

So you want to be a priest, then?

Colleagues,

First off, some facts and figures:

1. Twenty-five of you sent generous donations for getting us ThTh honchos to the Aarhus Conference next week on the Future of Lutheran Theology. The 2K total you contributed covers most of the airfare. For that we are grateful.
2. Year-end statistics for the Crossings Web-page in 2002: Average hits per day 1,044. Average page requests per day 853. Total page requests 308,029. Distinct computers served 58,326 in 105 different countries or islands outside the continental USA.

I continue to shake my head at these statistics, but Crossings webmaster Tom Law says they are true. What hath God wrought? Even though the service is free, the high-tech that makes it happen is not. In order for us to keep on keeping on, you know what to do. Here's the address: Crossings, Box 7011, St. Louis MO, 63006-7011.

Now to the main topic.

With our departure for the Aarhus Conference just days away –and a week's worth thereafter with Lutheran seminary folk in St. Petersburg, Russia—my plate is full. So this week's ThTh, though confected today, does double duty. Minutes ago it went “downunder” to an Anglican cleric in New Zealand. Call him Bryan, which is close to his real name. Bryan and I met in Rome in 1988 when we were billeted together at the Int'l Ass'n for Mission Studies conference. He's an evangelical Anglican, with a

Ph.D. from Oxford (I think). One of his major mentors there was Alistair McGrath, a Gospel-superstar of our age. We've kept in touch on the cyber-circuit. When Marie and I were traipsing home from our stint in Bali (1999), we crashed with Bryan and family in Melbourne, his pastoral locale then.

He sent me recently a 10-pager and asked for my opinion. It was "put together for the Bishops Commission" and titled: SO YOU WANT TO BE A PRIEST, THEN? SIX THESES AND SOME THOUGHTS ON PRIESTHOOD, ITS MEANING AND DIRECTION TODAY. Even though I'm not sending along his 10 pages, you'll deduce much of it from my responses. And even if you cannot, the responses—so says my editor—make sense (mostly) on their own. You will have to judge if that's really the case or not,

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Dear Bryan,

You ask for my thought on your ten-page piece. Here they are.

- 1. You have woven an entire systematic theology into these six theses and their explications. Has that large-scale systematics frightened away the intended clientele—those thinking about priesthood—or nurtured them? What sort of response have you gotten?*
- 2. Even with one reference to Blessed Martin of Wittenberg that I found in your screed, it's a forcefully Anglican piece. One signal thereof, methinks, is the grace-alone center with little reference to faith, let alone faith-alone. Not that the Luth. heritage ignores grace alone, but Luther's argument with the medieval establishment was*

on faith-alone, not really grace-alone. For my Lutheran take on coaxing folks for pastoral callings that would be front and center. Both in the overarching systematic theological blueprint, as well as in the counsel for the clerically curious.

3. No surprise, your constant designation for the pastoral calling is PRIEST. Which raises some thoughts. It is not only my Luth. penchant that then wonders about your key term “priest” throughout your piece for the leader in the Christian community. Or does your Anglican ethos make use of that term de rigueur? You’ve doubtless heard the data. 672 references in the OT to Levitical (et al.) priests and almost zero such references in the NT documents for the player-coach leaders in the Christian community. E.g., again no such reference in Paul’s list of Christ’s human “gifts to the church” (Eph. 4) and those few refs in Hebrews and Revelation that do link priesthood with Christ-followers are all and always to the whole mob of believers, and never to some baptized-brand of Levitical leader. To say nothing of the upside-down apple-cart turnover on priesthood occasioned by Christ himself and specked out in Hebrews. E.g., OT priests offered alien living organisms on their altars, THIS ONE put himself on the altar. That’s not just a novelty. That’s the undoing of mediatorial priesting, isn’t it? Doesn’t that make human-priesting passe? I think so. Why else such absence of the term for community leaders in NT texts? And even though you strive to de-hierarchialize the term, the levitical mindset—not only among religious folks, but even among our dear secular worldlings—makes that a lost cause, I think. I wonder if that levitical mindset might just be a signal of the Old Adam’s “opinio legis” [legalist opinion] in all of us. All of which makes me ask: why should we want to stick with it and/or even

rehab it?

4. To your six parts.

1. "THE PRIEST IS A PERSON OF PRAYER"

"Standing before God with the mind in the heart" is winsome as words for Christian prayer. You grant that prayer is gift for all, but your specs for the "priestly vocation . . . set apart [for] deliberate and careful nurturing of this gift," stretch me beyond where I sense the NT stuff on prayer commends me to go. Perhaps that is inevitable when an Augsburg Catholic and a Book-of-Common-Prayer [BCP] Catholic talk shop.

2. "THE PRIEST IS A PERSON OF WORSHIP"

From that Augsburg heritage comes this claim: "Faith itself is the highest worship of God." That is not all that can be said. But it is fundamental, seems to me, for whatever else gets said. I enjoy many of your bons mots about current culture and your gem about "transcendence transcended" when Chrsitleaves transcendence behind and becomes one of us earthlings. Yet I'm cautious about using transcendence talk at all—not just in these post-modern (?) days, but throughout our theological history. Seems to me that Blessed Martin's juxtaposition of *theologia gloriae* to *theologia crucis* (stolen from Paul in I Cor, 1) is a caveat contra all concern with transcendence for Christians—even in addressing the Enlightenment's alleged declaration of the death of transcendence. But that's a whole other agenda.

