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## **Monasticism, Clericalism, and the Priesthood of All Believers**

**By Abbot Nicholas Zachariadis and Benjamin Mann**

*“In the church, the [consecrated] religious are called to be prophets in particular by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never give up prophecy ... Let us think about what so many great saints, monks and religious men and women have done, from St. Anthony the Abbot onward. Being prophets may sometimes imply making waves.”*

(Pope Francis, La Civiltà Cattolica interview, September 2013)

*“When there is no prophecy among the people, clericalism fills the void.”*

(Pope Francis, daily Mass homily, 12/16/2013)

In an unusual, perhaps surprising turn of events, we now have a Pope who speaks explicitly against clericalism: that is, against the erroneous assumption that the Catholic clergy are spiritually superior to the laity and automatically more important to the Church’s mission.

This development is not wholly novel. Past popes have also known that giving laypersons a second-class status causes paralysis, not healthy order. The opposite of clericalism is not chaos, but responsibility: it means a Church in which all believers take responsibility for learning, living and transmitting the faith.

The backlash against clericalism has spawned false solutions, however. Some laypersons think they should oppose clericalism by taking on priest-like functions, or demanding access to ordination. But this “clericalized” behavior feeds into the very error it opposes.

To overcome clericalism, we must recover some deep truths of faith. Among these truths is the Catholic doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers,” or the “universal priesthood.” Different from the ordained priesthood, but no less important, this is the share in Christ’s priesthood which all the baptized possess.

Aspects of this universal priesthood are already implicit in Christian prayer and practice. But many faithful seemingly do not grasp the importance of the priesthood of all believers, or they lack models for living it.

We need not invent new spiritual models to fill this gap. Christian tradition already contains the resources for understanding and living this universal baptismal priesthood. One resource is the monastic tradition.

For cultural and historical reasons, monasticism has typically not served as a model for lay spirituality in the Christian West, at least in recent centuries. This is a significant loss – especially since monasticism originally developed among laypersons, as a means for living out their baptismal calling to its fullest.

Monasticism is fundamentally a lay movement. Its great founders, like St. Benedict and St. Anthony of Egypt, were not priests, and did not envision communities of priests. The essence of monasticism is not clerical service – which is possible only for some – but a radically converted way of life, available to all.

Many Western Christians see monasticism as remote and inaccessible, very different from ordinary Christian life. Often they associate monasticism with the ordained priesthood – as though ordination were the goal of monastic life, at least for men. Women’s monasticism, meanwhile, is almost off the radar.

All of these impressions are incorrect. Monasticism is a way of life for both men and women. Its goal is not ordination, but the fulfillment of one’s baptismal consecration to God. This is why monasticism can, and should, be a model for the “priesthood of all believers.”

In our Eastern Christian tradition, monastic life is more readily understood as a universal spiritual paradigm – a model of discipleship for all Christians, in any state of life. Not all are called to formal monasticism, but all believers can take lessons and inspiration from this spiritual path.

St. John Paul II noted this in Orientale Lumen, his apostolic letter on the Eastern churches: “... *in the East, monasticism was not seen merely as a separate condition, proper to a precise category of Christians, but rather as a reference point for all the baptized ... a symbolic synthesis of Christianity*” (9).

As representatives of Eastern Catholicism, we believe monastic spirituality can help the laity to live out the priesthood they possess by baptism. This, in turn, can help solve the problem of clericalism in the Church, as laypersons come to understand the holiness and importance of their baptismal calling.

In a deeper sense, too, monasticism is antithetical to the spirit of clericalism which would divide the Church into “superior clergy” and “inferior laity.” Monasticism is profoundly egalitarian: open to both sexes (albeit separately), placing all on the equal footing of humility before God.

Clericalism will not be overcome by shallow or politicized measures, but by a deeper consciousness of our identity in Christ. The monastic tradition offers a means of growing in this awareness – not only for consecrated monastics, but for anyone committed to a shared life of prayer and spiritual discipline.

### **Clericalism and the “clericalization of the laity”**

Though our focus is on this universal application of monastic spirituality, we must begin elsewhere: with a synopsis of clericalism, as well as the false solution that has been called the “clericalization of the lay faithful.”

