

On Becoming Fire

*Breathe on me, breath of God,
My soul with grace refine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with your fire divine.*

I have long been intrigued by a story from the days of the Fathers of the desert. A young monk — one might almost say, a seminarian — who is discouraged, approaches one of the venerable elders, and laments that despite all his efforts at holiness — fasting, hours of prayer, following the rules of the community, and so on — he has made no progress, but is overcome with a sense of desolation and fruitlessness. Not only is he not advancing in holiness, but he is slipping further into sin. The old monk looked at him, stretched out his hands, and flames shot out of his fingers. He said: “You must become fire.”

I believe that this story is instructive for all of us as we seek to be better disciples of Jesus, daily growing in holiness, and particularly for those who are called by Jesus to fulfil the mission of his apostles, and to help invite others whom he is calling to discern their vocation, and to enter formation for the holy priesthood. We must become fire.

If we who are bishops and priests do not become fire, and if those preparing for the priesthood do not, but instead become trapped in the dark and cold embrace of the world, the flesh, and the devil, then we are bound for destruction, for the lake of fire that is described in the Apocalypse (Apocalypse 20: 13-15), and we fail those entrusted to our pastoral care. As we are all aware, that has happened since the days of Judas, and is much in the news now. If the flame entrusted to us at Baptism, Confirmation, and Ordination flickers and dies, or is abruptly extinguished, and the darkness of evil envelops the priest or bishop, then havoc is wrought upon the most vulnerable, and the splendor of the Holy Priesthood is sullied, and hidden from those whom God is calling to be priests of Jesus Christ. Satan entered into Judas, the light went out, and it was night. (John 13:27-30)

So we must become fire.

I propose to reflect upon four facets of the scriptural theme of fire, and to apply them to the priestly life and to the ministry of encouraging and guiding those who are called to the Holy Priesthood. I will also make a few observations about how some priests and bishops have gone over to the dark side, but that must not be the focal point of our thoughts or actions. It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness. We would be naïve not to take note of the wickedness of Babylon, whose discord and darkness is destroying this earthly city through which we are passing, and has clearly infiltrated deep into the Church itself, but our hearts must be set on the fiery, dazzling beauty of our true home, the heavenly Jerusalem.

We must become fire. But how do we do that?

I will propose these four facets of the theme of fire that can focus our thoughts, move our will, and guide us in our actions:

1. *The Fire of Sacrificial Love*: This is a common theme in scripture. The sacrificial offering is totally consumed by fire, as we must be by our priestly mission. We are not to hold back, but to give our lives fully to Christ and his people, a fact that is also symbolized in the ordination rite when we lie prostrate before the Lord during the Litany.
2. *The Fire of Purification*: This is a frequent theme in both Old and New Testaments. Fire destroys that which is evil, which must be burned away. And gold and silver are tested in fire. (Sirach 2:5; I Peter 1:7) If we are to serve the Lord, and to invite others to do so, we must experience constant purification, and live in a spirit of repentance. Let the weeds and chaff within our hearts be thrown into the fire. We are currently going through a great and life-giving purification in the Church. The scandal is not that we become aware of evil in the Church, and to our shame so does the world around us; the true scandal is that evil occurs in the Church, and it is at its worst when it is hidden. It festers in darkness. The truth will set us free. Let there be light, and purification can begin.

3. *The Fire of Pentecostal Zeal.* God came down in tongues of fire upon the apostles, cowering in fear, and they were granted apostolic zeal, that boldness which we see in the Acts of the Apostles. The early servants of God were on fire with the Gospel. So must all disciples of Jesus, and especially all who are called to the Holy Priesthood.

4. *The Fire of Majesty and Mystery.* Every priestly vocation begins at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-12), in the presence of the majesty and the mystery of God. A vocation is not a career, but a personal call to the service of the Lord God and of his people. It is sublime, and it is divine. Profound awareness of the majesty of the Lord who calls us must penetrate to the depths of our souls; if it does not, then priesthood and episcopate can become worldly, and can be corrupted.

I will offer some reflections on these four facets of the biblical theme of fire, and will seek to draw from them some practical suggestions for our life as priests or bishops whose mission is to invite candidates to discern whether God is calling them to the holy priesthood.

The Fire of Sacrificial Love

The theme of sacrifice is constant throughout the Old Testament, and is deepened in the New Testament. The sacrificial offering is placed upon the altar and is consumed by fire. To this day, in sacramentals of our Catholic liturgy, we have reminders of the Old Testament vision of sacrifice, as in vigil lights which burn until all the wax is consumed, and in incense which is burned as a sign of worship and prayer. This is an exact continuation of ancient sacrifice: "Let my prayers rise as incense before you, O Lord." (Psalm 141:2)

The offering itself, the victim, is to be the best that the person can give to God. We too must give the best we have to God. Candidates for the priesthood, and priests and bishops, vary greatly in what they may have to offer, but whatever it is, it must be the best they have. No left-overs for the Lord, or for the priesthood.

