

***PRAYER AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST IN THE
REFORMED TRADITION, by Graham Redding***

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In a recent work, *Why Priests?*, a prominent American intellectual, Garry Wills, argued not only that Christian priesthood is "a failed tradition" but also that the Letter to the Hebrews went astray in recognizing the priesthood of Christ himself. "A polished writer" but no "profound thinker," the author of Hebrews produced "flimsy," "capricious," and even "fallacious" arguments in presenting Christ as "a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek."

One can and should take issue with Wills over various dubious claims: for instance, that, among the books of the New Testament, Hebrews stands alone in recognizing Christ as priest. Without explicitly using the title, the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Romans imply that priesthood. 1 Timothy 2:5 famously states that "there is one mediator between Christ and humankind, Christ Jesus." When Hebrews also names Christ as "mediator," Wills undercuts priestly implications by proposing to translate *mesitēs* as "guarantor."

But, rather than engage in debate with Wills over details, we would be advised to follow Graham Redding in reflecting on Christ's priesthood in the context of worship. He first explores ways in which the mediatorial role of Christ's priesthood has been understood (or misunderstood and/or marginalized) in the early church and then in the Reformed tradition. A careful examination of various (Reformed) Eucharistic liturgies shows how an adequate doctrine of Christ's mediatorial priesthood has often been absent or at least obscured. The modern liturgical renewal in the West has, however, helped to renew a sense of the way in which the priesthood of Christ is enshrined in the public prayer life of the church and, above all, in the Eucharistic liturgy.



Redding argues convincingly that, unless Christ's priesthood is properly appreciated, Eucharistic worship remains confused and impoverished. That priesthood must be expressed liturgically if the public prayer of the church is to function as it should — through conscious participation in the eternal offering Christ makes of himself (in the Spirit) to the Father. Thus Redding rightly recognizes the role Christ's priesthood plays for trinitarian faith and practice. Founded in the incarnation itself, this priesthood makes it possible for the church to pray to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. In short, appreciating Christ's priesthood opens us to a properly trinitarian conception of our common prayer.

Redding is surely right in pointing out the harm done to the worshipping life of the church where a proper doctrine of Christ's priesthood is missing. Worship can become more and more dependent upon the talents and personality of the minister or priest who leads the congregation in prayer.

Redding reaches his conclusions by a critical examination of the Reformed tradition, especially as found in the Church of Scotland. But he is rightly convinced that his conclusions can be applied to other Christian bodies. In the Roman Catholic Church, it was no accident that, even if much more attention should still be paid to the priesthood of Christ, the liturgical reform has gone hand in hand with some renewed sense of his priesthood. Witness the first document promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*). It insists that the liturgy "is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ." Every liturgical celebration is "an action of Christ the priest and of his body, which is the church" (art. 7).

Redding focusses on the life of the church at prayer — and especially on a theme wonderfully developed by Tom Torrance, the need for conscious participation in the eternal self-offering of the risen and ascended Christ. But Christ has exercised and continues to exercise his priesthood not only for members of the church who assemble for worship but also for the wider world. Is he not high priest also for all human beings, many of whom may never have heard his name?

Sacrosanctum Concilium stated: "'Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, when he assumed a human nature, introduced into this land of exile the hymn that in heaven is sung throughout the ages. He unites the whole community of humankind with himself and associates it with him in

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singing the divine canticle of praise" (art. 83). Earlier the same document had taught that the risen Christ is present "when the church prays and sings" (art. 7). Now *Sacrosanctum Concilium* sums up this singing as "one divine canticle of praise," led by the incarnate, high-priestly Cantor. He joins with himself not only the church but also "the whole community of humankind" in singing a heavenly hymn that he has brought to earth. This picture vividly presents Christ the High Priest as joining with himself, in virtue of his incarnation, all human beings without exception, including millions who go through life without ever hearing his name. Without consciously knowing this, they belong to his cosmic chorus and are constantly affected by his priestly work.

In short, Christ is priest not only for the church but also for the whole world. In a forthcoming article in the *Irish Theological Quarterly* I develop this theme and would cherish the chance of discussing it with Graham Redding. In the meantime let me express my admiration for his impressive and constructive study of Christ's priesthood.