Clericalism is based on a distortion of certain truths. The ministerial priesthood, conferred by ordination, does convey responsibilities and rights which do not belong to laypersons. The ordained priesthood differs, not just in degree but in kind, from the priesthood of all the baptized (Lumen Gentium, 10).

Nonetheless, Christianity is not a religion centered on the clergy. The baptismal vocation of laypersons is not inferior to the vocation of those ordained. A differentiation of roles in the Church is not a stratification of “important clergy” and “unimportant laity.”

Still, clericalism makes some laypersons feel like spectators – rather than protagonists in salvation history – simply because they are not ordained, and often cannot be ordained, to the ministerial priesthood.

Even consecrated life has suffered from clericalism. Deviating from tradition, medieval Western men’s monasteries became clericalized: divided into “choir monks” chosen for ordination, and lower-ranking “lay brothers” focused on manual labor. This division has long affected the Western Church.

Along with the problem of clericalism, the Church now also faces a misguided backlash against this phenomenon.

Unfortunately, this overreaction to clericalism has not promoted a proper understanding of gifts and vocations within Christ's Body. Instead, we have witnessed power struggles, confusion about the priesthood, and what St. John Paul II called the "clericalization of the lay faithful" (*Christifideles Laici*, 23).

Ironically, the backlash against clericalism often proceeds from the same basis as clericalism itself. Many opponents of clericalism implicitly accept the false premise that ministerial service within the Church – in liturgical, sacramental, and pastoral contexts – signifies superiority and importance.

Rather than rooting out this error, these opponents demand that such ministries be open to laypersons. They desire to take up priestly or priest-like duties – distributing Communion, serving in the sanctuary, or exercising pastoral governance – in order to prove their importance and worth in the Church.

In the worst case, this mindset generates tension between clergy and clericalized laity, who see themselves as competitors for status and influence. Such misunderstandings reach their height in the demand for women's ordination, often framed in terms of "equal dignity" or "equal worth."

Sadly, these protests stem from basic misconceptions: not only about the ordained priesthood, but – more fundamentally – about the source of dignity and worth in the Church, which is found not in ordination but in our common baptism.

Holiness is one single reality, the reality of our transformation in – and into – Christ. By baptism, all are called to this holiness. Yet the Lord desires the differentiation of gifts and roles in his Church: "that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11).

Laypersons should not try to approximate or appropriate the clerical state – either by demands for ordination, or by the "soft clericalism" that demands special roles in the sanctuary and the parish.

Instead, all Church members – clergy and laity – should reflect on the tremendous baptismal calling of all the faithful. Our shared baptismal vocation is a priesthood in its own right, the "priesthood of all believers" in the authentic, Catholic sense.

Though different from the ordained ministry, this priesthood is not inferior. Indeed, it is more fundamental: the whole Church comprises "a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9). This universal priesthood is a participation in the mystery of Christ, who is "priest, prophet, and king" (CCC 783-784).

The consecrated monastic vocation emerged as a way for both men and women to live this universal priesthood. Later developments or distortions notwithstanding, this is still the essence of monasticism.

Furthermore, it is the reason why monasticism can serve as "a reference point for all the baptized." To see how this is possible, we must first examine the priesthood of all believers.

### **The universal priesthood of the baptized**

Though it is an authoritative teaching of the Church, many Catholics seem unaware that there is a universal priesthood of all believers, in which we share because of our baptism into Christ the Eternal High Priest.

This priesthood – like the entire reality of Christ and his Church – is a great mystery. But we can grasp several of its essential aspects. These include *intercession, sacrifice, mediating grace to others, offering creation back to God in thanksgiving, and the contemplative work of “standing before God.”*

Individually, these aspects of the universal priesthood will be more or less familiar. What is lacking is a vision of the whole, connecting these spiritual practices through our participation in Jesus’ priesthood.

Our intercessory prayer is a participation in the priesthood of Christ, “who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34). Hebrews 7 makes this clearer: “[H]e holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (v. 24-25, RSV-CE)

Since the Church prays “in Jesus’ name,” our prayers are joined with that single, definitive divine-human intercession which Christ makes before his Father for the world. Since Christ is both God and man, we pray both to him and, in a sense, with him – in union with this eternal intercession.

