

Living from the Heart of the Priesthood

By Mary Gannon Kaufmann, M.A., M.S.

I stood listening to the words of the young celebrant who, during the prayers of petition offered the following prayer: “Lord, please help those who are discouraged in living their vocation.” He was the same person who had previously shared privately that he struggled to find time to pray and often fell into a routine attitude towards the sacred mysteries that he celebrated in the Mass. I began to pray for him and to reflect on the priesthood. I wished to “rouse him to his life of love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24).

What would “rouse his heart to his life of love and good works?” Part of the answer can be found by reviewing and reflecting on what the Church teaches about the ordained priesthood, particularly in current, post-councilar magisterial and theological writings. But, sometimes we wish that the written truth we read would jump off the page, and strike us in the heart, so it would affect how we live. The approved writings and spiritual diary of a seemingly ordinary lay woman, Ven. Concepción Cabrera de Armida seem to jump off the page and bring the supreme gift of priesthood and the central mystery of our faith, the Incarnation to living color. Then to answer our question about “rousing the heart,” we will explore both recent Church documents and the life and writings of Ven. Concepción Cabrera de Armida.

Ven. Concepción Cabrera de Armida or “Conchita” for short, lived, during the early 20th Century (1862-1937) in Mexico. By processing the mystical intuitions and lights of spiritual doctrine that Conchita received from our Lord (including the special grace

of the mystical incarnation which we will describe later), we can begin to catch a glimpse of how we all might deepen our understanding of the gift of our own priesthood (baptismal or ordained) and incarnate it in the events of our day after being empowered with the Eucharist. Her writings shed new light onto the supreme dignity of the ordained priesthood as a call and capacity for the priest himself to be transformed into Christ so that he may order, sanctify and call forth the baptismal priesthood of the Faithful.

Being a married and then widowed mother of nine children, “Conchita” was a privileged soul, who lived an exemplary life through many difficulties. During the religious persecutions of the Mexican Revolution, she inspired the foundation of the “Five Works of the Cross:” two associations for the lay faithful: the Apostleship of the Cross and the Covenant of Love, a contemplative religious congregation, called the Sisters of the Cross of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a community of priests called the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit founded by the Ven. Fr. Felix Rougier, M.Sp.S., and a movement for priests and bishops called the Fraternity of Christ the Priest. Two of her children joined religious congregations: her son, Manuel, the Jesuits; and her daughter, Concha, her mother’s order, the Sisters of the Cross. Through the course of her life as a wife and mother, Conchita experienced many crosses including the untimely deaths of her husband and four of her children. Her writings and her life of sanctity brought her to the attention of The Congregation for the Clergy who included her story and insights into their statement entitled

Adoration, Reparation, and Spiritual Motherhood for Priests (December 8, 2007). The Congregation for the Clergy described her as a figure of “great importance for the Universal Church.” (ARSMP 24) In order then to understand both the “heart and the head” of priesthood and to give us our bearings as we explore the mystical writings of Ven. Conchita, we turn first to some magisterial teaching.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priest, suggests that priests should “return regularly and deliberately to the holy mysteries that ground their ministry and life” (BPPF12) in order to get to the heart of it and center their lives in the *unum necessarium* or the one thing necessary of the Gospel. In addition, they suggest that priests must understand themselves as human persons “whose very humanity ought to be a bridge for communicating Jesus Christ to the World” (BPPF 6). As human persons, they possess a heart or central animating core that ideally integrates and energizes them from within for generous service to others and draws their thoughts, feelings and actions into a unity of purpose. And further, like all the baptized, they can possess “a personal unity of body and spirit that can receive the indwelling and continuous presence of the Holy Spirit into this soul and body” as per Pope John Paul II (TOB 56:3). In human terms then, what may seem like impossibility, of being persons oriented from within, and filled with the living presence of God, becomes possible through the redemption obtained through Jesus and our human correspondence to God’s generous graces. At the heart of it then, God wishes to institute a movement of renewal in the Church and World that’s personally mediated to the baptized through the presence and practice of ordained priests, priests who are fashioned to animate or manifest Christ even through their own humanity.

With this in mind, I suggest that the Incarnation or “God with us in bodily form” becomes much more than just a belief the Church professes in the Creed. It is the cornerstone of our eternal existence that reveals to us our identity as human and baptized persons and our mission in the world. God wishes to “divinize” us or fill us with his living presence and draw us to Himself so we can reflect and even incarnate his very presence, his self-oblatory love and his life story in the world around us. In The Message of the Cross, Fr. Roberto de la Rosa, M.Sp.S. says: “Baptism accomplishes a radical transformation that demands a progressive identification ‘until we become... fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself’” (Ep.4:13). Christ calls us to offer our lives as a living sacrifice for the redemption of others. At its fullest, the offering of self to God for the needs of others can manifest as the mystical Incarnation, where Christ takes perfect possession of the person to continue his sacrifice in them for the salvation of the World. The mystical Incarnation is a fruit of baptism that we facilitate through the practice of virtue in response to grace. This sublime and seemingly oblique mystery is really true and moreover something we must hold before us and progressively seek to live in the ordinary contexts of our lives.

