

Paul the Priest

by Scott Hahn

When Saul was a young Pharisee, he was zealous for the Torah. He studied in the most prestigious theological school in Jerusalem. He may have been a member of the Sanhedrin, Judaism's supreme court in the first century.

But he did all of this as a layman. He could never lay claim to priesthood—nor could he hope for a priestly “vocation”—as he was born into the tribe of Benjamin, and the priesthood of Israel was restricted to the tribe of Levi. For centuries, the Levitical priests alone had been responsible for carrying out the sacrificial rites in the Jerusalem Temple.

Yet, as an Apostle, St. Paul clearly understood his role in priestly terms. In his magnum opus, his Letter to the Romans, he spoke of his calling as “the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:15–16).

Those are carefully crafted phrases, precise in their terms, each rich in evocative power. And what they evoke is *priesthood*.

By grace, Paul had become a “minister.” In Greek the word is *leitourgon*, from which we get the English word “liturgy.” In St. Paul's culture, this referred to a ritual role, a priestly role, not simply a job title for a religious administrator.

Thus, he goes on to say specifically that his work is a “priestly service,” and he further specifies that it is sacrificial. He speaks of the “offering of the Gentiles” and prays that it may be “sanctified.”

For some people today this has become churchspeak, Christian jargon for bureaucratic functions. But in its time it was revolutionary. St. Paul was speaking of himself and his labors in terms that were off-limits to him because of his genetic make-

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up. To his fellow Jews, it would have seemed arrogant, if not insane.

Nevertheless, Paul employs it on many occasions. He spoke of his apostolate as a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). Again, in the Old Covenant, that role had been fulfilled by the priests, who brought about the forgiveness of sins through the expiating sacrifices of the Temple (see Heb. 8:3). Now, Paul can describe himself as a “steward of God's mysteries” (1 Cor. 4:1), employing a common Greek term for religious rituals, *mysterion*.

That is the very term that the Church would use to describe its own essential rites. The ancient Romans translated *mysterion* as *sacramentum*, from which we have our English word “sacrament.”

Paul was a steward of God's mysteries. He also identified himself repeatedly as an “ambassador for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20; Philem. 9). The ancient rabbis said that an ambassador was to be received as the dignitary whom he represented. And indeed that is how the churches received St. Paul—they “received me,” he said, “as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” (Gal. 4:14).

With the coming of Jesus Christ, there was a “change in the priesthood” (Heb. 7:12). Jesus Himself was the High Priest of the New Covenant. In fact, Paul spoke of Jesus as both sacrificial priest and sacrificial victim (see Eph. 5:2).

But Jesus also shared His priesthood with men He designated as Apostles, and He commanded them to offer the sacrifice of the New Covenant (see 1 Cor. 11:25).

So close was the Apostles' communion with Jesus that they represented Him—they *re-presented* Him. They were His ambassadors

and more. When St. Paul forgave sins, he said that he did so *en prosopo Christou* (2 Cor. 2:10). That Greek word *prosopo* is very rich. It literally means “face.” It can also mean “person” or “presence.” In English, too, these words and their close relatives have overlapping meanings. If I am *present*, I am here *in person*. My *persona* is another word for the *face* I show you.

In the fourth century, St. Jerome translated that Greek phrase into Latin as *in persona Christi*. Thus tradition has always read that phrase: *in the person of Christ*.

That is how St. Paul understood his priesthood: to be the presence, the person, and the face of Christ the High Priest. His is the face God showed to the Gentiles. Like Christ, St. Paul saw himself as a sacrificial victim, “poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith” (Phil. 2:17). The priesthood then, as now, was a call to self-giving.

By the rite of ordination, the Apostle conferred the gift of priesthood on a new generation (see 2 Tim. 1:6). And so it has passed through the millennia, to the priests who serve our parishes today. They may preach like Paul—or not. But, in all cases, we receive them as Christ, for so they are. ¹⁴⁷

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