The offering is then totally removed from the control of the one who offers, by being totally burnt up before the Lord as a sacrificial gift. There is no holding back, no clinging to that which is consumed by fire.

Sacrificial fire speaks to us of the totality of the gift of love: everything is offered, and nothing is held back. In the sacrificial love which is prefigured and symbolized by the fire of sacrifice, our lives are offered completely to the service of God and our neighbour. How many false gods and earthly distractions are jockeying for a place in our lives, so that we offer ourselves to God half-heartedly, not whole-heartedly? But Jesus, recalling Deuteronomy, commands us: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength”. (Mark 12:30; Deuteronomy 6:5)

Two wise guides to a priestly life of whole-hearted sacrificial love are Bishop Sheen, in *The Priest is Not His Own* and Cardinal Manning in *The Eternal Priesthood*. Priests and bishops are to be self-sacrificing, consumed by love of God and neighbour in selfless ministry, until at death they come before the Lord, and hope to hear: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Their prayer must be that of John the Baptist, Christ “must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30)

When the sacrificial fire goes out in a priest or bishop, then he begins to put first his own wants – not his needs, but his wants. He wants control, or adulation, or a comfortable life, or worldly success, or popularity, or satisfaction of his lusts. Outwardly going through the motions of priestly or episcopal service, and saying all the right things, his actual conviction is that Christ must decrease, but I must increase.

When the fire of sacrificial love goes out, we can become self-indulgent. If priests or bishops lead self-indulgent lives, then we should not be surprised if shocking instances of abuse occur. Self-indulgence is the culture in which both sexual and financial corruption flourish.

When the fire of other-centered sacrificial love flickers, or goes out, we can also turn inward, and exalt the ego. A priest can become a star: a narcissistic star. The parish revolves around him, and he is beyond rebuke. People become dependent not on Christ, but upon the priest, an addictive situation that can destroy a parish. But as St Paul says: “what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.” (II Cor 4:5) I remember reading a book that aptly summarizes narcissism: *The Object of My Affection is My Reflection*. That is toxic in the leader of a community, bishop or priest, especially since he is called to be a spiritual father,

and a spiritual shepherd who must be ready to sacrifice even his life for his flock. I recommend reading the description of the poor parson in the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. He was a shepherd, and not a mercenary. He did not run off to London to advance his ecclesiastical career, but stayed at home, visiting his parishioners far and wide. Christ's teaching, and his apostles twelve, he taught, but first he followed it himself.

So when we are accompanying potential candidates for the priesthood, and when we are presenting the priesthood to them, we must stress the fire of selfless, sacrificial love: humble, unassuming, other-centered, sacrificial love. Watch out for signs of self-indulgence and narcissism.

And watch for positive signs of humble service, concern for others, and unassuming hard work. The priest is not his own.

Because it takes time for signs both positive and negative to become evident, it is good to have a lengthy period of discernment and formation, to allow hidden problems to surface before ordination. A program of discernment and formation is more like a crock pot than a wok: it takes time. That is why in my own diocese and seminary I have lengthened the process: more time before entry into the formation community: a year or two in the associates program, four years of College Seminary for some, plus a propaedeutic year, and four years of theology, and a parish internship too. Can't we speed it up a bit? No. No. No. As the title for a great book on time management puts it: *If You Don't Have Time to do it Right, When Will you Find time to Do it Over?*

The Fire of Purification

We must become fire, and the fire of purification allows that to happen, for it burns away our sinfulness. As the book of Sirach says: "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, remain in justice and in fear, and prepare yourself for temptation... Gold and silver are tested in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation" (Sirach 2:1, 5).

We are all sinners, and as Isaiah says, men of unclean lips. In his great vocation experience in the temple, described in Isaiah 6, God purifies his lips and his life with sacred fire, and makes him ready to be sent. "Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven." And I heard the voice of the

Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me!” (Isaiah 6: 6-8)

To concentrate our minds, and to keep everyone on the straight path, it is good to remember the fire and brimstone that obliterated Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24), and the Lake of Fire in the Apocalypse, which is the second death, the death of mortal sin, and which is the destiny of those who are unfaithful to their call (Apoc 20: 10-14). It is a good practice to pray, not only in the Rosary, but all the time, the prayer: “O my Jesus, forgive us our sins. Save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to heaven, especially those who are most in need of your mercy.” Mercy is founded on a recognition of the reality of justice, of right and wrong, of the fact of sin, and of repentance.

