

Base Centrum

Spring Quarter

GIVING THE CHURCH BACK ITS PRIORSHIP

Area Prior Spin

Wk. 11, June 18, '73

It is in a time like this when I come back to be with you that I feel like Mountain Rivera. Everytime it got a little rough out there in the streets, he had a place to go--that bar room with all his fellow stumblebums. It is really great just to be with another group of nobodies. You all know what a relief it is, I am sure.

I have been doing a little solitary brooding for the last month or two on the Cost of Discipleship by Bonhoeffer. I have been asking myself what is the gift we stumblebums have to offer; and one of the areas I think most beneficial to the historic church is priorship. That is our gift as a group of nobodies. The office of the bishop has either become so weak, or else so autocratic that it has lost its power with the grass roots. It has lost its priorship. We need to give it back to them. One of the biggest contradictions in local churches is that pastors have lost their symbolic priorship. We need to give it back to them. Everyone is the symbolic Order is a prior.

First, a prior is called. You can never elect yourself. Now, when I hear people really wanting to be priors my first response is that I would love to give it to them. My biggest problem is I can't. On second reflection, I suspect that you are not ready to be a prior if you really want to be one. God has got to grab ahold of you, while you are screaming, ranting, and railing against it all the way. But when you are called, that is it! You have been ordained a prior forever--never to turn back. But you never choose yourself. You are called. You are called once, and that is it!

Secondly, a prior is given the power of responsibility. I was talking not too long ago with a United Church of Canada clergyman who had done some work for years with the Indians in the northern parts of Ontario. He told me a story that I think is about priorship. It is about the power the leader in the Indian community has. A friend of his who had been out at school for seven years had come back. The elders sat around with him, and passed the pipe of peace around twice. (This was all the symbolism they had.) Then they said, "You are now elected the leader of this community." He said, "I can't possibly be!" He refused it, and about three days later he ended up in the hospital, paralyzed from his spine all the way to the tip of his toes. He was in the hospital for eight months. The doctors tried everything, but could not find one reason why he was physically paralyzed. They believed it could be psychosomatic. At the end of the eight months the tribal elders went to him and said, "You refused to pick up leadership, therefore we are clear you are not going to be the leader anymore, so we have decided to take that back." He got up right there and walked!

One of the elders, Papa John, picked up the power, because, in the meantime, there was no symbolic leader to identify that tribe. They began to dissipate and deteriorate. They turned to alcoholism; there had been fighting, and a few murders. Three young Indians in that tribe were really cutting loose, causing tremendous havoc. One day they got themselves a gun-belt and a gun with three bullets with the names of the three elders. They went around bragging that they were going to take over. Finally one day, after so many months, Papa John called them in, looked at the three men, and said, "You're causing enough havoc in this community.

Enough is enough!" The next day one of those young men was taken off on a stretcher to a hospital in an unbelievable catatonic fit. One of the other guys was out sawing down a tree with a big chain saw (something he had done for years) and sawed right down below his knee, almost severing his leg. The third guy raced to Papa John's house, got down on his knees and said, "For God's sake, take this curse from me!"

It is that kind of power that is part of priorship, but it is not the power we want. Nevertheless, as a prior, you go screaming into that kind of responsibility.

Thirdly, a prior is an art form. He is a walking Guernica. You never take anything personally when you are a prior anymore. People reflect about their own lives off of you.

Finally, this could all be summed up by Charles Moore, who, when he came to Winnipeg, healed a half a million lives a few months ago in the great PLC! "You know what priorship is all about. Everytime you look at that movie Requiem for a "Headache", that is what priorship is all about!"

--Bill Alerding