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by

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An archdeacon friend recently complained to me about a paragraph in a religious newspaper which stated that though the Roman Catholic Church recognises the ministers of the Greek Orthodox Church as true ministers it does not recognise Church of England ministers. Before looking further into this matter let us consider what is the New Testament teaching about the Christian ministry. For this, chapter 4 of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a most important passage. There we see that to every Christian has been given by Christ some gift or other to be used to assist the spiritual growth of his or her fellow Christians. No-one is without a spiritual gift to be used and ministered for the benefit of all, but in particular St. Paul points out that God gives within the Christian congregation the gifts of pastors and teachers, that through their ministry of the Word of God the Christian congregation should grow in knowledge of God and so grow in Christ-like character. St. Paul's words are "Christ has given some to be pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints ... till we all attain unto the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a full grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ".

In the Epistle to the Romans chapter 8 Paul says it is God's purpose from eternity that we should be conformed to the image of His Son. Now this is brought about by the ministry of God's Word in which, I say, all Christians have a share, but which is pre-eminently entrusted to particular members of the congregation. If we look to the Old Testament or outside

Christianity, to the religions of heathendom, we will notice that the priest has a most important place in these religions. The priest is essentially an intermediary between the worshipper and God. The priest alone has the privilege of drawing near to God. It is he who offers the worshipper's sacrifice to God on behalf of the worshipper. Indeed, the most characteristic work of the priest is to offer sacrifice so as to reconcile the worshipper with his God, and as I say, the priest was a common and prominent figure in the Old Testament religion and also in the religions of paganism whether of the ancient world or of our modern times. It is a matter of very great interest and importance that in the New Testament the word for Priest as used of the sacrificing priest of Judaism or of heathenism is never applied to the Christian minister. The Christian minister is never termed priest. The reason is not far to seek. The Christian religion knows of no special class of persons who have the exclusive privilege of drawing near to God or of offering sacrifice. Indeed the New Testament makes it clear now that Christ's sacrifice has been offered on Calvary, no further sacrifice is needed or indeed is possible.

Jesus is called Priest in the New Testament because, of course, He offered the one complete and perfect sacrifice, the sacrifice of Himself on the altar of Calvary when He made propitiation and obtained forgiveness for all our sins. Also, all Christians in general are called priests, because, through Christ, every one of us has a full right to come into God's presence. But the Christian minister is never called a priest. It is not accidental that this word of a sacrificing priest is never used of the Christian minister in the New Testament. The reason is that since Calvary there is no further sacrifice for sins nor do we need any longer a special class

of persons to stand between us and God. In the New Testament the Christian minister is called a presbyter, that is, an elder. Our English word 'priest' is derived from this word presbyter, and strictly speaking it means 'elder'. It is unfortunate that in English we have no other word to describe the sacrificing priest of Judaism and paganism than this word which in the New Testament is used for the Christian elder and is very distinct from the word used in the New Testament for the sacrificing priesthoods of the religions round about, and for which there is no corresponding word in English.

Now the Roman Catholic Church have come to regard their ministers as sacrificing priests. They believe that in service of the Mass the minister offers up in sacrifice Jesus Christ Himself, Who has come to be present in His humanity and divinity as He was born of the blessed virgin, though now He is present under the appearance of bread and wine, which no longer exists but in its place there is Jesus Christ only. So Roman Catholics believe. In every Mass our divine Saviour is thought to be offered by the priest to God for the propitiation of sins. Thus the Council of Trent, Session 22, says "In the Mass the same Christ is immolated Who once offered Himself on the cross" and the Council added "If anyone says that in the Mass a true and proper sacrifice is not offered to God let him be anathema". But the Bible states in the Epistle to the Hebrews, especially in chapters 9 and 10, that Christ's offering on Calvary was made once for all and that He does not need to repeat it daily like the priests of the religions round about. Nothing could be more explicitly stated.

In Roman Catholic teaching the priesthood has tremendous power in that the priests



alone are said to be able to make Christ present on the altar and offer Him to God for sin. On this theory it becomes important to discover who are real priests and who are not. Three things are said in Roman Catholic theology to be necessary to create a priest. First, the ordaining bishop must stand in the right succession; secondly he must use a form of service adequate both in its words and in its actions, and thirdly he must have the intention in his heart of ordaining a priest. If any of these points are deficient, the ordinand has not been made a priest at all on the Roman Catholic theory. It is at this point that Roman Catholics disallow Church of England ministers, as well as ministers of other protestant denominations, although they recognize the ministers of the Greek Orthodox denomination.

The Roman Catholic denomination has not always been consistent in this attitude. At first, during the reign of Queen Mary it accepted clergy ordained according to the Church of England ordinal. Later it disallowed Church of England ministries sometimes on the ground that the ordaining bishop was not properly consecrated, sometimes claiming that the first service was only a sham. Historical research has disposed to these objections. New objections are now offered. Since 1895, when the Pope issued a Bull on the subject, objection is taken to Church of England ministries on two grounds. Firstly, it is said that for some years the words of the ordination service were inadequate to designate what ministry was being conferred; but chiefly it is said that the service is inadequate in its expressed intention to ordain sacrificing priests. Indeed, the Pope pointed out in his Bull that any phrases from the mediaeval services which suggested such sacrificial functions of the ministry were carefully pruned away at the Reformation in England. The pope's words are: "In the whole Church of England ordinal not only is there no clear mention of the sacrifice ... and of the power of consecrating and offering

sacrifice but every trace of these things was deliberately removed and struck out". These words are true, because at the time of the Reformation the Church of England rejected the mediæval concept of a sacrificing priesthood which had been borrowed from non-Christian religions, and returned to the clear concepts of the New Testament with regard to the ministry, namely that the Christian ministry is a ministry of God's Word, and of the Sacraments which are signs and seals of that Word.

In the New Testament all Christians are priests in the sense that through Christ they may draw near to God, though none are priests in the sense that they offer a sacrifice to God for the forgiveness of sins. Apart from Christ's sacrifice on Calvary we need no sacrifice nor any human intermediary or mediator to stand between us and our Heavenly Father. My Archdeacon friend ought not to be disturbed if on Roman Catholic principles he is not recognised as a sacrificing priest, for the Church of England ordinal has deliberately removed any suggestion of that, because the New Testament itself recognises no sacrificing priests in the Christian church. Our sins have been propitiated and forgiven on Calvary when Christ bore their penalty in His own body on the cross, and on the basis of that one and only sacrifice we may all draw near to God ourselves and offer to Him the sacrifice and worship of our faith and obedience, and receive from Him directly all His graces.

In the Christian congregation God gives some members special gifts as pastors and teachers to teach His Word and guide His people. The New Testament calls these ministers elders, that is presbyters or priests in the strict original meaning of the word. Their high privilege is to minister God's Word so that the hearers grow in Christ-likeness, so that the whole congregation grows up together into the fulness of the stature of Christ, as St. Paul puts it. We are all called to

share in this work of helping each other grow as Christians by ministering God's Word privately one with another, but some of us are called and commissioned to exercise this ministry publicly in the church. There is no higher calling open to any than by the ministry of God's Word to save the lost and to mould God's children into the image of Christ through their hearing of His Word.

20th January, 1963.

63..2