

Consecrating the Consecrated?

Bishop Nicolas Afanassieff and the Priesthood of All.

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Drawing on Orthodox Bishop Nicolas Afanassieff, in his book *The Church of the Holy Spirit*¹, this reflection argues that the defining understanding of the re-created People of God is a people anointed as priests and kings and that the Eucharistic mystery is an act concelebrated by the Body, the People of God, with their presider. The emerging civil ordering of the church following the Apostolic era evolved to separate the baptized into “consecrated” and the “unconsecrated”, the presbyteral ministers a separate ontologically distinct caste. Is this distinction among the People of God contrary to the spirit of revelation, the dignity of the baptized and does it contribute to a deficient understanding of the Church and ministry?

I remember my scripture professor, Fr. Normand Bonneau O.M.I., sharing the vision of what the temple must have been like at the great Passover. Thousands of animals being slaughtered on the temple altars by the priests. The Priests were Levites, a family line, the privileged class who alone were able to enter the sanctuary, and to make blood sacrifice. The incense would have been billowing to cover the odour and disperse the flies. Buckets of water constantly splashed onto the altars to wash the blood away. Through the temple was a primitive

¹ Nicolas Afanassieff, Vitaly Permiakov, Michael Plekon, and Rowan Williams. *The Church of*

plumbing system, of Roman design, carrying the mixture of blood and water through the streets and out the temple wall.

A temple and city filled with pilgrims for the annual festival and offering. Jews travelling from afar: families reunited, meals, parties, prayer, exchanges with old friends and relatives, a reknitting together of the people of God. Both an extraordinary sensorial ritual gathering and a cultural, human, communal experience that defined life as a Jew, ordering the lives of the chosen people - all centred upon the offering of sacrifice. This vision enriches the imagination and conceptualizing of the self-understanding of first century Jewish culture, and the powerful metanarrative of Passover, and where we place the crucifixion narrative:

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, ‘None of his bones shall be broken.’ And again another passage of scripture says, ‘They will look on the one whom they have pierced’ (John 19:31-37).²

The bones are not broken, according to John, just as the Passover lamb’s bones to be sacrificed and eaten by each family as ordered by Moses and Aaron in the Exodus account are to remain intact (Exodus 12:46). This is the startling “Paschal” revelation: God himself has become the sacrifice: Jesus is the Passover lamb. The Johannine community, one of many in the Jewish diaspora following the destruction of the temple (70 C.E.), are asking the question: “how are we to be Jews with nowhere to offer sacrifice?” This community of Jews, later to be called

² NRSV

Christians, answered: “Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and he has become the sacrifice, the paschal lamb. The temple of stone is no more, the messianic fulfillment has happened in the most extraordinary, unexpected, shocking way.” The meal we call the Eucharist emerged as the way these Jews fulfilled their Jewishness: they shared in sacrifice, in the life of the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Word made flesh who offered himself.

Fr. Bonneau related an even greater connection to the powerful image of the experience of Christ’s death at the Passover: “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out” (John 19:35). As the blood and water spilled from his side, he was hanging on a cross at Golgotha, which was located just outside the city, the temple wall lay just behind him - the temple wall where the mingled blood and water of the Passover sacrifices would be streaming out from that simple plumbing. Indeed, as John foretold the temple Jesus promised to destroy and raise in three days was “the temple of his body” (John 2:21).

Surely not a full blown Nicene theology as the Gospel narrative was penned, but the great passing-over of God to human in Christ is the astonishing, world changing discovery that defined Christianity – even before the great midwife Paul led the church from gestation as a sect of Jews. The great divide between human and God has dissolved, the veil between the people and the sanctuary has been removed, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (Matt 27:51). The temple sacrifice has been replaced “since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)” (Heb 10:19-20).

Nicholas Afanassieff explains that “through this entrance into the ‘temple of Christ’s body’ (John 2:21) the New Testament people became the royal priesthood (*basileion*

hierateuma).”³ The Levitical untouchable blood lineage of priests has been replaced by all those who are in Christ – a temple made of living stones:

like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2: 5-9)

Moreover, Afanassieff points to the Book of Revelation:

To him who...made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever (1:6)...and you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth. (5:10)... they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years. (20:6).