Our actions have consequences, as is evident in so many parables of the Gospel, such as that of the rich man and Lazarus. We sometimes forget that Jesus begins his ministry as John the Baptist did, with the words: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near at hand.” And at the end he speaks of the separation of the sheep and the goats. This is sharp, and clear, and calls for a decision. We should listen to the prophet Malachi, who warns the people about the coming day of judgment: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire...” (Malachi 3:2) Paul helps us to live rightly in the present moment when he speaks of the time to come when “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (II Thess 1:7-8) . Any one of us who is tempted to lapse into complacent self – indulgence will be shaken by that vision of the fire of judgment, which is the ultimate sign of accountability.

Disastrously, a toxic sentimentality, in which both the call to repentance and the vision of judgment are obscured, has entered into the Church, and never more so than in the few decades following Vatican II, from the seventies to the mid-nineties. There was a blurring of the clear lines of morality, and the creation of a distorted and highly subjective concept of conscience. It is no coincidence at all that this was the very period, we now clearly realize, in which most of the devastating incidents of priestly and episcopal abuse that are now in the news took place. Designing policies and other things to deal with this abuse is surely necessary, and largely has already been done. But that is radically insufficient. We surely do not need a policy to stop us from engaging in self-indulgent evil that

leads to the Lake of Fire. All Christians, but especially bishops and priests, need to listen to and act on these simple words of Jesus: Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near at hand.

It is also true that when the moral and spiritual demands of Christianity, or of the priesthood, become no more than an ideal, much to be praised in honeyed words, but with no practical relevance, and held to be impossible to actually live, then individually and as a Church we have become gnostics. But neither Christianity nor the priesthood is an abstract ideal; God does not play with us, holding out to us an ideal that it is impossible for us to live. By God's grace, and only by God's grace, every single one of us can actually become a saint. Vatican II spoke of the universal call to holiness, not the universal call to mediocrity. With a vision of the purifying refiner's fire to keep us honest, we are challenged every day to be happy, healthy, holy priests. Nothing less than that. That is the reality of the priesthood.

All of us in pastoral ministry, and especially we whose mission it is to accompany those whom the Lord may be calling to the priesthood, need to live repentant lives. Just as a personal suggestion, I recommend that at the elevation at Mass, when we raise the Host and the Chalice, we pray quietly: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner." And we need to get to confession frequently. Every day, may the fire of purification burn away within us all that is unworthy of Christ.

As we consider applicants for the seminary, we need to look for a repentant and contrite heart. Certainly no-one is worthy of the priesthood, and everyone is a sinner, and humanly imperfect. We can talk glibly about being sinners, but in ourselves, and in those considering a vocation, it is vital that the fire of purification actually be burning brightly, that we truly (though, of course, without scrupulosity) be aware of the geography of our souls, and that we trustingly resolve, despite our weaknesses, and by God's grace, to actually live a life of holiness. This is not an impossible ideal, despite our frailty. In fact, consciousness of our weaknesses leads us to know our need for God, and to realize that we will be faithful and spiritually fruitful as priests, not because of our own efforts but because of the power of Christ. We should listen to that great sinner and saint, St Paul, in II Corinthians: "a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made

perfect in weakness.” I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (II Cor 12: 7-9).

The Fire of Pentecostal Zeal

In my former life of almost twenty years of preparing seminarians for the priesthood, I recall discussions of men who were not obviously incompetent or immoral, who might even be doing quite well academically, but who seemed to be inert. They were drifting towards ordination, with no clear reason to stop them. But did they have the apostolic fire? Were they driven by a true love for Jesus? Or were they simply going through the motions?

Someone who is ordained needs to have the apostolic fire of Pentecost: “When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:1-4)

Some are introverts, and some are extraverts. Some have more lively personalities, and some are more quiet. Those superficial temperamental characteristics are irrelevant. Exuberant zeal is not required, and may in fact become a problem. But deep within, each person who is to be ordained must burn with the Pentecostal fire. As the prayer at one of the ritual Masses for ordination says: “make these your servants worthy ministers of your altar, and ardent yet gentle heralds of your Gospel.” Priests and bishops, and seminarians, must be *ardent*: they must be on fire with zeal to serve God and his people. The fire of Pentecost must burn away all self-referential careerism, as we boldly head out into the streets of the secular city, like the apostles after Pentecost, in love with the Lord and forgetful of self, ready to lose ourselves in our priestly ministry.

So we search for candidates who already burn with the Pentecostal fire, and who show it by their acts of generous initiative in their parish and in the activities of their life in society. Our seminary formation program must provide opportunities to develop and manifest that zeal. I don’t want to ordain a dead battery. One of the joys of working with candidates for the priesthood, as I have done almost all of my priestly life, is to have the privilege of being with zealous

and inspiring seminarians. And that is one of the greatest joys of being a bishop, as I have been now for twenty one years: to be the bishop of such zealous and inspiring priests.

