

PRIESTHOOD AS VICTIMHOOD

I was ordained a priest by Bishop Joseph Gray in 1984, on 4th August, the Feast of St. John Vianney. It was in my home parish, St. Vincent's Altrincham, a wonderful day, although I'll never forget my two-year old niece on the front row, getting very impatient with the Bishop at his lengthy sermon. She started crying, then threw the Order of Service at him, shouting: Stop it! Stop it! I hope you won't feel like that with me today, a mere youngster amongst these fine Jubilarians celebrating their ruby, golden and diamond anniversaries of ordination: Canon Michael Hore, Fr. Tom Grufferty, and Fr. Denis Blackledge 40, Fr. Eddie Richer, Fr. Brian Croughan, Fr. Wally Beale and Canon Richard Hind 50, and Fr. David Freeman 60 years ordained. We also remember in our prayers the other Jubilarians unable to be with us for this Mass.

In that First Reading, St. Paul expresses exactly what you feel being a priest, a pastor, the father of a community: *like a mother feeding and looking after her children, we felt so devoted and protective towards you, and [loved] you so much, we were eager to hand over to you not only the Good News but our whole lives as well.* By baptism every Christian shares in Christ's priesthood but by Holy Order, some are set apart to act *in persona Christi capitis*, in the Person of Christ the Head, that is to be pastors, to be servants, to look after the flock. In the Latin Rite, this is made manifest in the promise of celibacy. Like Jesus himself, priests are celibate, and like Jesus himself, they too are called to lay down their lives for their Bride, the community. No wonder in the Gospel, the apostles were indignant with the sons of Zebedee, James and John. For being a priest is not about sitting at God's right or left, lording it over people. It's about service. As Jesus said: *You do not know what you are asking.* Indeed, there is *a cup you must drink.*

A priest-friend of mine in another diocese was for many years PP in a small country-town, where he was very popular. Fr. Jim built the parish up; he renovated the church and started a new school. Suddenly, six years ago, the bishop moved him to a large urban parish, with many problems, where the people idolised the previous PP. They didn't take well to Jim and found him a bit traditional. A clique of comfortably retired people dominated everything. A bitter row about school caused the housekeeper to resign: she spat at him. And when he tried sorting out the parish club, a drinkers' den, someone made

a false allegation that hit the press. Jim started drinking and had a breakdown. Then four years ago, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, he collapsed and died, just 62. In worldly terms his priesthood had ended in utter failure

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. In the Catholic Tradition, to be a priest means to be a victim and so what happened to Jesus will in some way happen to us. Our discipleship and our priesthood is bound to attract criticism, ridicule, even outright opposition, for the Way of Christ is always the way of the Cross. Yet in Christ, Love is stronger than death and the Lord freely grants the grace of his resurrection to help us. So today as we honour these good men for their inspiring service, let us ask the Lord to grant them continuing health and happiness. Indeed, let us pray for ourselves too that one day we may be found worthy to hear the Lord say to us what we pray he will say to these priests: *Well done, good and faithful servant: come and enter the happiness of your Lord!*