



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



**MASS OF THANKSGIVING FOR ORDINATION OF FR. LINUS
(Eleventh Sunday of Year C)
Fr. Ambrose Bennett, O.S.B.**

Today we offer this Mass of Thanksgiving for the ordination of Fr. Linus to the priesthood. And though our gospel reading does not show us the ministry of Christ's apostles as it would be after the resurrection, it does tell us of Jesus' encounter with a sinful woman who came to him when he was having supper in the house of Simon the Pharisee. It seems that Simon had correctly observed the required decencies for his guest but nothing more: Simon gave no water to wash his feet, no kiss of greeting, no oil for Jesus' head. And then there came a major breach of proper protocol and of ritual purity: a sinful woman entered and bathed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with ointment out of an alabaster flask. Simon is appalled and questions whether Jesus could truly be a prophet since a prophet would know what sort of woman this was.

To Jesus' contemporaries, the duty of the holy was to separate themselves from the unholy until such time as the sinners repented. The Pharisees and the other major parties in Israel believed that God would forgive those who sincerely repented and sought purification through the sacrifices offered by the priests in the Temple. What Simon did not realize was that in Jesus he had something far more than a prophet or a rabbi as his guest. For it was the Holy One of Israel, God himself in the flesh, who was reclining at Simon's table. Since Jesus as God-made-man is the living Temple and the true High Priest, he is not tainted by sinners; and it was Jesus' saving presence that brought this woman to repentance and restoration. Christ's own words are mysterious: he says that "her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Lk 7.47). And yet, our Lord's parable of the two forgiven debtors suggests that love is the *effect* rather than the basis of forgiveness. The contradiction is only apparent: only faith and love can draw the sinner to reach out to Christ, whose grace has already touched the penitent even before the penitent can touch the Savior.

This awareness of both God's transcendent holiness and his nearness to us in the person of Christ underlies all of Christian faith, and especially the Catholic priesthood. As regards the proper attitude of Christ's followers to the unbelieving and sinful world, our Lord in his High Priestly Prayer says this:

I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one (Jn 17. 14-15).

St. Paul puts it very succinctly in his letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



(Gal. 2.20). St. Paul speaks of his apostolic ministry in priestly terms in his letter to the Romans, describing himself as “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15.16).

When the Church teaches that the priest acts in the person of Christ, *in persona Christi capitis*, we are simply drawing out the implications of these words from our second reading today: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2.20). St. Augustine put it this way: “Be it Peter who baptizes, it is Jesus who baptizes; be it Paul who baptizes, it is Jesus who baptizes; be it Judas who baptizes, it is Jesus who baptizes” (St. Augustine, Tract. 6 *In Ioann.*). The priest represents God’s holy people *not* because his priesthood depends on popular delegation but because the ordained priest represents Christ our Lord, who contains and encompasses in himself all of the baptized. The priestly power is Christ’s and therefore proceeds solely from on high and *not* from below. Christ himself said to his apostles: “You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Lk 22.28-30). Emmanuel Cardinal Suhard, who served as Archbishop of Paris in the post-war years, expressed this mystery very eloquently in a beautiful pastoral letter that he wrote to his priest on Holy Thursday of 1949:

At the altar, the priest, like Christ, is the [sacrificial] victim. But he is also the sacrificer; he is then the dreadful man, the one who works death, the one who slays sin and burns it, the one who is crucified and who crucifies, the one who cannot save the world, nor will consent to its salvation, save through nailing it to the Cross. “Without the shedding of blood there is no redemption” (Heb. 9.22)... That is why the priest in relation to society must always be somehow or other its adversary. He will never be forgiven for recalling and perpetuating, from generation to generation, Christ, whom they thought they had suppressed forever... Far from being a fatherly adviser or a good-natured citizen, a priest is, like God, a terrible being. He is a fighting man... Like Saint Michael, he challenges the Dragon, dragging him out of ambush by healing men’s hearts, so as to crush one by one his ever resurgent heads. Although it is too frequently overlooked, a priest is an exorcist...; he has the power and the duty of expelling the Devil (Cardinal Suhard, *Priests Among Men*, pp. 82-83; 44-45).

From today’s gospel, we see that Jesus is infinitely more than a mere prophet or herald of God’s Kingdom: he is the Eternal High Priest who ever lives to make intercession for us. So also, the Christian priest is far more than a minister of the Word; yet a great many people in recent years have erroneously seen priests as *primarily* ministers of the Word. In a strange way, they have made the same error as Simon the Pharisee: in Catholic priests they are looking for a prophet or a rabbi rather than a minister of sacrifice and are disappointed. What the Second Vatican Council actually said was: “Since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all men” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 4). Preaching is the first task in the sense that it takes place first, so that the hearers may be able to join in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the Christian life. The Council went on to say that, in the Eucharistic Mystery, priests

exercise *to the supreme degree* their sacred function... in the sacrifice of the Mass they make present and apply, until the coming of the Lord, the unique sacrifice of the New Testament, that namely of Christ offering himself once for all a spotless Victim to the Father (*Lumen Gentium* 28).

At the Last Supper, Christ made his Apostles not only teachers and ministers of the sacraments but also *sacrificing priests* when he said “This is my body which is given for you. Do this as my memorial... This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22.19-20). The Apostles also received from the risen Christ the power to forgive sins: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20.23). Christ’s truth and supernatural life need to be communicated to every successive generation. Therefore the apostolic ministry had to be handed on to successors in order to continue Christ’s mission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28.19-20). The apostles chose and ordained bishops and priests, to proclaim the gospel, to govern God’s holy people, to offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice for the living and the dead, and to absolve the penitent in Christ’s name.

This is the priesthood that has descended to us from Christ himself through his apostles and that Fr. Linus has now received. I do not think that I can improve on the famous words of the Dominican, Fr. Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, in describing the priestly vocation:

To live in the midst of the world without wishing its pleasures;
to be a member of each family, yet belonging to none;
to share all sufferings;
to penetrate all secrets;
to heal all wounds;
to go from men to God and offer Him their prayers;
to return from God to men to bring pardon and hope;
to have a heart of fire for charity and a heart of bronze for chastity;
to teach and to pardon;
to console and bless always.
My God, what a life!
And it is yours, O Priest of Jesus Christ!