses that the priesthood of Christ is unique, and that the faithful share in priesthood because they are members of the body of Christ.

When the people make their response in the Prayer of the Faithful, brief as it is, they are exercising their priestly function, and they bring to fulfillment the anointing they received on the crown of their head when they were baptized.

Omitting the anointing

At least, they should have received that anointing. There are some circumstances when people do not. In mission territories, for example, whenever a priest baptizes an immense number of people at a time, he may omit the postbaptismal anointing (RBC 125). If a catechist is baptizing because no priest or deacon is available in that part of the world, the anointing is omitted, though the text is said (151). The same omission occurs when a lay person baptizes in an emergency because no priest or deacon is available (161).

The most common circumstance in which this anointing is omitted is the baptism of adults. Ordinarily the priest who baptizes administers confirmation immediately afterward. But this may not happen if some serious reason stands in the way; for example, there is no chrism, or there is no priest, and a deacon has to baptize the adult. In those rare instances confirmation is omitted, and the first postbaptismal anointing is retained.

Those who designed the revised catechumenate feared that two anointings given back to back by the same minister with the same oil on the same head (one on the crown, the other a few inches away on the forehead) would not be sufficiently distinctive. Since confirmation is a sacrament, it takes precedence, and the first anointing in the initiation of adults has been omitted to avoid confusion.

However, the meanings of the two anointings are distinct. The first pertains to Christ; the second pertains to the Holy Spirit. Without the first anointing, the participation of the faithful in the priestly, prophetic and royal ministry of Christ is not explicit. Perhaps in some future revision of the adult rites of initiation, this omission will be reviewed.

The chrism mass

After all, the first postbaptismal anointing forms the background for another important moment in the liturgical year. Its profile shapes the very prayer that consecrates chrism. At the chrism mass each year, the bishop blesses the oil of the sick and the oil of catechumens, and then he solemnly consecrates the oil of chrism. Today the chrism mass has become a kind of celebration of priesthood: concelebrants reaffirm their commitment as priests. In that context you would expect the prayer over the chrism to speak about its significance in the ordination of a priest. But it doesn't. It speaks of the purpose of chrism in baptism.

The chrism mass has a utilitarian purpose: It gathers the community around the bishop before the beginning of the Triduum, so that all the parishes can take home the oils they need to perform the initiation rites at the Easter

Vigil. Logically, then, the prayer for the consecration of the chrism speaks about the initiation of Christians.

In the introduction the bishop asks that all who are anointed with chrism “be inwardly transformed and come to share in eternal salvation.” Consecratory Prayer A recalls that the psalms sing “of the life and joy that the oil would bring us in the sacraments of [God’s] love.” It tells of Noah, who survived the avenging flood, and prays that those anointed with this oil may be radiant with joy as “the waters of baptism wash away [their] sins.” Even when the prayer mentions the anointing of Aaron as priest, his image foreshadows the coming of Christ, not of the ordained priesthood. The prayer makes this petition:

Make this chrism a sign of life and salvation
for those who are to be born again in the waters of baptism.
Wash away the evil they have inherited from sinful Adam,
and when they are anointed with this holy oil
make them temples of your glory,
radiant with the goodness of life
that has its source in you.

Similar symbols are at work in the alternative Consecratory Prayer B. It proclaims to God that by this anointing, “you strengthen all who have been reborn in baptism.” The prayer makes this request: “Pour out the gifts of your Holy Spirit on our brothers and sisters who will be anointed with it.” We use chrism for several once in a lifetime events: baptism, confirmation, ordination and the consecration of a church and an altar. But at the mass that bears the name “chrism”, the key prayer has only one of these rituals in mind: baptism.

What baptism demands

So, if we are all baptized into the priesthood of Jesus Christ, what does that demand? Is it just a matter of repeating four words each Sunday? Hardly.

As members of Christ, we are members of him who is priest, prophet and king. We are set apart as God’s royal people. We are summoned to speak as prophets do, making the word of the Lord living and active. And we are to act as priests, sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others and offering prayers for them.

To say “Lord, hear our prayer” with integrity, we have to be people of prayer. We have to be people in tune with the needs of the church and the world. We have to think kindly enough of our civil authorities to pray for them. We have to remember those who are burdened. And we are to pray for the salvation of the world. Those prayers will be all the more effective the more we unite ourselves with Christ, the more we tell others about Christ, and the more we live as members of Christ, who is priest, prophet and king.

Ministry and Liturgy 34/7 (September 2007):6-8.