The Incarnation, then becomes especially important for ordained priests who offer their humanity to the Lord, for sacred sacramental ministry... so He can “re-incarnate” Himself in His Body,

Sacred Blood, Soul and Divinity through the humanity of the priest in the Eucharist of every Mass. The Incarnation is at the “heart” of the mystery that can rouse the life and mission of the priest. With this in mind, how can a priest delve to the heart of this mystery and live his priesthood from within or an “interior priesthood” in a way that facilitates real transformation in the lives of others?

To understand this, we turn to Pope John Paul II in Theology of the Body and *Pastores Dabo Vobis* in order to perceive who the priest is called to be in the Mystical Body. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (15) says that “priests are called to prolong the presence of Christ... to embody his way of life, make him visible in the midst of their flocks and grow towards being the living image of Christ, the Shepherd and the Spouse of the Church.” In Theology of the Body, Pope John Paul II confirms that the ordained priest, is a “charismatic sign” (75:1) or prophetic sign and sacramental presence of God amongst the people. The ordained priest both reminds the Faithful, who often are embroiled in the world, of life in the Eternal Kingdom and helps mediate God’s presence to them for their transformation. John Paul notes that from his own solitude, the priest is able to discover an even fuller form of connection with others around him by his “readiness to make an exclusive gift of himself to God for the Kingdom” (77:2). He labels priesthood as a form of spousal love through the priest’s exclusive gift of self to Christ and His mystical Body which brings about a “fruitfulness, that John Paul II describes as different from that of the flesh, but nevertheless a fruitfulness, a fruitfulness of the Spirit” (75:2) that shows forth the creative love of the Father.

Ven. Concepción Cabrera de Armida (1862-1937)





From our discussion, we recognize the radical priority of Christ for all of us to grow in His image and likeness. As temples of the Holy Spirit, we understand the Incarnation as an invitation issued to each of us to ready ourselves and to receive Christ's indwelling presence. Yet, as Conchita's Spiritual Director, Archbishop Luis Martinez relates, "Although all souls are destined to reproduce Jesus, not all of them do it in the same manner, for the Holy Spirit distributes His gifts as He pleases. The Holy Spirit is not given in the same form or in the same measure to all." God knows both His plan for each of us, our unique vulnerabilities, and how we best serve Him. All are called to participate in the reality of the incarnation, while some do that with mystical lights.

Ven. Conchita was a privileged soul, that helps each of us take hold of the reality of the Incarnation or "God within us" for ourselves. She helps us understand the importance of our own role in mediating redemption to others. To come to this new sense of knowing, we go back to Conchita's experience of the mystical Incarnation. In preparation to receive this grace, this gift of the Father's fruitfulness (mystical incarnation), Conchita was given a profound gift of being in the presence and gaze of the Father. One day in 1894, while she prayed before the Blessed Sacrament, Conchita experienced and heard Jesus tell her, "The Father has His gaze on you." And then, on March 25, 1906, Conchita describes her experience of receiving the mystical incarnation, the grace of the Father's fruitfulness in her. As she knelt before the tabernacle prior to Mass:

I was taken over by the presence of my Jesus, quite close to me, hearing His divine voice which said to Me: ' Here I am, I want to incarnate myself mystically in your heart...I have taken possession of your heart. I incarnate Myself mystically in it never to leave. This is much more than spiritual marriage. It is the grace of incarnating Me, of living and growing in your soul, never to leave it, to possess you and to be possessed by you as in one and the same substance. It is I who communicate it to your soul in a deep and inseparable relationship which cannot be comprehended: it is the grace of graces.'

Conchita experienced this sublime grace to "see and to know" about God in a more clear and deeper sense of what each one of us is called to live as baptized persons... Conchita came to live under the gaze of the Father, Christ uniting himself in bodily form with her heart or the central animating core of her person all under the movement of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world. Through this grace, she came to understand and teach us, in part, Christ's hopes for the Church, His hopes for Priests, and the loves of his heart.

