

Photographer's Statement:

At a recent coffee hour, my friend Sue told me that during the liturgy it occurred to her that photographing the parish was Frank's priesthood.

I understood what she meant, but the idea seemed too melodramatic for me to accept it.

After all, there are few things less necessary for a parish than photographs. It's not like having the Eucharist, a choir or central heating. And, frankly, even among serious photographers, the of one's friends are considered in the same category as shots of one's cats.

Granted, it was useful to have photos for the website and to have a semi-pro for weddings and baptisms, especially an "unmercenary photographer." But priesthood? Technically, yes. But far too charged a word for such a minor activity.

Now is it Missionary? Yes. In the limited sense that the website helps show our community to the world. Community? Of course, but in a minor way. Joyful? Of course. And a way to express our love for the little ones so dear to Jesus. And, secretly, an ambition to capture souls, if only their shadow, and thus on occasion the shadow of God's shadow...

Morover, photography is the opposite of icon painting. Iconography shows the holy image that opens a window between our mortal life and the eternal. It is not in the least naturalistic. It may involve fasting and prayer and letting the hand be guided by the Beyond, and, as in all painting, the hand and life force of the artist is intimately present in the finished work.

Photography is not like that. To quote an ancient ad, "You push the button and we do the rest."

"Priest?" The word itself is alien and troubling. "Priest" has been a loaded and contentious word for thousands of years, shamanistic and primitive and tinged with unnatural power. A priest is the mediator between man and God, he who is admitted to the Holy of Holies in the Temple, who performs the Sacrifice, who pilots the shuttle that runs between sinful humanity and its Redeemer. Becoming a priest is a sacramental act that serves to separate and divide and elevate. Photography is something simple that every one does. Billions of times. Quite different.

"Priesthood?" Wasn't Sue (who is not an exaggerator) being a little hyperbolic?

How could my little mustard seed of photography be anything so grand as a priesthood? Shouldn't priesthood be what is the most beautiful, the most extraordinary, the most godly and consequential things one could possibly do? How can it reside in snapshots taken on Sunday mornings?

But Sue was right. And much more discerning than I was.

The priesthood of all believers is a cornerstone of the Orthodox Christian faith. Although I knew it was important, essential even, I was undiscerning in my understanding of it until Sue opened my eyes. There is no point in accepting a doctrine, even fervently, and not allowing it to actually operate in one's life.

That uncomfortable, massively charged, very alien word of "priesthood" has to be tamed and brought into everyday life so that it loses its fantasy nature. Their priesthood is usually a fantasy for the people (laoi) who are not ordained. Yet how can they have an active and fully Christian life without their priesthood? And it also becomes a fantasy for many priests, for how can they live up to their separation from the rest of us and still maintain their humanity?

It is easy to pay lip service to this idea. It's a great and comforting thought, especially handy when it bears no consequences. Priests continue to be priests. Bishops to be bishops. And we continue to be absolved of all responsibility except to be meek spectators at this great medieval pageant of worship. Sometimes to sing. Sometimes, if genetically qualified, to serve around the altar. But let's face it. All our ritual falls in the hands of the priest and the choir director. The people (laoi) of God could just as well be robots.

But in our father's house there is no mansion for robots. "Liturgy" comes from the Greek words for work/energy (ergon) and for the people (laoi). It signifies the public work the people do after they gather in the public assembly (ecclesia.) At its base root, liturgy means the public work of each and every person. In Athens, it was performed by volunteer private citizens, not by paid public officials. After centuries of hierarchical structure, the Orthodox words for church (ecclesia) and liturgy are still the very words first used by the extreme participatory democracy of the Greek city state. As bishops and monks came to define the Christian life in all its respects, was it not strange that the Church and the Holy Spirit kept alive, in the very words used to define church and liturgy, the idea of the full democratic participation of all citizens of the City of God?

Thousands of beautiful words have glorified the sacerdotal priesthood. But these two words, liturgy and ecclesia, continue unchanged to remind us all of our hidden calling.

So is a protestant revolution needed? Not at all. The relative sacerdotal or administrative insignificance of one's priesthood makes no difference in the eyes of God. One's priesthood, however tiny, is one's priesthood, just as if one were a pope or patriarch or even an apostle. And just as necessary in God's eyes for the edification of Christ's body. For in this structure, the lowest brick is as essential as the highest tower, none will be lost. Every branch is indistinguishable from the entire vine.

Whatever one's priesthood –singing, reading, publicizing, planning events, setting up, cleaning, vestments, working on the facility, coffee hour, money

raising, teaching, visiting the sick, giving alms, writing, greeting strangers, writing icons, visiting each other, contributing one's widow's mite --what matters is that one enter into it, not with competitive striving, but with joy and love in the Lord. That one enter into it with openness and kindness --to each other and the Spirit of God, however he wishes to express himself and to communicate with us. In the cloudy region of theology, this is called kenosis.

Administratively, and sacerdotally, we have one priest who represents one bishop. But the inner life of the Church, the saving liturgy that goes on with each breath in and each breath out of our entire being in Christ, knows no such distinctions. We are each united in priesthood and in love. For Christ is the only High Priest, we are told, and each of us is in him and he is in us. And fulfilling this in a practical way, together, is of the utmost importance --not for getting the work done (Martha), but as a way of living in the presence of Christ (Mary.)

Unlike work in the world, it is not about competitive excellence. In liturgical work, perfection consists of doing the work of the Holy Spirit. Its perfection is provided by the perfection of God's exceeding love for us, and the expression of this perfect love in our salvation both as individuals and as a community. We are not doing this to be in Wikipedia, but to be in heaven.

The best choir director I knew could not read music at all (nor could most of us sing.) But he was in a state of steadfast grace each minute when he stood before us, calmly radiating inclusive love and acceptance. And the choir did fine.

As that latest Doctor of the (western) Church, Therese of Lisieux, put it, there is a little way, and sometimes one can save a soul just by picking up a pin. Perhaps we can paraphrase her and say sometimes one can be a priest by making the parish coffee.

Nothing Christian is worth doing if it does not involve inner change and growth. For me, this was as simple as learning to give up all artistic and spiritual pretensions and using a flash at weddings and baptisms. At unique events like that the participants don't care about my holy best wishes and artistic aspirations, they want sharp photos. They want to be able to share the with their absent mom, they want to be able to look back and realize that grace actually happened. Art and spirituality are completely on the back burner when one ministers to others.

One sign that one is exercising his priesthood is learning from mistakes and growing in service to Christ, and doing so again and again.

Just as great saints, such as Anthony (and Mina for Romanians), devote their eternity to helping us find lost objects, for bringing Christ to the horrible martyrdom where a passport is lost before boarding an international flight, or a precious keepsake is missing, where grace seems like a hollow joke, so, likewise, whatever our priesthood may be, it is about bringing grace to others where grace is not. It is not trying out for a personal halo.

I encourage everyone in our parish to be bold in exercising their priesthood, no matter how mundane or insignificant it seems. The story of sixth century English poet Caedmon, is an example of how we are often held back, not by coldness per se, but by simple stage fright, even when our heart burns to serve the Lord.

The man was of advanced age, and he had never learned any songs. Often at a drinking gathering, when there was deemed to be occasion of joy, where all in turn must sing with a harp, when he saw the harp nearing him, he then arose for shame from that feast and went home. Thus it happened on a certain occasion, that he left the banquet-hall. When he fell asleep, a man stood by him in his dream and hailed and greeted him and addressed him by name: 'Caedmon, sing me a song.' Then he answered and said: 'I do not know how to sing and that is why I left this feast and came hither.' Again he who was speaking with him said: 'Nevertheless, you must sing.' Then he said: 'What must I sing?' Said he: 'Sing to me of the first Creation.'

After he heard this, he began immediately to sing in praise of God the Creator:

Now should we praise	the heaven kingdom's ward
the measurer's might	and his mind's purpose
glory-father's work	making each wonder
lord eternal	firmly established.
He shaped earliest	for earth's children
heaven's wide roof	holy creator,
middle-world next	ward of mankind
lord eternal	later created
land under foot	master almighty

(This is perhaps the earliest surviving poem in English.)

So we must not be shy as Caedmon was, but ever aware, as he became, that there is one standing beside us at all times, longing to grant us our deepest and most intimate desire, which is to serve him with a heart that is warm, active, creative and alive with sacred, self-emptying love.