

Are you weak enough to be a priest?

“BECAUSE BESET BY WEAKNESS...”

By Michael J. Buckley, S.J.

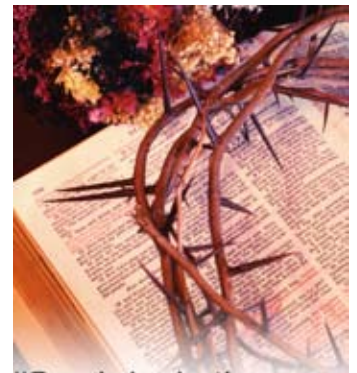
There is a tendency among us Americans, common and obvious enough, recommended by common sense and successful practice, to estimate a person's aptitude for a profession or for a career by listing his strengths. Jane speaks well, possesses an able mind, exhibits genuine talents for leadership and debate; she would be an excellent lawyer. John has recognizably good judgment, a scientific turn of interest, obvious manual dexterity and deep human concerns; he would make a splendid surgeon.

The tendency is to transfer this method of evaluation to the priesthood, to estimate a man by his gifts and talents, to line up his positive achievements and his capacity for more, to understand his promise for the future in terms of his accomplishments in the past, and to make the call within his life contingent on the attainments of personality or grace. Because a man is religiously serious, prayerful, socially adept, intellectually perceptive; possesses interior integrity, sound common sense, and habits of hard work -- therefore he will make a fine priest.



I think that transfer is disastrous. There is a different question, one proper to the priesthood as of its very essence, if not uniquely proper to it: *Is this man weak enough to be a priest?* Is this man deficient enough so that he cannot ward off significant suffering from his life, so that he lives with a certain amount of failure, so that he feels

what it is to be an average man? Is there any history of confusion, of self-doubt, of interior anguish? Has he had to deal with fear, come to terms with frustrations, or accept deflated expectations? These are critical questions and they probe for weakness. Why weakness? Because, according to Hebrews, it is in this deficiency, in this interior lack, in this weakness, that the efficacy of the ministry and priesthood of Christ lies.



**“Surely he hath borne our grief and carried our sorrows.”
Isaiah 53:4**

“For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning...He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself is beset with weakness.” (Hebrews 2: 18; 4: 15; 5:2).

How critically important it is for us to enter into the seriousness of this revelation, of this conjunction between priesthood and weakness, that we dwell upon deficiency as part of our vocation! Otherwise we can secularize our lives into an amalgam of desires and talents; and we can feel our weakness as a threat to our priesthood, as indicative that we should rethink what was previously resolved, as symptomatic that we were never genuinely called, that we do not have the resources to complete what we once thought was our destiny and which once spoke to our generosity and fidelity.

What do I mean by weakness? Not the experience of sin; almost its opposite. Weakness is the experience of a peculiar liability to suffering a profound sense of inability both to do and to protect, an inability, even after great effort, to author, to perform as we should want, to effect what we had determined, to succeed with the completeness that we might have hoped. It is this openness to suffering which issues in the inability to secure our own future, to protect ourselves from any adversity, to live with easy clarity and assurance; or to ward off shame, pain, or even interior anguish.

If a man is clever enough or devious enough or poised enough, he can limit his horizons and expectations and accomplish pretty much what he would want. He can secure his perimeters and live without a sense of ineffectual efforts, a feeling of failure or inadequacy or of shame before his temperament or his task -- then he experiences weakness at the heart of his life. And this experience, rather than militating against his priesthood, is part of its essential structure. This liability to suffering forms a critically important indication of the call of God, that terrible sinking sense of incapacity before the mission of Moses and the vocation of Jeremiah, that profound conviction of sinfulness when the vision of God rose before Isaiah and demanded response.

There is a classic comparison running through contemporary philosophy between Socrates and Christ, a judgment between them in human excellence. Socrates went to his death with calmness and poise. He accepted the judgment of the court, discoursed on the alternatives suggested by death and on the dialectical indications of immortality, found no cause for fear, drank the poison and died. Jesus -- how much the contrary.

Jesus was almost hysterical with terror and fear; "with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death." He looked repeatedly to his friends for comfort and prayed for an escape from death, and he found neither. Finally he established control over himself and moved into his death in silence and lonely isolation, even into the terrible interior suffering of the hidden divinity, the absence of God.

