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THE COMMON PRIESTHOOD OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

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Abstract

Historically priesthood is a creation of cult. Almost every culture developed some form of priesthood. The notion of priesthood was different in Israel since the Israelites considered themselves as a priestly people. For Christians Jesus is the only mediator between God and humans. However, Christians share in the priesthood of Christ through their baptism and confirmation. The vocation to live as a Christian is a call to live the priesthood of Jesus who offered himself as a victim for the salvation of the world. Ministerial priesthood which developed in the church is meant to help all baptized to live their priestly call to the full. Yet undue emphasis is still given to ministerial priesthood in the church even though Vatican II emphasized the vocation of all Christians to be priests. Women in the Church live their priestly vocation seriously even though they do not often talk about it or are conscious about it. Women need to appropriate to themselves their call to participate in the priesthood of Christ on account of their baptism and live that call with full awareness.

Keywords: Priesthood, Spiritual Sacrifice, Priesthood of the Faithful, Ministerial Priesthood, Priesthood of Women

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Introduction

On Maundy Thursday the Church highlights three aspects in the liturgy, namely, the commemoration of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, the institution of the Eucharist and the institution of priesthood. This year as I participated in the liturgy, I asked myself what we are really celebrating on that day. Are we celebrating the priesthood of Christ or the institution of the ministerial priesthood? I felt that we are celebrating the priesthood of Jesus more than the institution of the ministerial priesthood. With this new awareness I greeted not only the priests on that day but also the lay faithful because all of us share in the priesthood of Christ by virtue of our baptism.

This paper is an attempt to understand the common priesthood of all baptized Christians. I do this in a context when Catholic Church strictly prohibits even the discussion about the possibility of women becoming ordained ministers in the Church. As a woman follower of Jesus in the Catholic Church, I do feel the burden and the suffocation such prohibition brings to women. So it is important for me to understand the common priesthood of women in the Church and to explore how they live their priesthood in their daily life situations.

1. Priesthood in the Old Testament

Historically priesthood is a creation of cult. It is an externally visible veneration in sense-perceptible behaviour which occurs within a community through legitimate representatives and in set forms.¹ Almost every culture developed some form of priesthood. Israel too developed the notion of priesthood in their religious tradition. In most cultures and religions, the priest's job was to arrange the transactions between the gods and the community. The priests ensure that the gods did not become hostile. The priest stood as a mediator, on the frontier, looking both ways, to the gods and to the people; communicating to the people the message of the gods, communicating to the gods the offering of the people.

There was one major difference between the religion of the Jewish people and that of the surrounding nations. While each nation worshipped their national gods, Israel was called to worship the God of the entire world. They also differed from other nations when it came to the understanding of priesthood. Israel does not just *contain* a number of priests, but as a *whole nation* she is priest of the God of the Universe. For the God of Israel tells them, "all the earth is mine, and

¹Irene Beck, "Sacral Existence: The Common Priesthood of the People of God as a Cultic and Extra Cultic Reality," *Theology Digest* 17, 1 (Spring 1969) 22-29 at 22.

you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:3, 5, 6). Israel as a whole nation is priest for humankind and their God is the God of the whole world.²

So from the very beginning of their existence, Israel understood herself as a priestly people. Their priestly vocation came from Yahweh, a mission entrusted by Yahweh to the nations. She has to be the revealer and witness of the true God. Unlike in other nations, priesthood in Israel was a collective quality of the community.³

2. Priesthood in the New Testament

The terms 'priest' and 'priesthood' are applied to Christ and Christians in the New Testament. Scripture never speaks of ordained ministers as priests. In the letter to Hebrews (10:5-9), Christ is pictured as the sole-sufficient priest. In him both parties of the covenant, God and human, meet. Thus we see a reversal taking place in the New Testament. It turned out that the priesthood of the Jews was preparing for and culminated in one man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Christians did not have priests in the beginning but had supervisors and elders. The only priest in that sense is one who was priest in the fullest and final sense, Jesus of Nazareth. He is 'the one mediator between God and humankind'-Jesus Christ. He is the only priest and his sacrifice was considered as the only sacrifice.⁴

Meditating on the meaning on this one priest, the early Christians made a new kind of move back from the individual to the whole community again, for they saw the whole community of believers as sharing in the priestly mission of Christ. We see St Peter's first letter re-echoing and giving new meaning to the words of Exodus: "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (Ex 19:6); but now we are "a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices to God *through Jesus Christ*" (1 Pet 2:5). Christians are priests for the whole of humankind before God of the universe — to bring God to the world and the world to God.