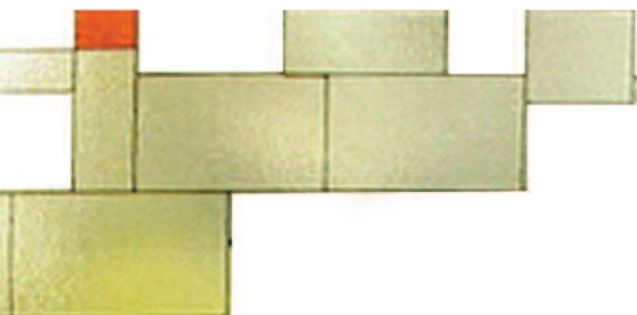
For the Church

In her spiritual diary, Conchita wrote that Christ told her:

The Church and the world need a new Pentecost, a priestly Pentecost, an interior Pentecost. I want to come again into this world...in my priests. I want to renew the world by revealing myself through the priests. I want to give my

Perhaps, the priest will more effectively offer this fruitfulness of the Spirit so it can be received by others if he understands his relationship with the baptized themselves. In the article "Priestly Spirituality" from Vocation and Prayer Magazine (# 73, Vol XVII, No. 3), Rev. George Gallaro describes the mutual call to holiness that priests share with all the baptized that they live from a "twofold position in and in the forefront of God's people," as the "Lord's sign given to the Church, just like the column of cloud and fire that guided Israel." As part of the baptized himself, the priest is spiritually empowered to call forth the laity. Gallaro adds: "The priest, already indelibly configured to Christ through baptism, receives an additional special configuration to Christ as head and shepherd of the Church through sacred ordination."

This special or ontological configuration to Christ Priest gives the presbyter a distinct share in the authority of Christ and "special power to act" in the person of Christ to sanctify and draw the community into one body and living relationship with Christ. However, this power although real, must be manifested in generous self donation by the priest and according to Gallaro: "All this implies authority, not power, service not control, and moreover an exemplary life." By allowing grace to harmonize his humanity, the priest becomes more and more, a person anointed to carry the living Christ to others.



Church a powerful impulse in which I will pour out the Holy Spirit over my priests like a new Pentecost.

Knowing our vulnerabilities as persons, Christ preferred to leave us with visible and sacramental reminders of His presence and of our particular responsibility to incarnate Him to the world.

For Priests

Towards the end of her life, Christ shared His intimate thoughts or “confidences” about His priests with her.

Conchita compiled these into a manuscript entitled, To My Priests. He told her: The priest who fulfills his mission will be another Me. This transformation into Me must be so intimate, so real and so profound that they disappear in Me, I living and working and loving in them, with the Holy Spirit.” At consecration, we are one: he disappears in Me and I stay in him as if two in one. The Father sees him; the Father smiles at him; the Father envelops him with his shadow. The Father’s love for priests is the source of transformation.

Although each is called to experience it by degree, it seems that as part of this ontological configuration into Christ, the priest is particularly invited to seek and correspond to the grace of deep union with God, i.e. the mystical incarnation. Through his participation in the mystery of the Eucharist, the priest begins his transformation into being “another Me.” Along with all the baptized, the priest receives the seeds of the mystical incarnation in baptism which the graces of ordination orient and amplify. In The Priesthood of Christ and the Ministerial Priesthood in the Experience and Message of Concepción Cabrera de Armida, Fr. Juan Bifet describes that applied to the priest, the mystical incarnation has two aspects: The priestly grace received at ordination is the fruitful breath of the Holy Spirit and the development of that grace (seed) comes through a corresponding fidelity.

On another occasion Christ shares:

This is why I love the grace of the mystical incarnation so much...I want to develop that grace in the priests’ heart to ensure their fidelity, their heroism and to feel in them some of the fruitful filaments of my Father’s love and Paternity that they have received from Him. They will feel and love what I do and lose themselves in the unity with Myself and the Father in union with the Holy Spirit.

Daily at Mass, the priest receives in his soul the reflection of this mystery of the Incarnation...But the soul of the priest which embraces and develops this gift from God with his reciprocity to grace, is the one most ready to receive and increase the priceless grace of mystical incarnation in the soul.

Jesus emphasized to Conchita, that He wished the presbyters to be so transformed into Him themselves that they can light this same fire for union with God in the souls of the laity. It seems par-

ticularly efficacious for the priest to celebrate the Eucharist with a most decided recollection and to offer himself to the Father along with Jesus for the salvation of souls including his own.

Understanding the Love of Christ

Christ described the generous and outward focus of his love:

From the first moment of the Incarnation, I understood my role of victim (or self offering love); and I embraced it and accepted it joyously. My human Heart loved them (souls/people) and understood their weaknesses, miseries, crimes and sins. How did I love?...With a love of sacrifice, immolating Myself...forgiving, forgetting, and attaining graces for them with my sorrow. Love which does not crucify is not love. My Heart and my cross are inseparable.

