

# Anglican Reflections: What About Priests?



The New Testament uses the words *episkopos* (“bishop”) and *presbyteros* (“elder”) to refer to those who exercised office in the church, along with *diakonos* (deacon). It uses the word *hiereus*, equivalent to English “priest” or Latin *sacerdos* to refer to Old Testament and Jewish priests (Matt.8:4; John 12:51, Acts 5:27, Heb. 7:14), to the High Priesthood of Jesus (Heb. 4:14), and to the priesthood of the entire church as the people of God (1 Peter 2:9, Rev. 20:6). The New Testament never uses the word *hiereus* to refer to persons who hold office in the church.

Nonetheless, Anglicans have continued to use the word “priest” to refer to those who hold the office of *presbyter*, to the consternation of some. Richard Hooker wrote that he preferred the word “presbyter” to “priest” because he would prefer not to offend those who are troubled by the word. The Anglican Reformers rejected the notion of eucharistic sacrifice, and so rejected any notion of priesthood that implied sacrifice. As Richard Hooker asked, “Seeing then that sacrifice is now no part of the church ministry how should the name of Priesthood be thereunto rightly applied?” Hooker believed that the term “priest” was permissible in reference to one “whose mere function or charge is the service of God,” and specifically in reference to the celebration of the eucharist: “The Fathers of

the Church of Christ with like security of speech call usually the ministry of the Gospel Priesthood in regard of that which the Gospel hath proportionable to ancient sacrifices, namely the Communion of the blessed Body and Blood of Christ, although it have properly now no sacrifice." In the end, Hooker did not think the word itself is very important: "Wherefore to pass by the name, let them use what dialect they will, whether we call it a Priesthood, a Presbytership, or a Ministry it skilleth not: Although in truth the word Presbyter doth seem more fit, and in propriety of speech more agreeable than Priest with the drift of the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ." (Laws 5.58.2-3.)

There are two key aspects of ordained ministry that touch more directly on the "priestly" aspect of ordination in Anglican tradition than the use of the word "priest" as equivalent to "presbyter."

First is the "office of the keys," and specifically, the sacramental rite of "confession" or "Reconciliation of a Penitent" (1979 BCP). The Anglican Reformers did not adopt either the more radical Reformation view that individual confession of sin should be to God alone nor the Tridentine Catholic view that confession to a priest was mandatory. Rather (in a manner similar to Lutheran practice), they retained the possibility of non-obligatory individual confession to a priest. The 1549 and 1552 Eucharistic rites include an invitation to private confession:

*And because it is requisite that no man should come to the holy Communion but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience: therefore if there be any of you which by the means afore said cannot quiet his own conscience, but requireth further comfort or counsel; then let him come to me, or some other discreet and learned minister of God's word, and open his grief, that he may receive such ghostly counsel, advice, and comfort, as his conscience may be*

*relieved; and that by the ministry of God's word he may receive comfort and the benefit of absolution, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness. (1552 BCP)*

Cranmer's catechism recommends private confession as does *The Second Book of Homilies*. John Jewel's *Apology of the Church of England* refers to the "power of the keys" and Jewel suggested that private confession was a matter of individual conscience. Several of the Caroline Divines recommended private confession. Cranmer's exhortation was retained in the 1662 BCP. The standard *Prayer Books* and Ordinal continued to retrain both the use of the word "priest" and proclamations of absolution of sin.<sup>1</sup>

The second "priestly" aspect of ordination concerns eucharistic sacrifice. By the end of the second century, writers like the author of *The Didache*, Clement, Justin Martyr, and Hippolytus were already referring to the eucharist as (in some sense) a sacrifice. Later writers like John Chrysostom would insist on the oneness of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the eucharistic sacrifice. The church does not offer a new sacrifice, but an *anamnesis* of Christ's one sacrifice.

Medieval theologians wrote much more about "real presence" than they did on the subject of eucharistic sacrifice. Medieval theologians did agree that the "once for all" nature of Christ's passion meant that his sacrifice could not be repeated. Thomas Aquinas wrote that Christ's passion was a "true sacrifice" because "Christ by his suffering made perfect sacrifice for our sins" (ST 3.48.2). Thomas stated that the eucharist does not offer a different sacrifice than the one offered on the cross: "There is one sacrifice." (ST 3.83.2). The eucharist does have the nature of a sacrifice inasmuch as it makes Christ's passion present (ST. 3.79.3). The eucharist is a "re-presentation" of Christ's passion (ST 3.83.3). Thomas

makes clear that what takes place in the eucharist is not a repetition of what Christ did on the cross.<sup>2</sup>