2.1. The Priesthood of the People of God

This one priesthood of Christ is shared equally by all — the faithful, religious and clergy. The lay faithful participate in Christ's priesthood first by their union with him through sharing his life as

²Herbert McCabe, OP, "A Kingdom of Priests?" *New Black Friars* 71, 844 (Dec 1990) 524-26 at 524.

³George Karakunnel, "The Priestly Function of the People of God," *Living Word* 94, 6 (Nov-Dec 1988) 363-379 at 364.

⁴Herbert McCabe, "A Kingdom of Priests?" 525.

children of God. Secondly, they are given a sacramental sharing in the priesthood of Christ through the characters of baptism and confirmation and are thus deputed to take part in the church's worship.⁵

"Come to him, a living stone... and 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" (1 Pet 2:4-5). This verse speaks of stones first, then of house, where sacrifice is offered. It is not an individual Christian who is a priest but the community itself is a holy priesthood.⁶ Again in 1 Peter we find, "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 Pet 2:9). Here St Peter applies to Christians exactly the same titles that Moses and Isaiah had formerly applied to Israel. The priesthood of Christians is said to be royal, because it is coming from Christ, who was at once priest and king.⁷

There are other New Testament passages that speak about the priesthood of all those who believe in Jesus. For instance the author of the letter to the Hebrews says: "...let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God... Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb 13:15-16). The letter to the Ephesians says that Christians have access to the Spirit of God by means of their priesthood (Eph 2:18). Again in the book of Revelations we read, "To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever" (Rev 1:5-6).

The letter to the Hebrews underlines three walls of separation within OT worship: separation between people and priest (only the High Priest may enter the sanctuary); between priest and victim (the priest, a sinner, cannot offer himself, and the animal victim is incapable of offering itself) and the impossibility of authentic communion between the victim (animal) and God. In Christ all these separations are abolished. Christ offered himself as victim⁸ (Heb 7:27; 9:14, 25). He offered his personal obedience unto death (Heb 10:5-10).

⁵This view was first put forward by Yves Congar in his book *Lay Faithful in the Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965. See Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 32, 2 (April 1965) 93-115 at 98.

⁶George Karakunnel, "The Priestly Function of the People of God," 365.

⁷George Karakunnel, "The Priestly Function of the People of God," 366.

⁸While applying the word 'victim' for Jesus we need to be cautious about its negative implications in today's context. Unlike an animal victim who has no freedom of choice, Jesus voluntarily chooses to offer himself as a sacrifice. In that sense he is not a *victim*. But we continue to refer to him as a victim because of the OT understanding of sacrifice where the animal which was sacrificed had no freedom of choice.

Christ's sacrifice, the doing of God's will, transforms his humanity and perfectly unites it to God, thus removing the distance between priest, victim and God.⁹

This abolition of all separations grounds the common priesthood of the whole church. Hence all believers are raised to priesthood. Everyone may now approach God without fear, a right previously reserved to the High Priest. Hebrews 7:25-calls Christians as "those who come to God through him (Christ)." Access to God is no more the privilege of a small group.

2.2. Meaning of Christian Priesthood

The four pillars of the priesthood of the faithful are vocation, community, faith and responsibility. First and foremost, Christian priesthood is a vocation. Christians have been called and selected. Secondly, they are called to a community. St Peter speaks of Christians forming a spiritual house made up of many stones. Christians are a chosen race having common ancestry in Christ. They form a nation, not because they are born within a geographical space but all born of grace.¹⁰ The third aspect is faith. It is by their faith that they believe. Therefore the heart of Christian priesthood is faith.¹¹ Moreover, every vocation implies a mission, a purpose. To have been called to be a Christian is a call to exercise the responsibilities of a Christian.¹² It is through baptism and confirmation that all Christians share in the priesthood of Christ. As can be seen below, the Christian priesthood has multiple meanings.

2.2.1. Sharing in the Passion and Death of Christ

Christian priesthood is the priesthood of the cross; Christians exercise it only in sharing the passion and death of Christ. As they share in it, they are in solidarity with the victims of this world. This is the first and fundamental priesthood which all Christians share by baptism.

