

No matter what 'Why Priests?' author says, believers need priests

Brian Cahill | May. 13, 2013

Viewpoint

In his latest book, *Why Priests?: A Failed Tradition*, Garry Wills states that Jesus never claimed to be a priest, that there were no priests in the early church, that the priesthood was invented a few centuries later, and that the power of priests to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ was also invented. In treating the Eucharist, Wills summarizes the historical tug of war between the Thomistic, church-approved insistence on transubstantiation, and the lesser-known Augustinian understanding of the real presence. In addition, Wills challenges the overemphasis on sacrifice in the Mass, the validity of the ransom theory of redemption, and the claims of priesthood for Jesus arising from the Letter to Hebrews, the only part of the New Testament that refers to Jesus as priest. Wills acknowledges his respect and love for many priests, but his bottom line is that the priesthood is superfluous.

As I finished *Why Priests?*, I would have preferred that he had instead written on why popes, cardinals and some bishops might be considered superfluous. In fairness, Wills does suggest that our church would do fine administratively with just presbyters (elders) and deacons (agents), presumably of either gender. He also reminds us that the role of bishops did not evolve until well after Peter's time, and the community selected them based on their moral integrity.

But my strongest reaction to Wills' book is to think of all the great priests I have been blessed to know. I think of the great priests who taught me, coached me and inspired me at Holy Name School in San Francisco in the 1950s. I think of my friend Peter Sammon, who died a few years ago, pastor of St. Teresa of Avila on Potrero Hill in San Francisco for more than 30 years, with a gentle spirit but a fierce commitment to social justice. I think of Bernie Bush, a great Jesuit retreat master, the wisest priest I know, who helped me keep my faith when I lost my son. I think of George Williams, another Jesuit and the chaplain at San Quentin State Prison, who by his words and actions constantly reminds his parishioners of God's love and forgiveness. I think of Dave Pettingill, a retired diocesan priest living in my parish, who never fails to give a relevant and inspiring homily for the 30 regulars at the 8 a.m. weekday Mass. I think of Bob McElroy, now a bishop, a brilliant scholar and leader, always a warm and compassionate pastor.

But most of all I think of my friend Jerry Kennedy, who died this January after serving 47 years as a priest and pastor. Jerry and I had a friendship and connection from our first days together in September 1954 at St. Joseph's Seminary in Mountain View, Calif. At first I didn't understand the connection. He was from Oakland and I was from San Francisco. He had nine siblings and I had one. And worst of all, he wasn't into sports. But we were definitely friends and over the years I came to see that Jerry Kennedy was a remarkable human being, loving and sensitive, smart but unassuming, understanding the importance and the grace of friendships. Jerry kept his classmates close and connected, reminding us how grateful we should be for each other. He has been the glue over these last few years for our every-other-month "old guys" lunch where we sit around all afternoon discussing our health, our families, politics, sports, and of course what's wrong with our church. We will keep gathering, but it won't be the same.

Jerry took a similar approach to his priesthood. It was all about the people, all about relationships, all about service, all about Jesus' message of love and inclusiveness. One friend said, "Jerry bent to love over law." And while he was appalled at the molestation scandal and cover-up, and dismayed with the current leadership and direction of our church, that never weakened his love of church. It never lessened his trust in the Holy Spirit, and it never diminished his commitment to serve the people of God. And Jerry never needed trumpets. His was more the style of Micah, "to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God."

Jerry's love and friendship and ministry have been a huge part of my life in recent years. He preached the homily at my son's funeral, a message that continues to console me. My wife and I had Jerry for dinner a few nights before Christmas, just the three of us. I will treasure that night. Two weeks later he died from a heart attack. I didn't know when Jerry had dinner with us that it would be the last time we would see him. As he left, I hugged him and I told him I loved him. I'm really glad I told him that.

As I think of him now, with all due respect to Wills, there is no way Jerry Kennedy was not supposed to be a priest. And there is no way those of us who are believers can get along without all the other Jerry Kennedys who have been called to be priests -- not to be superior to us, not to be separate from us, but to serve us, to love us, to be loved by us, to remind us through the Eucharist and through our life and work and relationships and service, of the Christ in all of us. And of course, there is no way that there aren't thousands of women who have been called, who are waiting to answer that call.

I have respected and appreciated Wills' writings over the years. I'm not a Scripture scholar, historian or theologian, so I will leave any challenges to his arguments to those more qualified. My view is from the pews. I believe that the basic message of our church, Jesus' message of his Father's love, the message of charity, justice and inclusiveness, derives its validity from Scripture. Some elements of our church teaching may not have that same scriptural validity and may not be inspired by the Holy Spirit. But I have no problem if the concept of the priesthood, evolving from the role of presbyter, was developed well after Jesus Christ walked this Earth. That does not make it any less valid, any less sacramental, any less guided by the Spirit, any less necessary for church.

Wills concludes his work with a simple, profound declaration: "There is one God, and Jesus is one of his prophets, and I am one of his millions of followers." In my attempt to be one of Jesus' followers, I regularly need guidance, support or a good kick. Sometimes that comes from my wife or other evolved souls I know, but more often it comes from priests in my life, priests who teach Christ, preach Christ or remind me of Christ. Like all the rest of us, priests are far from perfect, and if the church doesn't change its eligibility criteria, priests may become an endangered species. But it is impossible for me to think of them as superfluous.

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