If a priest is himself alive and on fire, then he will be able to pass that on to others, as the flame of the Paschal candle spreads from taper to taper throughout the church at the Easter vigil, until the whole church is bright with the light of Christ. It has been said that education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire; that is even more true of evangelization. We must keep in mind the example of the Lord Jesus on the road to Emmaus. The two disciples marvelled: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (Luke 24:33)

So that is what we should look for in candidates for the priesthood: men who are on fire with love for our Lord and with zeal in his service. And we need in our program of formation to help the seminarians become so profoundly committed to the life of holiness, that the fire will burn steadily and quietly throughout their priestly life. There are two times when a priest or bishop is horizontal in Church: face down at his ordination and face up at his funeral. In every moment between those two points, he must be on fire with sacrificial love and priestly zeal.

The Fire of Majesty and Mystery

We must become fire, and we catch that fire from the burning bush, where Moses discovered his vocation. It is in contact with the mysterious majesty of God that we discover and daily renew our vocation to the holy priesthood. Priests are not branch managers, and bishops are not CEO's: woe to those who think in those terms, or who think of a priestly or episcopal career. We are unworthy servants and messengers of the living God, and we must live our mission in this fallen world always conscious of the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem, which is our home.

If we look to the vocation stories of the Old Testament, so often they are set in the context of divine glory, of the fire of majesty and mystery. God makes a covenant with Abraham in a fiery theophany of sacrifice (Genesis 15:12-21), and Moses hears the Lord's voice from the burning bush. Isaiah receives his vocation in the temple, in a vision of the glory of the Lord, as an angel of God touches his lips with a burning coal. Elijah passes his mantle to Elisha, and is swept up into heaven in a chariot of fire. (II Kings 2:9-11) Jesus reveals his glory in the

transfiguration on Mount Tabor, and Paul is dazzled by divine light in the road to Damascus.

A vocation to the Holy Priesthood is never prosaic; it is always glorious, though it is rare that the glory is as visibly manifested as in the Biblical vocation accounts. We are servants of the living God, and must never forget it. Some have forgotten it, as did Judas when Satan entered into him, and it was night. But that requires effort to resist God's grace. There is a marvellous image of the Last Supper in the chapel of Prince of Peace monastery near San Diego: there are shiny haloes over Jesus and all of the apostles at the table. But on the left, Judas is leaving the table, and walking away from his halo. Bishops and priests have sometimes done that.

We need to be conscious of the sacred office that was entrusted to us at ordination. We are stewards of the mysteries of God. To use that sacred office for personal benefit is simply wrong. I used to advise my seminarians that when they are priests they should go to the end of the line, unless doing so would be false humility that insults others, and wear clerical attire, as a sign of their mission, though not when buying a car.

So our vocation ministry must be founded on a profound awe of the privilege of being called to serve the Lord God as priests. And the holy priesthood must be treated with reverence – the priesthood, not the priest. Clericalism is not too high an estimation of the priesthood, but too low an estimation: it is using the holy priesthood to advance one's personal desires, as sadly has happened. The priesthood is to be lived with sacrificial love, not used. If bishops or priests use their sacred office to dominate others, to take advantage of people's quite appropriate reverence for the priestly office, or to manipulate that reverence to satisfy the cleric's self-indulgent desires, then that is not simply evil; it is sacrilegious evil.

Every day we need to remind ourselves of the majesty of the Lord, whose servants we are. That is one reason why making a daily holy hour of adoration is such a good idea, and why the celebration of the Eucharist, and Eucharistic adoration, should be at the heart of our vocation efforts. In any case, all Jesus ever told us about vocations was to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into harvest. We need constantly and consciously to return to Mount Tabor, and to the heavenly Jerusalem, if we are to be faithful and fruitful in our priestly ministry in

this vale of tears. As we pray before the tabernacle, the fire of the sanctuary lamp is a visible sign of the majesty and mystery of God.

You must become Fire

In every age until the end of time the Holy Priesthood is entrusted to frail and sinful men. Many priests have become famous as saints; most priests try earnestly each day, by God's grace, to be faithful and humble servants; and some priests have betrayed their mission and their Lord. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is glorious, but we are not. We are called not just to do the minimum, or to shine by our own light, or to advance within the earthly structure of the church; we are called to become fire.

We must burn with the fire of sacrificial love, not holding back, but offering everything we have and are to Jesus and to the mission upon which he sends us. We must be repentant, alert to God's justice, and trusting in his mercy, made holy in the fire of purification.

We must be filled with the fire of Pentecost, boldly proclaiming Christ in the darkness of the secular world.

And with awe and wonder we daily come before the Lord in prayer, meditating on his Word and receiving new life from him in the celebration of the Eucharist and in Eucharistic adoration, seeing reality as it truly is, in the light of the fire of divine majesty and mystery.

The young man said: what must I do? And the wise elder replied: you must become fire.

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