This is the new identity of the People of God: they are priests and kings of the Kingdom.

He draws on Galatians to argue “The ethnic principle, according to which ancient Israel was chosen has been surpassed and replaced by the principle of belonging to the Church: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’”(Gal 3:28).⁴

Baptism is the ontological consecration of this royal priesthood where the gift of the Spirit is bestowed upon them. Afanassieff relates: “In baptism a person dies to his previous life and is born spiritually through the Spirit as a new creation, for a new life in the Church. Life in

³ Afanassieff, p. 11.

⁴ Afanassieff, p. 10.

the Church is to serve God through the Church and in the Church.”⁵ Anointing was bestowed upon kings and priests, Augustine claims baptism fulfills the Old Testament circumcision (traditionally on the 8th day after birth), as the mark of God’s people⁶, anointing as the kingly mark, an anointed one, “a Christ” sealed with the gifts of the Spirit. It is the priestly ministry of all members of this new body, the Church, which finds its identity in the Eucharistic assembly, a new creation, forever renewed on this 8th day of creation.

This is the people of God “*Laos tou Theou*,” a community of “*laics*” (persons), anointed kings and priests: the *ecclesia*, the Body, the Church: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (I Cor 12:27) and “ he has put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him fills all and in all” (Ephesians 1:27). All Christians are laics and all Christians are consecrated as priests as Irenaeus of Lyons would claim: “all the righteous possess the order of the priesthood.”⁷

The insistence on the new creation, the people of God, presupposes that all are consecrated, changed, into this priesthood as the Baptismal rite proclaims as the community welcomes the newly baptized: “We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.”⁸

Afanassieff argues that through baptism each member of the body, the church, is called by God,

⁵ Afanassieff, p. 24.

⁶ St. Augustine (Sermon 8: octava Paschae 1, 4; PL 46, 838.841).

⁷ Afanassieff p. 20.

⁸ *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada: with the Revised Common*

Leticionary. (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2007.), p. 161.

“set apart by Him as a member of the Church through the gift of the Spirit.”⁹ The gifts, belong to the whole, and for the whole, and “consequently, each member of the Church is called to life, activity, work, and ministry in the Church, for the Spirit is the principle of life and activity in the Church.”¹⁰

Afanassieff notes that the gifts of the Spirit are bestowed on all the baptized to offer and minister to the church: ‘The gifts and call of God are irrevocable’ (Rom 11:29).¹¹ To be in the Church is to be a laic, and to be bestowed upon with the gifts of the Spirit to be given for the life of the body. The Royal priesthood became the operating narrative and basis of the life of the whole Church, argues Afanassieff. The sharing of the Eucharist is the expression of the community in all its fullness, a community of people stewarding the gifts of the Spirit¹²:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ (Eph 4:11-13).

Every member ministers those gifts for the church, and offers them for the life of the world and enacted as priests offering sacrifice to God in the Eucharistic Assembly¹³: “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (acts 2:42).

⁹ Afanassieff, p. 11.

¹⁰ Afanassieff, p.11.

¹¹ Afanassieff, p. 10.

¹² Afanassieff, p. 24.

¹³ Afanassieff, p. 10.

The variety of gifts are given not earned, but rather as the gift of baptism, how the life of the Spirit is manifest: “wherever ministry is, there is the Spirit and wherever there is no ministry there is no Spirit and no life,”¹⁴ he suggests. This is the foundation of the work of ministry: I claim the gifts of the Spirit bestowed on me from God and I offer them back to God, to the church, to the world in Christ. Afanassieff key argument is this: “The difference between a person who has a particular ministry and a person who does not have such a ministry is not ontological but functional.”¹⁵

Afanassieff argues that there is fullness of grace in each gift which is given to all members of the church: “From his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16).¹⁶ “Grace does not have levels,” he suggests, “thus one cannot speak about higher or lower levels of grace, as does scholastic theology”¹⁷. There is One spirit, many gifts, each gift with the fullness of grace. One such gift is the gift of presidency (*presbyteros*), the presider of the assembly. This gift is one of many gifts of the Spirit which is fulfilled as a function within and for the Church: “All the participants of the assembly together with their presider constitute[d] a single people of God, the royal priesthood.”¹⁸

He argues that Laics, the baptized, are the concelebrants with the bishop and the presbyter for it is only together that the sacraments can be performed: “not just because they have some active role in the sacramental ministry, but because they being the priests of the most

¹⁴ Afanassieff, p. 17.