2.2.2. Offering Sacrifices

The vocation to Christian priesthood demands sacrifice. According to 1 Peter Christians as a holy priesthood are to offer spiritual sacrifices which are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. It is a new kind of sacrifice, one that is in the image of Christ's sacrifice.

⁹Albert Vanhoye, "Common and Ministerial Priesthood," *Theology Digest* 25, 2 (Summer 1977) 157-161 at 157.

¹⁰Nobert Thomas, "An Assessment of Common and Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Canon 517 # 2," *Vaihari* 14, 1 (January-June 2009) 122-136 at 124.

¹¹Nobert Thomas, "An Assessment of Common and Ministerial Priesthood," 125.

¹²Nobert Thomas, "An Assessment of Common and Ministerial Priesthood," 126.

Christians are asked to offer their own existence. St Paul presents this perspective in Rom 12:1 when he says, “offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice...” The letter to the Hebrews has the same orientation. Recalling that Christ came to do God’s will (10:7-9) by offering his own body (10:10), the author urges Christians to do God’s will (10:36; 13:21; cf. 5:8f).¹³ In the patristic writing, a recurring theme is that Christians are obliged to offer to God the sacrifice of a virtuous life. Modern writers continue to write of the living of a virtuous life as a function of the priesthood of the faithful.¹⁴

A committed Christian makes in his/her life the following sacrifices: 1. Sacrifice of time and energy: it consists in using them for others, by making oneself available and approachable to others. 2. Sacrifice of autonomy: Sacrificing one’s freedom for others. This implies obliging to others, and assuming responsibilities. 3. Sacrifice of Service: the Christian expresses his/her gratitude for God’s gifts to him/her by placing them at the service of others. 4. Sacrifice of security: Apostolic involvement always involves risks — the risk of rejection, failure or risk of life itself. 5. Sacrifice of Attachment: The virtues of chastity, poverty and obedience are for all Christians. When they are put into practice in the various circumstances of one’s life they have a great value. 6. Sacrifice of the Cross: Cross assumes different forms — tiredness, sadness, anxiety, rejection, failure, loss of health, alienation, catastrophes of life and death, etc.¹⁵

2.2.3. To Make Perfect

In the Septuagint, *teleioun* ('to make perfect') designates the consecration of priests. In the letter to Hebrews, this term is used three times to indicate Christ’s consecration, a consecration through suffering (2:10; 5:8-9) and consisting in a deep transformation of Christ’s humanity. Therefore consecration is truly “to make perfect” the person consecrated. In his passion, Christ “was made perfect” (Heb 5:9), and he “made perfect forever those he consecrated” (Heb 10:14).¹⁶

2.2.4. Mediator Function

Through the virtue of their common priesthood the people of God are set apart and consecrated to participate in the two-fold mediatory function of Christ, the descending mediation whereby he brought the

¹³Albert Vanhoye, “Common and Ministerial Priesthood,” 158.

¹⁴Laurence Ryan, “Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 32, 2 (April 1965) 93-115 at 107.

¹⁵Timothy McCarthy, *The Post-Conciliar Christian*, New York: Kennedy and Sons, 1967, 129ff. As cited by George Karakunnel, “The Priestly Function of the People of God,” 366-7.

¹⁶Albert Vanhoye, “Common and Ministerial Priesthood,” 159.

knowledge and love of God to humans and the ascending mediation whereby he offered true worship to God on behalf of humankind (AA, 3).

2.3. Ways of Exercising Common Priesthood

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his own vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet and king (1546). Again, "The common priesthood of the faithful is exercised, by the unfolding of baptismal grace — a life of faith, hope and charity, a life according to the Spirit" (1547).