3. "THE PRIEST AS PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST"

I was frankly jolted when after this heading you go immediately to the Great Commission and

then—horrible dictu!— to the “two commandments [of the LAW]” to articulate this Gospel-role for the priest. If there is one thing that macerates Gospel proclamation in most liturgies I attend (not all of them Lutheran) is that so often the preacher hasn’t a clue about what “gospel” is. Simple test that preachers so frequently fail is: Does the crucified and risen Christ get “used” to get the hearers to whatever goal the sermon claims to have? If as happens so frightfully frequently, said crucified and risen Messiah never even gets mentioned—it has been known to occur—over and over and over again—then said parson was not a PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. And your immediate move to the two “great” commandments, no surprise, gives me pause. To put it in a thesis: “The Gospel of Jesus Christ is NOT the twin commandments to love God and to love neighbor.” It is something else—and I know you know this, that McGrath taught it to you. But why then didn’t you say so? The Gospel of Jesus Christ is (as one early witness claimed) “God in Christ reconciling the world, not counting our trespasses against us [as God does when we seek, but never succeed, to fulfill those two commandments as our format for faith], but instead making him to be sin for us, so that we might become the very righteousness of God.” This “sweet swap” is both Good and New (therefore Good News) *via-a-vis* the two commandments. It replaces those two as our link with the deity. It’s an offer (not a requirement as those 2 mandates are) and it only calls for the offeree to TRUST it. Call it faith-alone.

When you devote most of this section to Mission, I

ask: Isn't this cart-before-the-horse? Before you clarify MISSION for the PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, don't you need to help her to clarity about the Good News of the Great Commissioner himself? If not, what we get (and such sermonizers are legion) noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

4. "THE PRIEST AS DISCIPLE WHO DISCIPLES THE PEOPLE OF GOD"

Your words on servant-posture for a priest's authority role is great. My Lutheran bones long for more "faith-in-Christ" as the mark of the disciple and the goal of any disciple called to disciple anybody else. If not Paul, then Evangelist John for sure, makes that the sine qua non for discipleship: "that you might believe, and that believing you might HAVE the Life that is in His name." Luther is often linked mostly with Paul in seeing faith as "fiducia" [trust]. But he is just as much Johannine in his constant talk about faith as possession, having something you didn't have before, finally "having" Christ [Christum habere] which is borrowed straight from St. John.

5. "THE PRIEST AS MIDWIFE OF THE GOSPEL"

Your motherly/feminine images are wholesome. They come off largely as formal categories as you use them, don't they? Signalling the shape of the priest's posture in the execution of her calling. If the formal category, the "shape" of priestly ministry, is MIDWIFE OF THE GOSPEL, then I ask: Is there something midwifely about the substance, the Good News itself? E.g., God groaning in childbirth to bring off our salvation, as pictured in the first Suffering. Servant poem of Isaiah 42. That

used to be the OT lesson for this coming Sunday, the First after the Epiphany, the Baptism of our Lord, but it's not there in our RSL selection for this year. When you then toward the end of this section slide into Jer. 31 and his new covenant proclamation (and cite its return in Paul's 2 Cor 3), I get excited. But not enough from what you offer. What is it that is really NEW in this covenant in contrast to Sinai? Answer: for one thing there is NO forgiveness for sinners in Sinai (read the specs of the contract both in Exodus and Deuteronomy), but God's forgiveness abounds in the New One. Which contrast Paul hypes in his self-presentation (2 Cor 3) as minister of the New Covenant.

But with that we're back to the Augsburg Catholic hermeneutics, the radical distinction between God's Law and God's Gospel—even though they come from the same God and are addressed to the same sinners. The difference being, of course, that the crucified and risen Messiah is in the one but not in the other.

6. "THE PRIEST AS AN ICON OF THE HOLY"

Holiness, as you well know, was a hot potato of the Reformation era. In view of the striving for holiness in Latin medieval piety, the Augsburg reformers claimed that "holiness" for humans, ala the Gospel, amounts to being a forgiven sinner. Holiness is received, not achieved. Receiving the Gospel's offer of forgiveness is receiving holiness. Your thesis here is "Priesthood is the vocation to the holy; it is vocational holiness. Its specific ministry is the gift of grace or charism to the Church in order for the Church to

mature in holiness.” My re-reite might go like this: “The pastoral calling is to disperse (not dispense) holiness. [A US Episcopal bishop these days like to say that.] Holiness occurs when sinners trust Christ’s word of forgiveness offered to them. The pastor and those she serves are equals in this body of forgiven-sinner-holiness. That is what makes them qualitatively ‘different’ [=root meaning of the Hebrew term for holy] in the world, also different vis-a-vis what they were before they began trusting Christ’s word of forgiveness. The pastoral office is to administer the preached gospel and sacraments so that people trust Christ’s forgiving promise offered to them via those media. That’s dispersion phase one. Dispersion phase two is keeping them minded of Christ’s Easter mandate (ala John 20) that this holiness—a.k.a. “forgiveness” [Jn 20:23!]-is the burden of their own vocations: as the Father sent me so I send you.”

You asked for “some thohghts,” Bryan. These may be more than you wanted.

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed