

Chicago Centrum
Priorship Training School

T-241, CM
9/6/73

THE ARTFULNESS OF PRIORSHIP

When I began thinking about the artfulness of priorship, I recalled that I have been working on it for four years. Yet, it seemed that I should be more ready than I am today. Actually, it is more like forty years!

Using the classical categories of our Fathers of the Faith, the first half of what I want to say deals with Man and the World, and the second half deals with Satan and the Mystery. We are not just playing around after all these years with some tricks we have learned about how to get people to do this or that. We are dealing with the eternal verities of what it means to be a human being in the presence of God and in the presence of Satan.

I want to begin by talking about priorship as the embodiment of the way things are.

First of all, priorship is honoring the earth as it is. It is honoring the fact that we came from dust, and to dust we return. In sending forth a prior in the world, it is crucial to remember that I, who have decided to prior, and man, whose needs I am prioring, are the same. We came from the same dust, and we return to the same dust. That cannot help but result in what Schweitzer called "a reverence for life." It is living intentionally in the presence of the death from which you came, and the death to which you are going. That is reverence. But we as men of faith and priors are more. We go a step beyond Schweitzer to dare not only to view the world as it is, but to become the world as it is, in order to transform the world into what it needs to be.

A prior, I suppose, is one who is so global and so local that he is never offended by the kind of romanticism found in Tennyson when he wrote the little poem about the flower in the crannied wall, in which he noted that if he could understand everything about the little flower he could understand everything about everything. There is no place in this world where one of us, called upon to be a prior, could not give our whole being, since in every microcosm there is the whole universe. Therefore, assignment is never a problem for anyone who decides to be a prior. Anyone who had been serving for the last few years as a first prior and suddenly finds himself assigned to clean one bathroom every day in the Kemper Building for the rest of his life has no problem. In that very bathroom is the whole universe. And if he is a global man, that bathroom becomes his world and he gives himself entirely to it.

It is not, however, just a matter of honoring the stuff of the stuff of the universe or the earth. You notice that there are given structures in the world that keep "running blocks," and when they do not, they are in trouble. You look around and notice that you have earth, continents, regions, polises, parishes, and families which you did not create, but which you discovered already there as part of the givenness of life. To be a prior, then, is to recognize that that is the way life is and to honor it. You look around and you see that there are God's people and there are the People of God, and that's just the way it is. You do not complain about it; you just see that this is the way it is.

I have come to the conclusion that there is no other kind of prior than a Religious House prior; it is just a matter of where you fit into that dynamic. What I mean to say is, the Religious House is not something we have temporarily brought into being to do something or other. A Religious House is the embodiment of the whole universe, it is the way life is, it is humanness itself and to be a part of it is to be a prior of the universe. I guess that is impossible to say to anybody outside of our group, but here it certainly should be clear.

Finally, in the art of priorship, it is not the stuff of the earth that is honored, it is not the given structures of society that are honored, but, what every man is interested in and only in, what every man needs for his healing, is the honor that comes from the symbolic. That is all there is---symbolic. Symbolism has to do with the invisible relationship of things. That is why what it means to be a prior is to come into a room, see that the candle on the altar is two inches northeast in the wrong direction, and move it. The awe is not in some static thing. It is always in the relationship of things, and it really does not make a whole lot of difference what things you are talking about. I do not know if you are like I am, but I just die every time somebody comes to an RS-I site with pre-fabricated table decor. You know: you have one for God, and one for Christ, and everything is carefully done; I remember the days when you came to a place and you did not have a thing. You looked around and found a piece of string, a piece of broken wood, or bottle, or something. The group could not figure it out. There was almost too much awe in that. I believe the reason we are getting asked some questions these days is that there is enough of the "canned" in our decor that it makes one think somebody had something up his sleeve.

A prior is someone who arranges space so that it becomes sacred. The art of priorship is that of being passionate for sacred space. A prior creates space in such a way that any man who comes in contact with it is touched by awe. He does not have to have any religious, intellectual, or psychological presuppositions; when he comes in touch with it, he experiences awe.

The art of priorship has to do with not only creating sacred space, but designing sacred time. For the unbelieving world, energy and time is running out. For men of faith, time is the running into structures and designs he creates and lives out of. It is like Joshua, when he had God make the sun stand still for him. He didn't really make the sun stand still; he just designed time in such a way that it seemed like he had more of it; we do the same thing with our Week I and Week II, Day I and Day II. We have a lot of work to do, and a lot of awe to communicate, so we need more time. To be a prior is to learn how to design time--not to schedule it. A prior never makes an appointment with anybody, unless he is somebody in the establishment who has to have one. The prior says fine, and then he does what is necessary and appropriate, because it is never the schedule, never the static chunks of time that make any difference: it is always the design.

First of all, then, priorship means seeing the way life is and saying "Yes" to it, in the light of the whole universe in which you show up.

The second thing is saying "Yes" to your self-image. There is no such thing as being a prior without a highly self-conscious image of what it means to be a self, of how it is that the self relates itself to the self in concrete situations.

Now, most of us are Protestants, most of us are lower-middle class Americans. I am glad there are some of us here at this time who are not. Most of us are, and we have been taught that what it means to be a man of faith, (you may notice that I am using "man of faith" and "prior" interchangeably) is to be invisible and unnoticeable. You and I must understand that "incoognito" does not mean "invisible." To be what we call a prior is to be a public image twenty-four hours a day. A prior is inescapably in himself a human institution. For a prior, the question is not whether an institution, but what kind of an institution is a prior. It is very practical. It means whatever is appropriate to the situation is right. It does not mean being the kind of slob that hopes to go unnoticed.

Thomas Carlyle says that man is an omnivorous bi-ped who wears britches. Of course he said that while in a bad mood. But the question of how this creature called man decides to prior his fellow man, wears his britches, and the kind of britches he will wear is life or death. Sometimes I think we believe the business about shining your shoes for the fat lady is a spiritual state. It is not a spiritual state. Ultimately, it is getting the polish and putting it on your shoes so that your presence, your appearance (Isn't that a great word? That's what resurrected people do---they appear) is a sign to your fellow man that life is meaningful and is holding itself together. The issue of working at what you need to look like, as part of your self-image, is never one of doing something

for yourself, but it is always for others; always for the last fat lady; always to enable the task.

Thirdly, after the self-image, a prior is always a model-builder, always out-doing the Boy Scouts by obeying their motto, "Be Prepared." If I were a sculptor, and I wanted to do one thing which would tell the world what a prior is, I would sculpt a man, late at night, sitting at the table, leaning over it, brooding and making notes. That is really where the art of priorship takes place. The public image is the working out of what you have brooded on and planned for in the middle of the night. The refusal to do the homework is the decision, the already-made decision, to fail. Of course, homework really can be done anytime, anywhere, in any length of time. You know how it is: You get into a situation which gets rough and you say, "I didn't do my homework last night, so I can't possibly do anything in this situation today." But sometime, you have to do your homework on the spot. That is, of course, never a substitute for doing it before.

The model-building gets very, very nitty-gritty. It means intentionally preparing for each day. Preparation means programming the consciousness for your brooding to go on while you are sleeping. The matter of deciding to sleep intentionally is a crucial part of the preparation for the living of the next day. How do you spiritually dress yourself as you physically dress for that day? I tell you it is a far different thing to set your alarm for ten minutes before worship, spring out of bed, grab your books, run a comb through your hair, dash off to start the day, and feeling you have never quite caught up with it. It is another thing to get up earlier than everybody else, bathe yourself, or whatever you do, take your time shaving or putting stuff on your face, just brooding all of the time about your readiness for that day. I would say, unequivocally, that anyone who is not willing to get up early enough to get sufficiently prepared for the day is never going to be what we call a Prior. Of course, people who get up late are just out of it entirely; that is just a rudimentary thing. But just try it---get up thirty minutes earlier than anybody else, take your time, choose with care what it is you are going to dress yourself in, brood about the coming day; you will see that the whole day, not just the beginning of it, will be different, and your whole life (I guarantee it) will take on a new significance. I did it two or three times, recently, so that what I am saying I already know to be true.

Another dimension of the self-image, maybe the most crucial one, is detachment from yourself, or not taking yourself seriously. I think it's very clear that suicide and taking yourself seriously are identical realities. Life is, from beginning to end, absurd. Your willingness to participate in that absurdity, is one of the fundamental things you need in order to be a prior. Back to RS-I, the lecture when you tell the story, "My wife

is the wrath of God in my life," and everybody laughs. Everybody participates in the sheer absurdity of your matrimony. Besides that, you can be sure that God does not take you seriously, so why should you take yourself seriously? My wife is the mercy of God in my life, but it is still absurd. I have to take into consideration that once in a while I get real "down-and-out" in dealing with my family. But you ought to see the things Patricia does! She's fantastic! I remember one day she came and sat down on one of my knees, put her hand under my chin, and twisted, with all her strength; she pulled my head up and started making faces at me until I finally had to give up and laugh. There she was on my knee, pushing my head up with her hands, and here I am, Prior of the Chicago Religious House. I guarantee you, if you cannot laugh at yourself in public, there is no way to take intellectual criticism. That's just objectively the case, without that participation in the sheer absurdity of every man's existence. I used to be so serious about myself and my future, and saw that I could be intimidated and invalidated by a virus that I couldn't even see. It might do you good to remember how absurd it is that you ever were born and more absurd, that you are not going to be able to escape some day going right into the coffin. If that does not take all the seriousness out of your life, I don't know what would.

Now, I want to say a word about Satan. This is particularly crucial for those who are priors. If Satan is anything, he is clever. He knows that you cannot just come head-on with some gross incantation to Priorship. You have to be subtle. You have to be saying that it looks like it is coming from God. One thing that happens is I find myself saying to myself, "I worry about sin more than anybody else in this Religious House. Nobody else is concerned about the wickedness of the world except me." I have a colleague who used to be called "the young one." He was not brought up in the Church. He came here unbaptized and all that. He was offensive, especially to those of us who are clergymen. The way he looked at us was just terrible. Now that character is becoming objectively more religious, and the rest of us, I am afraid, are becoming progressively more secular. It comes like, "Well, I'm about to pull off the issues around here. Then Satan comes and tells me, "You're humble." The way you know you are humble is that you do not go around screaming at people and beating them over the head like people do. Because what that is, is a lack of guts. I do not mean that every scream is justified. Or I feel that people in this Religious House are perverting me. "I have just got to get away from here because this place is not very congenial." Well, that part is what it means to be secular.

Even more subtle is the man of status. I have told that to many a man wrestling in error with the image of, "I'm running things." If you want a religious house, if you want to be in the Order, or run the world, then you have to be servant of all, and clear about the society of God.

Remember the sign of St. Peter?

You take a group of people, each one of whom is totally committed to something--they are equal, and each one is totally in charge. So if you never get concerned about polity, about taking charge, then you can do the Mission without reserve, and that problem is solved, and you have become a prior.

I think this one is even more subtle, this business about, "I need to be a leader. The reason I do not fit in, is that I have never found the right size hole; one of these days I am going to stumble over this universe into the place I predict. But for now, I certainly don't fit here!"

Perhaps you get concerned with yourself, and you think, "Well, everybody is in the deeps, and there are people who have different needs, so people really should be allowed to do what they like." You remember in the early part of the film, Requiem For a Heavyweight, Maish, not being a prior to Mountain and yet we know that he was, because when Mountain wanted to know what to do, Maish said, "Well, do something that you like." And that statement to people is the antithesis to priorship. The temptation is so strong---people come to you with such fantastic rationales for why they do what they want to do, and Satan says to you, "Well, why not?" Sometimes, you even feel that you are not counseling with individuals. You sense that if you really care for the uniqueness of that person, his individual problems, then you need to take him seriously and counsel with him. But you can be very sure that the way of personal counseling is not the way of releasing anybody for anything.

Now the reason for considering that what Satan does in the realm of priorship is so crucial is that Satan only operates relative to God. That is, he is always where the Awe is about to be, and he moves in and perverts it and gets you all confused and turns you into zombiism. That is what pastors are supposed to be, but when you look into the eyes of most of them, you will not see anything. At a conference last Spring, I talked to a man and suddenly realized that I had known him for a long time. His eyes were just burned out. He wasn't even looking at me; but he wasn't looking any place else either. You know how that happens? I look at the clergy, and see them in the same predicament as those scientists who worked with radium before it was clear how to protect themselves. They got burned with it. Clergymen in our generation have to operate in a time when we have lost our clarity on how to reveal and deal with the awe; yet, to be a person, you have to deal with it.

There has been a lot of fooling with Awe unseriously, and it is possible for us to turn into zombies. That can happen to priors just like anybody else. One way is that of attacking other people to justify one's own claim to life. "I don't hate God; I hate that other person." Or, going another step in zombiism, there is a type who ignores people, with the justification in being God. He never has any trouble with anybody, just smiles and rolls on: "Well, I don't know what to say. You just take care of it."

Finally, what priorship has to do with is embodying the mystery. Finally, what it has to do with is intentionally "being nothing." You can always clarify that. You already know that does not mean being "unnoticeable." It means you have no personal history anymore, when you are set aside as the religious. You realize that you were chosen before you were born. And so your history has been the history of God working with you to turn you into a Man of Faith.

If you have no personal history then you have no personal problems. You cannot have any personal problems if you have no personal history. In this shadow world, this world that tries to pretend that it can give you problems, sometimes we think we have some. I remember an old man in the first congregation I ever served. This little man did not push you very far, but he used to say to me, every time I went to see him, "Now, Brother Moore, don't forget one man plus God will always be regarded." Corny as that is, you know, a prior is one who decides that "I and the Spirit are one."

Therefore, we are the fulfillment of every situation we reach. We fill every situation with Awe, and Being. That is what it means to be the same gift that every man is. You see the embodiment of every affirmation that, finally, all is well. The beckoning participation is saying that by and by, the new world will be here. If you think I mean "pie in the sky"---absolutely not! For I believe that only one thing is absolutely necessary for any man who gets his faith, and also gets his troubles. It is just waiting on the Lord. Nothing else is necessary; it is just waiting on the Lord. The man who cannot wait commits suicide. The prior decides just to wait. He decides just to wait. He decides his own fate, with himself, and his neighbor relative to God.

That is all that there is to prioring. Our being Prior is being transparent love. Commitment is to history. Commitment is to enabling men to be transparent, so that what you see is to be recruited to History and not be condemned at all. It is a reincarnation of care. It is 110 per cent intentionality in every detail.

And then I want to add this little footnote. Lest you think that priorship is some kind of individual accomplishment, let us all be clear that priorship is entirely corporate. The entire world is just corporate. You just wait until ten thousand intentional people show up somewhere wearing blue. That is art; that is the art of priorship. That is the Spirit: that is the serious accomplishment of corporate intentionality. This means one thing---that we are committed to each other, to do the mission is what is necessary to do the mission to be a part of the corporate priorship.

---Charles Moore

6/22/74