Likewise, our sacrificial acts and redemptive sufferings are a participation in Christ’s priesthood. Jesus suffers in the members of his Mystical Body (Acts 9:5); and while his sacrifice alone redeems us, our struggles can sanctify the Church and bring the grace of Christ’s Passion into the world (Col. 1:24).

Similarly, our share in the priesthood of Christ makes us mediators of God’s grace. We become “sacraments” of God’s love: signs which embody the very reality that they signify. Baptized into Christ, we live for others as tangible manifestations of the grace given to us.

Jesus himself is the singular, absolute “sacrament” of God’s love in this sense. But we, in him, are transformed into reality-bearing signs of the same grace. Through our incorporation into Christ the One Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), our presence also becomes a conduit of grace between God and the world.

Another universally-shared aspect of Jesus’ priesthood is the work of thanksgiving: to receive God’s creation as a gift, and to respond by rendering it back to God, with gratitude and rightful use.

In this respect, Jesus – in his incarnate priesthood – succeeds where Adam failed. Creation was made for man’s use and God’s glorification, with the intention that all gifts would be referred and offered up to the divine Giver. But mankind shattered this relationship by transgressing against God’s generosity.

In Christ – and subsequently, his Church – the relationship is restored: creation shows forth its meaning as a sign of God’s grace, and mankind can offer creation back to God. Though it is not among the Seven Sacraments, our grateful reception and blessing of God’s gifts is “sacramental” in this broader sense.

We end our summary of the priesthood of all believers, with the work that St. Edith Stein called “standing before God for all.” Rooted in the Old Testament and Christian mysticism, this is the simple yet profound task of bringing the world into God’s presence, and God’s presence into the world, within oneself.

Because of the original unity and solidarity of the human race (cf. CCC 404), one person’s presence before God brings grace, in some way, to the whole world. All prayer, and especially that prayer which consists in simply “practicing the presence of God,” is implicitly offered “*in behalf of all and for all*” (Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Anaphora).

But what makes this possible? Again, it is the grace of Christ – in whom we are united with one another and with God. Belonging fully to eternity and time, to the world and the Trinity, he makes each present to the other. It is the Eternal Word who first “stands before God for all.” Yet in him, the same work is ours.

## **Monasticism and the universal priesthood**

A deep connection exists between monasticism and the “priesthood of all believers.” In the West, this link was obscured by the later clericalization of men’s monasteries – the ordination of nearly all monks judged capable of priestly service – and by the functional specialization of later, semi-monastic religious orders.

These developments are at variance with the original monastic tradition – which was devoted to prayer, and involved celibacy, but which had no essential connection to the priesthood or any other ordained ministry. Early monks were in fact strongly discouraged from seeking or desiring ordination.

Open equally to both men and women, in a spirit of true Christian egalitarianism, monasticism is not essentially ordered toward the ordained priesthood. But it is very much ordered toward the universal priesthood shared by all believers through their baptism.

Having enumerated some central facets of our common priesthood – its intercessory, sacrificial, mediational, offertory, and contemplative aspects – we can see how this is so. For we find the same elements present in monastic life, only in a more developed and explicit form.

Every Christian can offer intercessory prayer in union with Christ “who indeed intercedes for us.” The intercessory prayer of monks has no more inherent power than that of laypersons; but both derive their strength from our share in Jesus’ priesthood and his divine-human mediation.

Monastics offer intercession regularly, in the daily cycle of services. But any layperson can perform the same work – by praying some of the canonical hours, or simply following a personal prayer rule with an intercessory dimension. Indeed, intercession for others should be part of the laity’s daily prayers.

Through physical asceticism, and especially the discipline of fasting, monks and nuns learn to consecrate the entire experience of human life – including its inevitable struggles and sorrows – to God through Christ. Yet this work, too, belongs just as properly to all the baptized.

The Christian East and West offer fasting traditions which should be robustly revived among Catholics and other Christians. But asceticism is not an end in itself, either for laypersons or monastics: through it, we share in Christ’s priesthood, by entering into his solidarity with the sufferings of all humanity.

