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# Christ and the Priesthood

## Biblical Reflection for 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, OCT. 14, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The readings for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time of Cycle B invite us to prayerfully consider the priesthood and priestly ministry. The first reading is the passage of Isaiah's mysterious suffering servant who takes upon himself the people's iniquity (Isaiah 53:2-11).

The second reading speaks of Christ the high priest, tried in every way like us but sin, and the Gospel passage speaks of the Son of Man who has come to give his life in ransom for many (Mark 10:35-45.) These three passages bring to light a fundamental aspect of the heart of priestly ministry and one that we celebrate together as God's people in the Eucharistic mystery.

Recognizing that we are in the midst of celebrating the Year for Priests to mark the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, and knowing that many priests around the world are reading these reflections each week, I offer these thoughts that are particularly inspired by the second readings from this Sunday and next Sunday (Hebrews 4:14-16 and 5:1-5).

### Isaiah's mysterious servant

First, allow me to offer a brief thought on today's reading from the prophet Isaiah (53:10-11). Isaiah's mysterious figure of the "suffering servant" is not only a sign of God's love for us, but he also represents all human beings before God.

Only God appreciated his servant's true greatness. Because he suffered, he was regarded as a sinner and therefore as one to be spurned. Because the servant fulfilled the divine will by suffering for the sins of others, the servant will be rewarded by the Lord.

### Jesus, our great High Priest

In the letter to the Hebrews 4:14-16, the author calls Jesus a great high priest (v 14). Jesus has been tested in every way, yet without sin (v 15); this indicates an acquaintance with the tradition of Jesus' temptations, not only at the beginning (as in 1:13) but throughout his public life (cf Luke 22:28). The similarity of Hebrews 4:16 to Hebrews 10:19-22 indicates that the author is thinking of our confident access to God, made possible by the priestly work of Jesus. Jesus' entire life is steeped in the Scriptures of Israel and he lived and acted out of God's Word.

Our "great high priest" is Jesus, the Child of Bethlehem who becomes the "Ecce Homo" of Jerusalem, not one distant from us and our condition, but he is the one who sympathizes with us, for he has experienced our weakness and pain, even our temptations (Hebrews 4:14-15). We must ask ourselves: Are we priestly people like he was? Do we live for others? Is the world any less violent, any less hostile, any more merciful, patient,

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kind and just, because of us?

In his very memorable and ever valid 1975 apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" (On Evangelization in the Modern World), Pope Paul VI rightly noted: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

Lest we experience emptiness, and the effectiveness of our ministry be compromised, we need to constantly ask ourselves: Are we truly inhabited by the Word of God? Is that Word truly the nourishment we live by, even more than bread and the things of this world? Do we really know that Word? Do we love it? Do we act upon it? Are we deeply engaged with this Word to the point that it really leaves a mark on our lives, shapes our thinking, and motivates and inspires others to act?

### Old and New

The Old Testament never dreamed of requiring the high priest to make himself like his brothers and sisters, but was preoccupied on the contrary with separating him from them. No text ever required that the high priest should be free from all sin. In the Old Testament, an attitude of compassion toward sinners appeared to be incompatible with the priesthood.

Unlike the Levitical priests, the death of Jesus was essential for his priesthood. He is a priest of compassion. His authority attracts us- because of his compassion. Ultimately, Jesus exists for others: he exists to serve. He has been tested in all respects like us -- he knows all of our difficulties; he is a tried man; he knows our condition from the inside and from the outside -- only by this did he acquire a profound capacity for compassion.

The opposite of a priestly person is a consumer: one who buys, amasses, collects things. The priest is one who spends and consumes himself for others. Is it any wonder that vocations to the priesthood face immense challenges in cultures of wealth, abundance, consumption, and excess?

### Can you drink this cup?

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks the enigmatic question: "Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38-40): the metaphor of drinking the cup is used in the Old Testament to refer to acceptance of the destiny assigned by God.

In Jesus' case, this involves divine judgment on sin that Jesus the innocent one is to expiate on behalf of the guilty (Mark 14:24; Isaiah 53:5). His baptism is to be his crucifixion and death for the salvation of the human race. The request of James and John for a share in the glory (Mark 10:35-37) must of necessity involve a share in Jesus' sufferings, the endurance of tribulation and suffering for the gospel (Mark 10:39). The authority of assigning places of honor in the kingdom is reserved to God (Mark 10:40).

Whatever authority is to be exercised by the disciples must, like that of Jesus, be transformed into service to others (Mark 10:45) rather than for personal aggrandizement (Mark 10:42-44). The service of Jesus is his passion and death for the sins of the human race (Mark 10:45).

Today's Gospel passage concludes with one of the most important Gospel sayings that indicates Jesus' messianic mission: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus did not come into the world seeking personal gain, privilege or prestige. Rather, he came for service, and this entailed giving his life up as a ransom.

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The Old Testament never explained how God could "pay a price" for his people. Only in the passion, suffering and death of his only Son does the price become clear. We become capable of salvation only by offering our flesh and blood.

All of the sinfulness and evil in the world around us must be borne on our shoulders and in our own flesh. In this way, we share the pain in our own flesh and bones, making it part of our very selves just as Jesus did. For as St. Paul tells us in his second letter to the Corinthian community: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21).

### Difficult times

As priestly shepherds, we are given a share in arduous and awesome duties in difficult and trying times. We are ordained to gather God's people, to boldly proclaim the Word of the Lord, to baptize, to celebrate the breaking of the Bread, and to constantly give thanks to God for so many gifts.

We are also commissioned to assist those in need and to rouse generosity to the poor. Our ordained ministry demands that we lead by wholehearted example.

Nevertheless we remain unworthy servants, yet sent to do the work of Christ. Who of us can ever be worthy of such a great calling? As human beings, we priests can err, but the priestly gestures we carry out at the altar or in the confessional, are not invalid or ineffective because of our weakness and sinfulness.

God's people and ours are not deprived of divine grace because of our own unworthiness. After all it is Christ who baptizes, celebrates, reconciles and forgives; the priest is only the instrument.

Only if we are servant shepherds who suffer will people be stung by Jesus' call to tend one another, and to wash the feet of the world. Only if we allow our own hearts to be broken over and over again, in joyful service of God's people, will we be effective priests and good shepherds to the Lord's people.

It is this broken, wounded heart that lies at the heart of authentic ministry and shepherding today in the Church. Not a heart broken in a state of despair, but one opened in loving embrace to the world [...] a broken heart that leads to ultimate joy because we have given it all to God and made place for the entire world in our own hearts.

Jesus is the perfect priest who burns, spends and consumes himself gladly for his brothers and sisters; one who lays down his life for others. The suffering servant of the Lord lives in union, communion and sympathy with the entire human family. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, so must it be for us.

Above and beyond eloquent words in homilies and written texts, we must know Christ and love him. Our friendship with him will be contagious to our contemporaries, and others might recognize the Lord's nobility, beauty and greatness through our faces, our smiles, our hands, our feet, our heart and our weaknesses. We cannot forget that people will fall in the love with the Lord in spite of us, and hopefully because of us.

[The readings for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time B are Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrew 4:14-16; and Mark 10:35-45 or 10:42-45]

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