Whether they understood or correctly represented the patristic and Medieval position, the Reformers uniformly rejected the notion of eucharistic sacrifice. Martin Luther insisted that since Christ's sacrifice on the cross was sufficient, and only Christ himself could offer himself as a sacrifice, that sacrifice could not be repeated. Therefore, there could be no repetition of Christ's sacrifice in the mass, and so no eucharistic sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

John Calvin insisted that there was no longer any human priesthood (as in the Old Testament) because Christ alone is now the only priest. To speak of a eucharistic sacrifice is to rob Christ of his eternal priesthood by claiming to do his work. The doctrine of eucharistic sacrifice presumes that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross was not sufficient. Calvin rejected Roman Catholic arguments that the eucharistic sacrifice was not a "re-sacrifice" by simply re-affirming that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was "once for all" and not repeatable.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Cranmer's position on eucharistic sacrifice was in line with the Reformers.<sup>5</sup> Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross cannot be repeated and so there is no eucharistic sacrifice. Cranmer's eucharistic prayer affirms:

*O God heavenly Father, which of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesu Christ, to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption, who made there (by his one oblation, once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world, and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to celebrate, a perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again . . .*

The only reference to eucharistic sacrifice in Cranmer's rite is not to a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice, but to our grateful response – "rendering unto thee most hearty thanks, for the innumerable benefits procured unto us by the same, entirely desiring thy fatherly goodness, mercifully to accept this our Sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving."

The 39 Articles repeat this understanding:

*The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone. Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses, in the which it was commonly said, that the Priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables, and dangerous deceits. (Art.31)*

The first sentence is compatible with the traditional Catholic position of someone like Thomas Aquinas, but the concluding sentence clearly repudiates any notion of eucharistic sacrifice. Confusingly, the reference to "sacrifices" (plural), presumes that the Catholic position is that each eucharist is a distinct sacrifice, but this is contrary to the historic Catholic position, represented by someone like Thomas Aquinas, that the once-for-all nature of Christ's sacrifice on the cross is not repeatable, and that there is only one sacrifice. The historic Catholic position is that the eucharist is not a repetition of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, but a re-presentation or making present of that once-for-all sacrifice. In referring to "sacrifices," Art. 31 repudiates a position that historic orthodox Catholic theology would not seem to hold.

The logic of a Catholic thinker like Thomas Aquinas would be:

1) The once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross is complete and sufficient, and therefore is not repeatable.

2) Because the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is not repeatable (see 1), the eucharist *cannot be a repetition* of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, but must instead be a representation or making present of that one sufficient once-for-all sacrifice.

The Reformers' logic would be as follows:

1) The once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross is complete and sufficient, and therefore is not repeatable.

2) Because the sacrifice of the cross is not repeatable (see 1), and a eucharistic sacrifice *would be a repetition* of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, the eucharist is not a sacrifice.

This would seem to be a rather blatant case of talking past one another.

At the same time, there are ambiguities in Cranmer's eucharistic rite that left the door open to later Anglican affirmations of eucharistic sacrifice. The 1662 BCP directs that bread and wine be placed upon the table without any words accompanying the action. Kenneth Stevenson points out that this can be interpreted either "functionally" or "functionally-symbolically."<sup>6</sup> In the eucharistic prayer, immediately after Christ's death is described as a "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world," the eucharist is described as a "perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again."

Caroline Divine Lancelot Andrewes, in his apologetic against Roman Catholic theologian Robert Bellarmine, stated:

*Our men believe that the eucharist was instituted by the Lord for a memorial of Himself, even of His sacrifice, and, if I be lawful so to speak, to be a commemorative sacrifice, not only to be a sacrament and for spiritual nourishment. . .*

*.The sacrifice which is there is Eucharistic, of which sacrifice the law is that he who offers is to partake of it, and that he partake by receiving and eating, as the Saviour ordered.<sup>7</sup>*

The writers of the Oxford Movement often understood eucharistic sacrifice as the offering that the risen Christ makes perpetually before his Father in heaven. Christ offers ceaselessly in heaven that sacrifice that he made once-for-all upon the cross. The church's eucharist is the earthly type of this heavenly offering. In John Keble's *Eucharistic Adoration*, he states:

*For the true oblation in the Eucharist is not the Bread and Wine, that is only as the vessel which contains or the garment which veils it; but that which our Lord by the hands of the priest offers to His Father in the holy Eucharist, is His own Body and Blood, the very same which He offers and presents to Him, with which, as S. Paul says, He appears before Him now, night and day continually in heaven, in commemoration of His having offered it once for all in His Passion and Death on the Cross. It is the one great reality, summing up in itself all the memorial sacrifices of old.<sup>8</sup>*