2.3.1. Participation in the Eucharist

It is by participating in the Eucharist that the priesthood of the faithful is exercised liturgically. By receiving Christ sacramentally the faithful are united with him and with one another. Vatican II repeats the traditional teaching that the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised in living the Christian life and by participating in the liturgy when it says, "The faithful, by reason of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise their priesthood, too, by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation, and active charity" (LG, 10). The teaching of the Constitutions of Liturgy and the Church gives a priestly and ecclesial dimension to every sphere of Christian activity. It shows that the priesthood of the faithful is exercised in the entire sacramental life of the church as well as in the Eucharist.¹⁷ Modern writers like H.F. Davis have no hesitation in saying that it is precisely because they share in the priesthood of Christ that the faithful participate in the liturgy.¹⁸

2.3.2. Participation in the Sacramental Life of the Church

The faithful exercise their priesthood in receiving the other sacraments too (LG, 10, 11). Not only they sanctify themselves but also they give worship to God, strengthen and express their own faith, and help to build up the Body of Christ (SC, 59). Christians who approach the sacrament of penance are reconciled with the church and those who receive the anointing of the sick contribute to the welfare of the people of God by enduring their sufferings patiently and in union with Christ.¹⁹

¹⁷Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 108.

¹⁸H.F. Davis, "The Priesthood of the Faithful," *Downside Review* 69 (1951) 155-170; C.A. Schleck, "The Lay Priesthood and the Mass," *Sciences ecclesiastiques*, 12 (1960) 83-103.

¹⁹Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 109.

2.4. Ministerial Priesthood and Priesthood of all Christians

It is the priesthood of the people of God that gives meaning and purpose to ministerial priesthood. The ordained priest presides at the Eucharist, but what he exercises is the priesthood of all Christians; at mass *all* consecrate the bread and wine through the ministry of the priest. He is there to represent the common priesthood of all and not just to represent the congregation present but the baptismal priesthood of the whole church throughout the world. In other words, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the priesthood of the faithful in that it helps to build up the priestly people who have been taken into Christ by faith and sacraments.²⁰

The ordained minister takes the place of Christ and of the whole church in the Eucharistic celebration and in most of the sacraments. The faithful are spiritually begotten, cared for, ruled, taught and formed by the ordained ministers of the church (LG, 10, 11, 32; SC, 7, 26, 28, 33, 41, 42). Vatican II highlights the positive nature of their mutual relationship. It stresses what the two forms of priesthood have in common and how they complement each other. All this is a consequence of the Council's teaching on the oneness of Christ's priesthood. The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood, in each in its own way, participates in the one priesthood of Christ (LG, 5, 8, 10, 31, 34; SC, 5, 7, 83).

Priesthood of the faithful is shared by the Church's ordained ministers as well as the laity. The Constitution on the Church brings out this point by including its teaching on the priesthood of the faithful in its exposition of the church as the people of God. In this way it shows that the baptismal participation in Christ's priesthood is a value which is shared by all the members of the church and is anterior to any hierarchical differences which exists between the members. The ordained priests could not receive the special participation in Christ's priesthood conferred in the sacrament of orders had they not already shared in the common priesthood of the faithful through their baptism and confirmation.²¹

The hierarchy in the church is a hierarchy of function, ministry, and power and as far as being a Christian is concerned there is no hierarchy. There is in the church a fundamental value and dignity which is shared by all and which is anterior to any differences of function within the church. In the past more emphasis has been put

²⁰Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 99.

²¹Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 104.

on the differences between them than on what they have in common and how they complement each other (see LG, 32). The Constitution of the Church brings out the wonderful complementary nature of the two participations in Christ's priesthood. The two forms of priesthood depend on each other.²²

3. Understanding the Priesthood of the Faithful in the History of the Church

The Patristic fathers were clear about the priestly character of the people of God.²³ St Thomas Aquinas thought that sacramental characters conferred by Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders were three distinct priestly consecrations. He explicitly taught that priesthood of all Christians is given at baptism. Luther stressed that every Christian has direct access to God, by virtue of his/her priestly character.

However, in an age of clericalism, the common priesthood of the people was belittled, and was subordinated to ministerial priesthood. It is in this context that Luther went to the extreme of denying the sacramentality of the Holy Orders.²⁴ In the Catholic circles, though the common priesthood was never denied, yet its inner reality was never well explored. Later the Council of Trent gave a balanced description of the priesthood of the people.²⁵

Pope Pius XI reminded the Christians that they share in Christ's eternal priesthood and that they exercise this priesthood by uniting themselves as victims with Christ in the Mass, by imitating Christ in their lives, and, in particular by doing apostolic work under the

²²Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 106.

²³For instance, Justin the Martyr says: "We are the true high priestly race of God." According to Irenaeus, "All the just possess the priestly rank." Origen writes: "Priesthood is given to the whole church of God and to all who believe." See Yves Congar, O.P. *Lay People in the Church*, 123. As quoted by Karakunnel, "The Priestly Function of the People of God," 367.