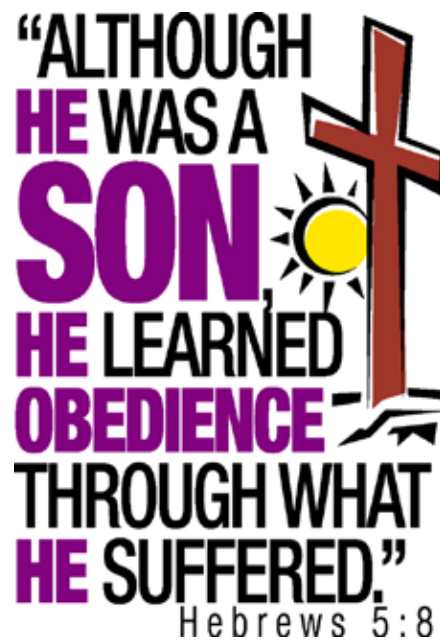
I once thought that this was because Socrates and Jesus suffered different deaths, the one so much more terrible than the other, the pain and agony

of the cross so overshadowing the release of the hemlock. But now I think that this explanation, though correct as far as it runs, is superficial and secondary.

Now I believe that Jesus was a more profoundly weak man than Socrates, more liable to physical pain and weariness, more sensitive to human rejection and contempt, more affected by love and hate. Socrates never wept over Athens. Socrates never expressed sorrow and pain over the betrayal

of friends. He was possessed and integral, never over-extended, convinced that the just man could never suffer genuine hurt. And for this reason, Socrates -- one of the greatest and most heroic men who have ever existed, a paradigm of what humanity can achieve within the individual -- was a philosopher. And for the same reason, Jesus of Nazareth was a priest -- ambiguous, suffering, mysterious, and salvific.

So with us, a priest must also be liable to suffering, weak because he must become like what he touches -- the body of Christ. Obviously the ordinary person understands priest primarily and imaginatively through the Eucharist within the Church. And what is this Eucharist? The body



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of Christ? Yes, certainly, but how understood? How does Christ conceive and present this, his body? This is an important question, for psychologists maintain that a man evaluates himself in terms of his spontaneous body-images, that what he senses and feels about his body is what he senses and feels about himself, that as he perceives his body so he perceives himself.

How then does Christ perceive this, his body? A body that was broken for us. A blood that was shed for us. He understands himself as a sacrificed self, effective only passing through his destruction,

(For to be a human being is to take a certain amount of suffering into life.) It is hard to get at this consideration, since so much in Western civilization attempts to disguise it or affects to despise it. One of the most debilitating aspects of American society is that we do not authentically admit the cost in a struggle and almost never allow real fear to surface. Yet most of us must struggle to make a living, must wonder about our future and about our sense of personal value in a market economy, must deal with the half-articulated and half-understood problems of our children, must

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giving life and freedom only because he himself has moved through death and terror and achieved new life. In our Mass, when we celebrate "the great mystery which he has left us," the Eucharist only achieves its graced entrance into our lives if it is broken and distributed. Thus it is the liability of Christ to suffer, his ability to be broken and shed that makes his priesthood effective and his Eucharist possible. How paradoxical this mystery is! The strength of our priesthood lies precisely in the weakness that seems to threaten it. The sensitivity and openness to discouragement and suffering are constitutive of the mystery of the priesthood itself.

fear what our death will be like -- what it will mean to die; we must deal with the temptation to believe that life is without meaning, that actions are inconsequential and selfish, and that other people are to be used.

Being a priest does not mean, must not mean, "that we are excised from all of that, as if called to deal with others as from a higher eminence; that the struggle for meaning and value and fidelity to the Gospel has been completed in our lives, and that we now deal out of our strengths. God has called us to the salvation of men, and there is no salvation without incarnation.

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The means of human salvation are other men, as Christ was a man, and we can understand and respond to the degree that we feel ourselves “beset with weakness.” If part of our life becomes a subtle, only occasionally noticed effort to maintain a daily sense of priestly call in a culture that increasingly finds us anachronistic and dying – a struggle against a sense of barrenness when God seems so distant, so unreal, and yet his reality is the one thing to which we have given our entire life; an exertion to deal sensitively and honestly with nagging occupations, with difficult colleagues, or with distant superiors in a context that seems lifeless and without promise -- then remember that we are called to be men, to enter as Christ so deeply into the human condition that we can redeem it, that our temptations and desolations are the grace of God calling us to a more profound sensitivity with those who are similarly in battle. As we are tempted, as we ourselves suffer or are in pain, so shall we understand and call upon our compassion.