It is said that consecrated religious men and women are “signs of grace” in the world. This is more deeply true than some realize: for they should be “signs” in the sacramental sense, encapsulating and transmitting the reality they signify. Yet we must not think this task belongs only to consecrated religious.

Every Christian is, by baptismal adoption, a “son of God” (CCC 460, 654, 2782). Thus, all believers – not only consecrated religious – ought to be, like the eternal Son of God, a “light to the nations” and a channel of grace between God and mankind. Christian life and social activism should be rooted in this awareness of our status as channels of grace.

The material simplicity of monastic life has an ascetical purpose; yet it is also oriented toward the original “offertory” purpose of creation, in which we receive all things as gifts from God and offer them back to him in gratitude. Simplicity reminds us that all things are gifts, to be received with appreciation.

Non-monastic laity share equally in this sacred task. By cultivating a measure of monastic simplicity in their lives, all believers can participate more deeply in Jesus’ incarnate priestly work of receiving and blessing creation. Every gift of God can be received and offered back, in a “sacramental” spirit.

Even the contemplative work of “standing before God for all” – bringing the world into the Lord’s presence, and vice versa, within oneself – is not limited to a particular group or class of Christians. It is an aspect of Christ’s priesthood which he shares with all members of his Mystical Body.

The essence of inward prayer is simply being present to God, opening ourselves to his transcendent love. Yet one cannot really do this without including, in some way, the whole of humanity in the same act. All true prayer is prayer for all: even a simple prayer – such as “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*” – includes all people, in all times and places, when offered “in spirit and truth.”

To intercede with God in prayer; to be a mediator of grace, and a “living sacrifice”; to receive and offer up creation as a sacramental gift, and to “stand before God for all”: these tasks belong to monks and nuns, but also to all believers. They are priestly works, but not the privilege of a particular subgroup. They are the extraordinary, grace-filled, eternally-consequential tasks of the ordinary, everyday Christian life.

Monasticism offers a structure in which those works – the works of the universal priesthood – are the main substance of life. Yet such a life is always possible – for all who, in baptism, “have put on Christ.” (Gal. 3:27). This is how monasticism serves as a model for the priesthood of all believers.

### **Overcoming clericalism, appreciating baptism**

Lived out on a Church-wide scale, this spirituality of the universal priesthood would render clericalism obsolete.

Clericalism is, above all, a diminution of baptism and an over-valuing of ordained ministry. The answer to clericalism is not in “clericalization of the laity,” or struggles about who may be ordained. Without diminishing the ordained priesthood, we must take a higher view of baptism.

Sharing actively in Christ’s priesthood, as well as his royal anointing and prophetic office, laypersons would feel no need for special, quasi-clerical tasks within their parishes. Nor would they be inclined – alternatively – to rest in complacency, letting priests and bishops do the spiritual “heavy lifting”

As a “reference point for all the baptized,” monasticism offers the means for a true, spiritual empowerment of the laity: not a usurpation of ministerial duties, but a growth toward “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

The Church needs men and women who will follow God’s call to formal, consecrated monastic life. But the Church also needs those who, without renouncing property or marriage, will look to the monasteries for inspiration in living as baptized members of Christ, participants in the mystery of his priesthood.

Monks and nuns are not a special, elite class of Christians. Fundamentally, they are baptized believers who have renounced certain natural goods to pursue the supernatural end to which all people are called: union with God, and with one another, in Christ.

Their vocation, in that sense, is simply the one Christian vocation – the universal human call that went out from the Upper Room at Pentecost:

*“In practice ... there is only one vocation. Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in [consecrated life] or out of it, married or single, no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life, perhaps even to*

*mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others. And if you cannot do so by word, then by example.” (Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain)*

**About the authors:**

**Archimandrite Nicholas Zachariadis is the founding abbot of Holy Resurrection Monastery, an Eastern Catholic monastery in Saint Nazianz, Wisconsin.**

**Benjamin Mann, a former journalist, is currently in the process of joining Holy Resurrection Monastery.**