In Risking the Future, Ven. Fr. Felix Rougier, M.Sp.S., the Founder of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit along with Conchita’s inspiration, describes this role of victim as an “interior attitude, a constant YES, as large as the sky, a confident and generous surrender without limit to all that love demands. It does not necessarily mean to do something, but to really love, accepting all the consequences of a true love.” Christ’s priestly love is a total loving oblation for souls. Christ wished His priests to be a reflection of His own generous and tender heart so they could help transform the world.



As I consider what this “generous surrender without limit to all that love demands” could mean, I am reminded of another young priest who told me:

We need to take what we know about the priesthood, apply it and experience it as true through us. As we say the words of consecration or absolution, we believe it and surrender to this reality and thereby, actively participate in letting ourselves be used for the salvation of others. When I say Mass, I often perceive that I am standing under the Father’s gaze, immersed in the center of the Trinity. Christ’s prayer and offering to the Father through me, allows Christ to incarnate or be present on the altar. In the Eucharist, I am offering the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the people, for where else but in the heart is the body and blood so united. In this light, I see my own limits more clearly and God’s great goodness. It’s a reality that’s true but seems too good to be true. Once a woman came up to me and told me that as I prayed the Eucharistic prayer, she, herself, was drawn deeply into prayer. She saw in her imagination that she was kneeling before the altar of the Mass in heaven surrounded by angels and saints, before the Father’s gaze. She said, ‘Your words Father, connected heaven and earth.’ It takes humility and gratitude to be sensitive to these profound acts of God’s love that happen thorough us as priests, he finished.

And as we finish, after picking up and reviewing some thoughts from the Theology of the Body, Pastores Dabo Vobis, the USCCB’s The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests, and several theological analyses, and the writings of Ven. Concepción Cabrera de Armada, we come to a small synthesis of the “holy mysteries that ground the ministry and life of priests.” At the heart of this redemptive drama, priests stand in a “two-fold position in and in the forefront of God’s people” for a purpose, to be transformed into “Other Me’s” themselves in order to offer all they are in self donation to engender and call forth “Other Me’s” in the Church. The grace of ordination assists the priest in this mission by “an additional special configuration to Christ as head and shepherd of the Church.” The call to unite with God in our very flesh in love becomes the unum necessarium or the one thing necessary that allows us to help unleash God’s love in the world. Together, the Church stands as a reflection of Christ’s mind boggling love that can transform the world. This has to “rouse us all in lives of love and good works” (HB10:24).

*The Sisters of the Cross run a retreat center for priests,
a place of renewal for priests to come for prayer,
reflection and spiritual direction.*

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Catechesis by Rosary

By Br. John Samaha, SM

Consider the rosary as a catechetical tool. This thought arises from many bishops and lay catechists and all the religious and lay educator groups in between.

Religious educators and parents often comment that many today – youth and adults – are lacking in Christian formation. A certain religious illiteracy has infiltrated the family, school, and society in general. Children especially lack a strong basic understanding of fundamentals of our faith and of how to pray. The challenge is clear for catechists at all age levels. In addition, we must remember that faith and virtue are caught more than taught. We must model what we teach. We must echo Christ; resound faith, hope, and charity by walking the talk.

Catechists and parents often seek new methods, programs, and books of religious instruction, and we are at a loss for knowing any. But one sure-fired and time-tested method is centuries old, tried and true, and easy to handle – the rosary.

If youngsters and adults learn the rosary, they are learning the basics of the Christian faith as well as learning how to pray. They would know from memory the *Apostles’ Creed*, the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, and the *Glory Be* – the latter three lifted literally from the Gospel. By praying the rosary they would be reviewing the fundamental truths handed on by Jesus and practicing the art of praying. By teaching the rosary we help others to learn that prayer is simple, Biblical, done in union with our Mother Mary, and leads us to become absorbed in the mysteries of the life of Christ and of salvation history.

To know how to pray the twenty mysteries of the rosary means that we know the basics about the life of Jesus and his teachings – his life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension; the meaning of Jesus’ Incarnation and Redemption. This challenges us to ponder what these mysteries mean for us today. In reality the rosary is a compendium of the Gospel; it is the Gospel strung on beads.

The rosary is not a panacea; it does not solve all the challenges of catechesis and faith formation. But it is one effective catechetical tool for teaching and praying. In the past noted saints and teachers have utilized it successfully. It worked for St. Dominic and his companions in combating the Albigensian heresy in his day.

Let’s try again.