Secondly, weakness more profoundly relates us to God, because it provides the ambit or the arena in which his grace can be seen, in which his sustaining presence can reveal itself, in which even his power can become manifest. This is why it contradicts expectations and stands as almost the contrary of sin. Weakness is the context for the epiphany of the Lord, it is the night in which he appears -- not always as felt reassurance, but more often as a power to continue, faithful even when we do not feel the strength, even when fidelity means simply putting one foot in front of the other.

Paul saw his own life’s history as this litany of reversals or sufferings, as linking moments of weakness, but transformed through the supporting power of Christ: “I will all the more gladly boast

of my weakness that the power of God may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9, 10).

The priest often discovers what his vocation means in these moments, as the power of God becomes evident in the continuity of his life, a fidelity which his weakness would only seem to undermine but actually supports as it evokes the presence of the Lord. Weakness becomes the vocation of the Lord, our call upon him. It is this night, and the heavy work of rowing against the storm, and the threatening waves that bring him to us. It is not that a priest’s life would

My Grace
is sufficient for thee:
for my **strength**
is made perfect
in weakness.

ideally be some other thing -- without struggle, self-doubt, or suffering -- but that circumstances have unfortunately introduced obduracy and humiliations and a sense of incapacity. Quite the contrary. It is in and through this night that a priest is joined to Christ, as it is in and through this night that he learns that he can trust in the Lord, that he can call out to Jesus in faith, even when this seems the most lifeless thing to do, and find that Jesus Christ is enough. Only in this way will that which we preach and urge upon others become part of our own lives. To commit our lives in trust to the Lord. It is in this experience, the experience of personal weakness, and of having read even limitations as the presence of Christ, of having trusted in him in darkness and having found that one can trust him -- it is the experience that joins Christ to his disciples, as he comes to them walking on the waters.

The experience of weakness deepens both our sensitivity to human religious need and our experience in prayer.

There is a collective consequence that follows from all of this. We must make such a life possible for one another. We must support one another in weakness, forgiving one another our daily faults and carrying one another's burdens. It would be absurd to maintain weakness as essentially a part of the priestly vocation and then to belittle those who are deficient; to resent those who are insensitive, unsophisticated, or clumsy; to allow disagreements to become hostilities. It would be a dreadful thing for us to reject, under one criterion or another, those whom God has called.

The sad fact stands that it is frequently no great trick to get religious men or women to condemn one another. Wars, even personal wars, are terrible realities, and the most horrible of these are religious. For under the guise of good, under the rubric of orthodoxy or liberality, of community or of personal freedom, even of holiness itself, religious men and women can slowly disintegrate into pettiness or cynicism or hostility or bitterness so that "the second state of the man is worse than the first."

Priests are of the same stuff as other men, and they also depend upon men for the unconditioned love of God to be mediated to their weakness. The command of Christ, that we should love one another as he has loved us, is more than a general norm of total benevolence; it is a particular mission: as he cared -- out of his weakness -- for our weakness, and so became our Eucharist.

For us to refuse this support to one another, no matter how religious our articulated standard, is to deceive ourselves almost irremediably

and to limit the mercy and understanding of God that should have come through our life. It is not our weakness that hinders the compassion and the goodness of God. It is that often what others count, our strengths, now become the criteria by which we distance ourselves from others not so gifted, interests through which we discover others as boring or unproductive, dedications and religious attainments by which we judge others as mediocre or obviously compromising. There is nothing in our lives that cannot be twisted into a means for evil, if we are not discerning, and we know when that moment has come, when Satan has finally effected his transformation into an angel of light, when we have judged others by our own achievements and found them wanting, too inconsequential for our support, unworthy of our time and concern. The greatest protection against this terrible pride -- masked as religious seriousness or apostolic commitment, as purity about the things of God, or as honesty about the qualities of men -- is an abiding sense of our own weakness, that searing reminder that as we are strengthened by one who has loved us, so we should support one another.

To live this way is to live the paschal mystery of Christ in weakness and in love. We have made a costly choice deciding to become priests, and we should not disguise that choice. Neither should we disguise the love that we are about nor the sense of personal weakness as we confront those lives. God will grace us in the priesthood, in the ministry that lies before us: "He is not weak

in dealing with you, but powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness; but lives by the power of God. (2 Corinthians 13: 3, 4).