¹⁵ Afanassieff, p. 16.

¹⁶ Afanassieff, p. 16.

¹⁷ Afanassieff, p. 16.

¹⁸ Afanassieff, p. 18.

high God, actually celebrate those sacraments.”¹⁹ As a priestly people bestowed with the gifts of the Spirit, all are ministers, for they are ministering the gifts of the Spirit for, through, with and as the Church. He draws on Origen who writes: “The priesthood belongs to everyone, for it belongs to the Church, and thus, everyone ministers when the Church ministers.”²⁰

In offering the description of the Eucharist by Justin Martyr Afanassieff maintains the clear ordering of the presider and the assembly, but as one holy priesthood. It is the gathered assembly who assent to the thanksgiving proclaimed by the presider in the Eucharist, rather than the confection of the presider:

And the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the readers have ceased, the president verbally instructs , and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought , the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent saying Amen. ²¹

He draws on Theodoret of Cyrus who says: “The Laic, after the prayers have been proclaimed and he has responded “amen”, becomes a partaker of the reward of the supplications which is in no way less than the rewards of those who utters the supplications in the assembly.”²²

For a number of reasons, including the battle with the Montanists, leaders of the Church such as Tertullian began detracting the charismatic emphasis of the Apostolic Church,

¹⁹ Afanassieff, p. 38.

²⁰ Afanassieff, p. 39.

²¹ Afanassieff, p. 17.

²² Afanassieff, p. 54.

withdrawing the connection of the gifts of the Spirit and ministry of all the baptized.²³ It was at this time (the end of the second century and early third), Afanassieff points out, that the identification of the priestly ministry became identified with the ministry of presidency, who begin to be called clerics.²⁴

Tertullian anticipated the future of ecclesial organization as Church and empire drew closer together. Empirical ecclesiastical life began to appropriate the principles and structures of Roman law and civil order. He contends: “the liturgical distinction between people and clerics...gradually led to the appearance of two heterogeneous strata or states of being.”²⁵ The seductive teleological distinction of the Old Testament with its allure to power and its sanctioned authority and control began to be revived, a tabernacle and a sacred cast. He posits: “The sword that finally cut the ecclesial body in two was the teaching on consecration.”²⁶ Ordination became a consecration, an ontological change in the nature of the person that previously was the property of that sacred new creation, the baptized. “Byzantine thought concluded that it was not baptism but the sacrament of ordination that was the genuine mystery of consecration,”²⁷ he contends. Laics were then fully excluded from the sacred hierarchy: there were consecrated Christians and un-consecrated Christians.

The separation eventually became so wide that ecclesiastical authorities insisted that access to the altar was only for the consecrated and liturgical space, practice, governance,

²³ Afanassieff, p. 17-19.

²⁴ Afanassieff, p. 18.

²⁵ Afanassieff, p. 18.

²⁶ Afanassieff, p. 18.

²⁷ Afanassieff, p. 19.

liturgical practice and exercise of ministry all reflected this gulf between the sacred and the profane. Afanassieff points to Canon 69 of the Council of Trullo (692 CE) which demands that “absolutely no one from among the laity shall be allowed to enter the holy sanctuary.”²⁸ The unconsecrated are not permitted access, and in fact the great mystery of the Eucharist must be kept secret.

Afanassieff contends that this is the root of the “secret prayers” said by the priest at the Altar, and the private reception of communion by the clergy. He argues that these practices are completely contrary to the liturgical practice and spirit of the primitive Church. He draws again on Justin Martyr:

There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgiving all the people present express their assent by saying Amen.²⁹

There were nothing hidden from the faithful in the Apostolic age. The “secret gnosis” sometimes referenced by Clement of Alexandria and Origen were not liturgical observances but related to the spiritual edification of the individual Christian.³⁰

The Scholastic period deepened this great divide, especially its sacramental development with its newly cherished rediscovery of Aristotelian categories, an emphatic focus on the species and nature of the elements of the Eucharist that came to be called “the body.” The consecrated caste, a *sacerdotal* society of clerics, became the self-appointed the stewards of all holiness, and

²⁸ Afanassieff, p. 34.

