

The Wisdom of Rev. Michael J. Buckley, S.J. The Downward Path

Father Buckley addressed a community of priests in training on the occasion of the completion of their work at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. He posed a very fundamental question and yet one at variance to the conventional wisdom of our day. He asked his young colleagues, not if they were strong enough for their vocation, but if they were weak enough. Listen with wonder as his audience must have at that time.

A Letter to the Ordinands

My Brothers,

As your ordination approaches, I find myself reflecting upon the priestly future of your existence, the deep mystery to which we are called, which catches up your whole lives. We have been together now for three years. We came to the theologate together. We began at Berkeley together. And now you are to be priests. There is a practice among us Americans, common and obvious enough, in estimating a man's aptitude for a profession and a career. You list his strengths. Peter is a good speaker, possesses an able mind, exhibits genuine talent for leadership and debate. He would make an excellent lawyer. Steve has good judgment, a scientific bent, obvious manual dexterity and human concerns. He would make a splendid surgeon.

Now the tendency is to transfer this method of evaluation to the priesthood, to line up all the pluses -- socially adept, intellectually perceptive, characterized by interior integrity, sound common sense and habits of prayer -- and to judge that such a man would make a fine priest.

I think this transfer is disastrous. There is a further pressing question, one proper to the priesthood, if not uniquely proper to it: Is this man weak enough to be a priest? Let me spell out what I mean. Is this man deficient enough so that he can't ward off significant suffering from his life, so that he lives with a certain amount of failure, so that he feels what it is to be an average man? Because it is in this deficiency, in this interior lack, in this weakness, maintains Hebrews that the efficacy of the ministry and priesthood of Christ lies.

"For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted...For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we, but without sinning... He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since He Himself is beset with weakness."

How terribly important for us Jesuits to enter into the seriousness of this revelation, of this conjunction between priesthood and weakness, that we dwell upon deficiency as part of our vocation. Otherwise we can secularize our lives into an amalgam of desires and talents, and we can feel our weakness as a threat to our priesthood, as indicative that we should rethink, as symptomatic that we were never genuinely called, that the resources are not ours to complete what we once thought was our destiny and which spoke to our generosity and fidelity.

What do I mean by weakness? Not the experience or sin, though it may contextualize sin, but the experience of a peculiar liability to suffering. A profound sense of inability, both to do and protect even after great effort, to author, perform, effect what we have wanted or with the success we would have wanted, an inability to secure one's own future, to protect oneself, to live with clarity and assurance or to ward off shame and suffering.

If one is clever enough or devious enough, or poised enough, he can limit his horizons and expectations, and accomplish pretty much what he would want. He can secure his perimeters and live without a sense of failure or inadequacy or shame before what might have been. But if you cannot---either because of your history or your temperament or your situation---then you experience weakness at the heart of your lives. And this experience, rather than militate against your priesthood, is part of its essential structure.

There is a classic comparison, my Brothers, running through contemporary philosophy between Socrates and Christ, a judgment between them in human excellence. Socrates went to his death with calmness and poise. He accepted the judgment of the court, discoursed on the two alternatives suggested by death and on the dialectical indications of immortality; found no cause for fear; drank the poison and died.

Jesus---how much the contrary. Jesus was almost hysterical with terror and fear; looked for comfort from friends and an escape from death and found neither; finally got control over himself and accepted his death in silence and lonely isolation. I once thought this was because they died a different sort of death. But now I think that this hypothesis, though correct, is secondary.

Now I believe that Jesus was a more profoundly weak man than Socrates. Socrates never wept over Athens. Socrates never expressed sorrow and pain at the betrayal of friends. He was possessed and integral, never over-extended, convinced that the just man could never suffer genuine hurt. And for this reason, Socrates--- one of the greatest men who has ever existed, a paradigm of what humanity can achieve within the individual--- Socrates was a philosopher. And for these same reasons, Jesus of Nazareth was a priest, ambiguous, suffering, mysterious and salvific.

So also us, my Brothers, so also us. The priest must also be liable to suffering, weak as a man because he must become like what he touches---the body of Christ. Obviously the ordinary Catholic so understands the priest primarily or imaginatively through the Eucharist within the Church. And what is the Eucharist?--- The body of Christ, certainly, but how understood? Psychologists tell us that a man understands himself in terms of his spontaneous body-image; what he feels about his body and its worth is what he feels about himself.

And how did Christ understand this, his body? A body which was broken for us; a blood which was shed for us; a sacrificed self, effective only through its destruction. What is more, in our ritual the Eucharist only achieves its graced entrance into our lives if broken and distributed to men. Thus it is the liability of Christ to suffering, his ability to be broken and shed, that both makes his priesthood effective and his Eucharist possible. How paradoxical this mystery is: The strength of our priesthood lies precisely in and through the weakness of our humanity.

Why? For two reasons, I think. Weakness relates us profoundly with men; it allows us to feel with them the human condition, the human struggle and darkness and anguish which calls out for salvation. Further, weakness relates us profoundly and apostolically with God, because it provides the arena in which his power can move and reveal itself: His power is made manifest in weakness. And so Paul: "I will all the more gladly glory in my weakness, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak; then I am strong." (2 Cor 12: 9-10)

There is a collective consequence which follows from all of this. Our Jesuit communities must make such a life possible; we must support one another in weakness, forgiving one another daily faults and carrying one another's burdens. It is absurd to maintain weakness as part of the essential priestly vocation and then to belittle those who are deficient or to resent those who are insensitive and clumsy or to allow disagreements to become hostilities or to continue battles and angers because of personal feelings.

The commandment and judgment upon our lives is that we should love one another as He loved us. He cared---out of his weakness came our weakness, and so became the Eucharist. This is the foundation of our lives together, the deep mystery of our mutual priestly presence, and so let us always be reconciled with one another. May God grace you in the priestly lives which lie before you. "For He is not weak in dealing with you. He is powerful in you. For He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in Him, but in dealing with you we shall live with Him by the power of God." (2 Cor. 13:3-4)

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Have we ever kept quiet, even though we wanted to defend ourselves when we had been unfairly treated? Have we ever forgiven some one even though we got no thanks...? Have we ever been absolutely lonely...? Have we ever tried to love God when we are no longer being borne on the crest of the wave of enthusiastic feeling...? Let us search ... in our life... If we find such experiences, then we have experienced the Spirit in the way meant here. For the experience meant here is the Experience of eternity...

...Karl Rahner