In their response to Pope Leo XIII's Bull *Apostolicae Curae* (1896) which declared Anglican orders "utterly null and void" because of the ordinal's lack of reference to eucharistic sacrifice, the Archbishops of York and Canterbury stated:

*[W]e make provision with the greatest reverence for the consecration of the holy Eucharist and commit it only to properly ordained Priests and to no other ministers of the Church. Further we truly teach the doctrine of Eucharistic sacrifice and do not believe it to be a "nude commemoration of the Sacrifice of the Cross," an opinion which seems to be attributed to us by the quotation made from that Council. But*

*we think it sufficient in the Liturgy which we use in celebrating the holy Eucharist,—while lifting up our hearts to the Lord, and when now consecrating the gifts already offered that they may become to us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ,—to signify the sacrifice which is offered at that point of the service in such terms as these. We continue a perpetual memory of the precious death of Christ, who is our Advocate with the Father and the propitiation for our sins, according to His precept, until His coming again. For first we offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; then next we plead and represent before the Father the sacrifice of the cross, and by it we confidently entreat remission of sins and all other benefits of the Lord's Passion for all the whole Church; and lastly we offer the sacrifice of ourselves to the Creator of all things which we have already signified by the oblations of His creatures. This whole action, in which the people has necessarily to take its part with the Priest, we are accustomed to call the Eucharistic sacrifice.<sup>9</sup>*

Finally, modern ecumenical discussion has led to a more or less agreed understanding of eucharistic sacrifice built on a greater appreciation for the notion of *anamnesis*, not as mere memory, but as “re-collection.” ARCIC, the agreed statement between Roman Catholics and Anglicans, states:

*The notion of memorial as understood in the passover celebration at the time of Christ, i.e. the making effective in the present of an event in the past, has opened the way to a clearer understanding of the relationship between Christ's sacrifice and the eucharist. The eucharistic memorial is no mere calling to mind of a past event or of its significance, but the church's effectual proclamation of God's mighty acts. Christ instituted the eucharist as a memorial (anamnesis) of the totality of God's reconciling action in him. In the eucharistic prayer the church continues to make a perpetual*



*memorial of Christ's death, and his members, united with God and one another, give thanks for all his mercies, entreat the benefits of his passion on behalf of the whole church, participate in these benefits and enter into the movement of his self-offering.*<sup>10</sup>

The above makes clear that there have been at least three senses in which Anglicans have been willing to speak of ordained clergy as “priests.” First, “priest” is understood to be the English equivalent of the New Testament “presbyter.” Second, unlike some other Reformation churches, the Church of England understood the notion of the “keys” to include the authority of ordained clergy to pronounce absolution, and thus, from the beginning, the *Prayer Book* tradition allows for the possibility of private confession. Third, although controversial, the notion of eucharistic sacrifice has been retained in an at least modified sense, understood not as a repetition of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, but as both a “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,” and also as a “perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again.” At the same time, while being clear that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is a sufficient once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world, and cannot be repeated, many Anglicans have been willing to speak of eucharistic sacrifice not in the sense of a “repetition” of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice, but as a “re-presentation,” or a “making present” of Christ’s sacrificial offering, made once-for-all on the cross, and now continually offered by the risen Christ to God the Father (Heb. 9:24).

1 Church of England Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod, *The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry* (London: Church House, 1986), 45-50.

2 George Hunsinger. *The Eucharist and Ecumenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 111-117.

3 Hunsinger, 100-104.

4 Hunsinger, 105-109.

5 On the Anglican Reformers and eucharistic sacrifice, see *The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry*, 50-60, H.R. McAdoo and Kenneth Stevenson. *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 112-117.

6 Stevenson, 112.

7 Cited by Stevenson, 126. Stevenson includes numerous citations of Anglican divines who affirm a notion of eucharistic sacrifice going beyond a “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,” despite the apparently clear stance of the 39 Articles. Andrewes is a typical example.

8 *On Eucharistical Devotion*, 1870; cited *The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry*, 70.

9 *Answer of the Archbishops of England to the Apostolic Letter of Pope Leo XIII [Saepius Officio] Addressed to the whole body of Bishops of the Catholic Church*; cited *Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry*, 76.

10 Anglican – Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission, “Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine 1971”; [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/eucharistic\\_doctrine1971.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/eucharistic_doctrine1971.cfm).