²⁴George Karakunnel, "The Priestly Function of the People of God," 368.

²⁵The Council says, "In as much as Sacred Scriptures speaks of two kinds of priesthoods, one internal and one external, it will be necessary to form a distinct idea of each. Regarding the internal priesthood, all the faithful are said to be priests once they have been washed by the saving waters of baptism. Especially is this true regarding those who have the Spirit of God and who by the help of the divine grace, have been made living members of the great high priest, Jesus Christ, for enlightened by faith which is enflamed by charity, they offer up spiritual sacrifice to God on the altar of their hearts. Among such sacrifices must be reckoned every good, virtuous action done, for the glory of God." Catechism of Council of Trent, ii, 7, q. 23, quoted in Timothy McCarthy, *The Post-Conciliar Christian*, 76. George Karakunnel, "The Priestly Function of the People of God," 369.

guidance of their bishops and priests.²⁶ Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Mediator Dei* explicitly speaks about the priestly dignity of all the faithful. He teaches that by reason of their baptism Christians are members of Christ the priest and share in His priesthood.²⁷ However, in the post-Reformation tradition, priesthood was understood more in terms of holy orders. The priesthood of all believers was seen more in terms of metaphorical or improper sense.²⁸

During this same period there were other theologians who always attributed a real share in the priesthood of Christ to all those who are baptized. They accepted the view of St Thomas who said that the characters of baptism and confirmation give to Christians a share in the priesthood of Christ. Theologians point out that this unique priesthood is possessed in its perfection by Christ alone but that different imperfect participations in it are given by Christ to the people of God. According to them the one priesthood of the New Law is something analogical which is found primarily and fully in Christ and is shared really but imperfectly and in essentially different ways by all Christians and by ordained ministers.²⁹

3.1. Vatican II and Priesthood of the Faithful

The teaching on the Common priesthood of all the faithful is found in the dogmatic Constitution on the Church (LG, 10 and 34) and the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. *Lumen Gentium* says that it is through baptism Christian shares in the priesthood of Christ. He/she exercises his/her priesthood by offering up to God all his/her works, prayers, apostolic endeavours, his/her ordinary married and family life, his/her daily occupations, his/her physical and mental relaxations and the hardships of life, and especially by joining his/her own self-offering to that of Christ at Mass.³⁰

The whole decree on the Lay Apostolate is a commentary on the royal and prophetic priesthood of Christians. A person is incorporated into Christ's priesthood by being incorporated into his body through baptism and is perfected and strengthened by confirmation.

It is in the chapter which deals with people of God that Vatican II deals most fully with the priesthood of the faithful. In dealing with

²⁶*Miserentissimus Redemptor*, AAS 20 (1928) 171-172. As quoted by Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 94.

²⁷*Mediator Dei*, AAS 39 (1947) 552 ff. As quoted by Laurence Ryan "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 94.

²⁸Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 95.

²⁹Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 96-7.

³⁰George Karakunnel, "The Priestly Function of the People of God," 370.

the people of God before dealing specifically with the hierarchical organization of the Church, the Council teaches that the church is primarily the community of those united with Christ. It further says that in God's plan the fact of being Christian is the primary value than the hierarchical arrangement of functions in the community.³¹

It has also drawn our attention to the fact that priesthood of the faithful is a positive reality. It is noteworthy that the Council did not defer treatment of the priesthood of the faithful to the chapter on the laity. To do that would be to suggest that it is something which is possessed only by the laity and not by those in holy orders. Again it is mentioned in the chapter on laity only to show that the laity shares in the common priesthood of the People of God. The Constitution on the Church teaches the doctrine of the priesthood of the faithful in a clear fashion.³²

The Constitution on Liturgy too takes it as an unquestioned fact that the faithful are a real priesthood and that this priesthood is exercised in the Liturgy. It presents it as part of the doctrinal basis for participation by the faithful in the church's worship (SC, 7, 14).

In Baptism Christians are given an initial, radical participation in Christ's priesthood. They are now incorporated into the priestly people of God. Confirmation gives them a more perfect participation in this same priesthood. It binds them more perfectly to the Church; the Holy Spirit gives them a special strength as a result of which they are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ (LG, 11).³³ It is through them that Christ now exercises his priesthood.