²⁹ Afanassieff, p. 46.

³⁰ Afanassieff, p. 42.

salvific power. Afanassieff notes that “when the Council of Trent, [1563] proclaimed the impossibility of the laicization of clerics, it affirmed for Western theological consciousness the ontological distinction between clergy and laics.”³¹

One of the most powerful and affirming experiences of my life, was when my Bishop presented me to the community at my ordination. It is hard to describe the experience of being publicly consecrated and presented to those who helped discern one’s call, and who now affirm you with the blessings of the Episcopate. And yet, I have come to wonder, why is this experience not the property of all the baptized?

Presbyteral ministry is unique, special and set apart. Serving as the presider of a parish, manifest in the presidency of that Eucharist assembly and serving the pastoral needs of the body is indeed a particular call, full of grace. Governing, leading, organizing, and loving a community, walking with them through sorrow, joy, life and death is a great privilege and profoundly challenging vocation. Identifying this vocation, heeding its call, and being ordained by the leader of the community, a Bishop according to the biblical ordering of the Church is a powerful expression of Christian identity. Afanassieff argues, however, that the Church has transgressed its own self understanding by separating the ministry of the *presbyteros* into an ontologically distinct caste, robbing baptism and the Church itself of its true identity.

Surely, there cannot be a distinction of consecrated and non-consecrated among the people of God, the Body of Christ? All its members share the same high calling, ordained kings and priests before God the Father. It is the whole people of God who gather at the table with common bread and wine, gifts from God, offered back to God. Gifts taken, blessed, broken and

³¹ Afanassieff, p. 19.

give for the life of the world. Rather than the magic act of a holy consecrated person imbued with a sacred power, who holds the power to share with the unconsecrated; it is we who together are living stones of the temple of his body, who together enact the Eucharist. It is the Body who together says “amen” as the Truth of all creation is revealed in the bread and wine transfigured as his flesh and blood, that we too, together are transfigured into his very life.

What risk would there be for the rites of ordination not to be considered a consecration? Could the Church reclaim baptism and Eucharist as the unique location of rites of consecration and the other sacraments, including ordination, maintain their sacredness as “blessing?” Could ordination be the blessing of the Church, called and commissioned, but avoiding the language of ontological change and leaving that holy state to the Baptized alone and all those who share in the banquet of the kingdom?

In this light, questions of Eucharistic hospitality are shared under a wider horizon. No longer a rite enacted by the sacred priest who then gives permission for the worthy to receive; but rather, Eucharist is an encounter with the living God, celebrated by a kingdom of priests. The Eucharist manifests the fullness of the Spirit ordained at Pentecost. Participation is not a matter of permission or inclusion, rather, an invitation to celebrate deeply in the new life freely given. All are invite to become priests and kings and queens and feast at the banquet by passing through the paschal mystery, the threshold of death into the new life in Christ bestowed in baptism.

The insights of Bishop Nicholas, I believe, claim a more truthful understanding of the intuition of the primitive and early Church from Justin Martyr, to Irenaeus of Lyon, to Clement of Alexandria, Origen, The Cappadocians and even to John Chrysostom, Jerome and Maximus the Confessor. Can we envision a Church that truly lives into the profound and awe-inspiring

dignity, call and vocation of baptism? After all, if one is named “a Christ”, what further consecration does one need?

The claim of baptism is this: it is we who follow Him to the cross and become His body, His hands, His feet, His eyes, ears and mouth, filled with grace and the gifts of the Spirit offered for the life of the world. The blood and water flows from our sides into the world as a Eucharistic People, a new temple of living stones. This Kingdom of priests and kings and Queens anointed and ordained by the Spirit at the font of regeneration, feast at his table, and offer ourselves in holy sacrifice, our blood poured out as a royal highway into the age to come.