

CHRIST IS THE TRUE HIGH PRIEST

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EVERY CULTURE HAS ITS PROPER WAY of communicating and expressing what it believes. Every culture has its own way of speaking, and so it is with Christians. The same is true for Catholics. We use the symbols of our Christian culture to express what we believe in a way that is unique to us. We have our own musical heritage, our own linguistic expressions, our own gestures that are charged with theological and holy meaning. To best appreciate Catholic culture we have to live in it, abide in it to make the meaning our own.

The windows always teach me something. Seated in the priest-celebrant's chair in Saints Peter and Paul Church, Naperville, the window of the Sacred Heart speaks, teaches, inspires me. Some of the most beautiful stained-glass windows in the Diocese of Joliet can be discovered here. A previous generation has left behind these images as a tribute to their own strong faith and to remind us of what we believe.

We believe that the Mass is the prayer of Christ to his Father. There is no more perfect prayer than this. What's more, not only do we witness this prayer, not only do we ourselves benefit from it, we get to participate in it—to find ourselves, our true selves, there.

The window of the Sacred Heart is given as a medalion above the window of the Lord's Ascension! It also weaves together powerful and essential aspects of the Lord's mission: at once he holds the Eucharist, he bears the weighty wood of the cross, he wears the crown of his victory over sin and death. Here we have the Suffering Servant, Christ the King, and the Eternal High Priest wrapped around the Sacred Heart. It is an icon that will not let us forget what Christ has done for us; what he continues to do to show his love to the Father, for love of us.

Christ is the true and eternal priest.

Another window, this one in the apse of the sanctuary depicts a priest celebrating Mass. It is a unique image in that it lets us see what the priest is thinking as he offers the sacrifice. He reflects on Christ the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep, who is known by the sound of his voice, who seeks out the stray and the lost. The window is a poignant reminder to every priest that the sacrifice he offers is Christ's own. The priest stands there in obedience to the Lord's will. He stands there in the place of Christ the head, *in persona Christi capitis*, as our Catholic theology tells us. Every

thought must be for Christ since it is not we who offer the sacrifice for him, but he who does it in us. As he enters deeper into the sanctuary, deeper into the mystery, the priest is reminded to model himself on Christ.

When it comes to the Sacred Liturgy, one of the most important things we must keep in mind is that since the Mass is the prayer of Christ himself to his Father, our participation in the liturgy allows us to join him. As a result, our prayer takes on the power of his words. He accomplishes for us what we are not able to do ourselves. This does not diminish us; it raises us up in Christ.

Christ is the true high priest. He is the perfect priest because his offering is the total gift of himself, "with no strings attached" as the late Bishop Roger Kaffer used to say. The Preface for the Mass of the Holy Eucharist, used especially on Holy Thursday as the Church enters the most sacred of events, tells us that Christ "is the true

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and eternal priest" who "offered himself as a victim for our deliverance."

To be priest is one of the most dangerous responsibilities. In the history of religions, the priest is the strong, manly figure who with heroic courage, does everything that is necessary for the sake of the people. Faith requires commitment, fidelity, hard choices. The priest dares to mediate between the human and divine, and so is constantly at risk of falling into the abyss.

A leader of the early liturgical movement once noted that renewal of the liturgy should lead us to a "strong, virile catholicity." This is the image and example of Christ, who holds nothing back for our sake—who does not pretend to die, but goes through death to rescue us from all the powers of evil.

Catholics must never forget that these same qualities in Christ, these virtues, must become our own, acknowledging all the while that the prayer is his, the work is his, salvation comes from him. ❧

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