

**REFLECTION AT MORNING PRAYER BY
ARCHBISHOP DERMOT CLIFFORD OF CASHEL**

There is only one priest; all are priests, some men are priests
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I realise that it is a bit too early in the day for riddles, puzzles or conundrums! But, let me give you a clue: Pope Benedict said at the Chrism Mass in 2009, *“There is only one priest of the New Covenant”*. The Chrism Mass, now that I mention it, is an ideal place to discover the theology of the priesthood. Not only that, but the liturgy illustrates that theology in action in all the Cathedrals of the world on Holy Thursday. The priesthood is the main theme of the Mass. The Preface gives the answer to the puzzle as follows:

“Lord Holy Father, Almighty and Eternal God..., by the anointing of the Holy Spirit you made your Only Begotten Son High Priest of the new and eternal covenant, and by your wondrous design were pleased to decree that this one Priesthood should continue in the Church. For Christ not only adorns with a royal priesthood the people he has made his own, but with a brother’s kindness he also chooses men to become sharers in his sacred ministry through the laying on of hands”.

Christ the High Priest shares the one priesthood with all the baptised, the priesthood of the lay faithful, as it is known. Christ also shares his priesthood through the Sacrament of Holy Orders with bishops, priests and deacons.

The Chrism Mass is also a very expressive manifestation of the Church. The Vatican Council describes this ideal as consisting, *“in the full, active participation of all God’s holy people in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in a single prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides surrounded by his college of priests and deacons”*. The diocese is the Church in miniature. The Holy Thursday liturgy in the Cathedral comes very close to this ideal. Here we have the bishop, head of the local church, surrounded by priests, religious and lay people from all the parishes of his diocese. The bishop concelebrates Mass with his priests as a sign of unity and fellowship.

The Oils are blessed for the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Sacrament of the Sick to be conferred on their people by the priests and deacons. When the priests renew their commitment to service, the bishop asks the lay faithful to pray for their priests and for their bishop. As a visible expression of communion within the diocese this is almost unique.

Holy Thursday is the birthday of the Priesthood. The birthplace is the Upper Room, the occasion of its birth, the Last Supper. At the Last Supper Jesus instituted the Eucharist when he consecrated the bread and wine. He added immediately, *“Do this in memory of me”* (Lk: 22,19). In St. Paul’s account the words are *“Do this as a memorial of me”* (1, Co. 11,24)

Pope John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia, On the Eucharist and its Relationship with Church*: *“The Eucharist is the principal and central raison d’être of the sacrament of the priesthood, which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist.”*

Priesthood is not to be undertaken purely as a personal honour. At his ordination the bishop is instructed: *“The title of bishop is one not of honour but of function and therefore a bishop should strive to serve rather than rule.”* The purpose is the service of the faithful, to enable them to exercise their own special priesthood.

The ordained priesthood is, *“unique, indispensable and irreplaceable”* in the words of Pope John Paul II. Vatican II states that, *“No Christian community can be built up unless it has as its basis and centre the celebration of the Eucharist”*. It belongs to bishops and priests to preside at the altar, and to offer the sacrifice of the Mass. But the Eucharist has to be at the centre of the life of all members in the Church. There is a beautiful balance here. On one hand, it is through the grace of the Eucharist – Christ’s ultimate expression of love – that the Church is made present. And on the other hand, it is through the priestly ministry of the Church that the Eucharist is made present. Each has been entrusted to the other, so to speak, by Christ; *“the Church (makes) the Eucharist, but the Eucharist also (makes) the Church”*, as Henry de Lubac put it.

The bishop and priests are challenged to live lives worthy of their high offices as the Preface continues:

*“As they give up their lives for you
And for the salvation of their
Brothers and sisters,
They strive to be conformed
To the image of Christ himself
And offer you a constant witness
of faith and love.”*

It is no accident, of course, that the word “communion” is the same word we use for the sacrament of the Eucharist...Christianity is an invitation to share in the communion of the Holy Trinity and to live in communion with one another, nourished by the Bread of Life. And both senses of the word “communion” are fundamentally about *love...love of Christ, love of one another*. The response to the psalm at the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday repeated by the choir kept coming back to mind for days afterwards: *“The blessing cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ”*, (1, Cor. 10,16). Come to think of it, that is what the response is meant to do – to linger!

In our country at this time, priests are under a good deal of pressure. The abuse scandals weigh heavily on them, most of them are no longer young, their numbers are decreasing with no young priests in prospect. But some of their loyal flocks are aware of this. They are not found wanting in their support for their shepherds. A touching example comes from the hills of Pakistan. When a shepherd collapses in the very high temperature, the sheep form a cluster around him to assist his recovery. An extraordinary protective instinct indeed! The priest under pressure today receives similar support from members of his loyal flock.

For bishops, priests and the lay faithful, *“the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life”* as Vatican II teaches. Blessed Columba Marmion wrote that our lives as priests should be “a prolongation of the Mass”. *“In this way”*, said Pope John Paul II, *“priests will be able to concentrate the daily tensions which lead to a lack of focus and they will find in Eucharistic Sacrifice – the true centre of their lives and ministry - the spiritual strength to deal with their pastoral responsibilities. Their daily activity will thus become truly Eucharistic”*.

The Congress Prayer gathers us all, bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful as companions of the Lord on our journey. The word *“companion”* comes from the two Latin words, *“cum”* and *“panis”* – Christ is the one who shares the Bread of Life with us. I will conclude with one verse:

“May your Holy Spirit inflame our hearts,

*Enliven our hope and open our minds,
So that together with our sisters and brothers in faith
We may recognise you in the Scriptures
and in the breaking of bread.
May your Holy Spirit transform us into one body
And lead us to walk humbly on the earth,
In justice and love,
as witnesses of your resurrection.”*