4. Women Exercising their Priesthood in the Church

How do women exercise their baptismal priesthood? Looking at the lives of many women including my mother, I can confidently say

³¹Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 99-100.

³²Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men (Heb 5:15), made the new people 'a kingdom and priests to God the Father' (Apoc 1:6; 5: 9-10). The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all the works of Christian men they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1Pet 2: 4-10). Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God (Acts 2:4, 47), should present themselves as a living sacrifice holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1). Everywhere on earth they should bear witness to Christ and give and answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them (1 Pet 3:15). LG, 10; see also 11, 31, 33, 34.

³³Laurence Ryan, "Vatican II and the Priesthood of the Laity," 102.

that women have been faithful in living out their baptismal priesthood to a great extent. However they have not consciously articulated to themselves how they exercise their priesthood.

Recently a student of mine studying for priesthood shared something about his home. His father was addicted to alcohol and used to treat his mother badly. As a growing up boy, once he even raised his hand against his father. Last year while he was at home the same situation occurred. His father was dead drunk and was abusing his mother. When he could not stand it any longer, he came out of his room. But his mother forced him to go back and closed the door so that he will not be tempted to hit his father in anger. After some time when he looked out, he saw his mother holding a Rosary in her hand, standing in front of his room and praying. His father continued his verbal abuses against her.

I marvel at this woman who stood with deep faith between an alcoholic and abusive husband and a son who is outraged at his father's behaviour. For me, this woman was living her priesthood hundred percent on that day. I am sure that she did all that she can to cure her husband of his addiction before accepting the situation. She has reached a state where she is able to offer herself as a victim for sacrifice just like Jesus by accepting to remain with her addicted husband in spite of his abusive behaviour for the sake of her children.

At the same time I am aware of the danger such situations can bring to women. Often women are taught to accept their sufferings passively by looking at Jesus on the cross. There are women who consider such situations as their fate and suffer silently. Some even lose their individuality and a positive sense of self. I do not consider such sufferings as redemptive. However, there are also women who in difficult and trying situations have made choices to remain in an abusive or unjust situation for a greater good. When they make such choices they are not victims. They are indeed exercising their agency. They choose to undergo suffering for the sake of others.

Moreover, there are thousands of women who offer their bodies as a living sacrifice. Often mothers let go off their right to care for their bodies like taking meals on time, getting adequate rest, having sufficient intake of nutritious food, etc. Women accept the discomforts and pain suffered in their bodies during the time of pregnancy and childbirth. Often they sacrifice their time and energy, their autonomy and freedom in order that the family may live in peace and happiness.

Women also exercise their priesthood through the worship they offer to God both at home and in the church. As mothers they play the

priestly role of a mediator. They take their little ones to God and bring God to their children. At times they even bring their spouses to God.

In times of pain and difficulty women tend to look at Jesus on the cross and draw strength. My mother helped all of us; her children to look at Jesus on the cross and draw strength from him especially in times of pain. I never heard her complain for being confined to bed for ten years. But on the contrary, she felt that she has a responsibility to pray not only for my father but also on behalf of him. One day she told me that God would not call her until she completes praying all the rosaries which my father should have prayed but did not during his life time.

Many women also exhibit a special devotion to Eucharist. They usually do not miss an opportunity to participate in the Eucharist. They offer themselves and their life struggles together with Jesus who offered himself as a sacrifice to God. They also live their priesthood each time they celebrate other sacraments like the sacrament of reconciliation and anointing.

Reflecting on the lives of the many women whom I know including my mother, sisters, sisters-in-law, aunts, and friends, I have no doubt to say that women live their vocation to priesthood in an extraordinary way. They are the living examples of Christian priesthood for me.

Concluding Remarks

Christians share in the priesthood of Christ through their baptism and confirmation. The vocation to live as a Christian is a call to live the priesthood of Jesus who offered himself as a victim for the salvation of the world. Ministerial priesthood which developed in the church is meant to help all the baptized to live their priestly call to the full.

Undue emphasis is still given to ministerial priesthood in the church even though Vatican II emphasized the vocation of all Christians to be priests. Women need to appropriate to themselves that they are called to be priests. They live their priestly vocation seriously even though they do not often talk about it or are conscious about it. The call of the hour is to live their priesthood with awareness so that women can affirm their full humanity and created equality.