

Priestly Hands

By Father John Cihak

An assignment at the Casa Santa Maria offers a priest the opportunity to deepen his priestly identity not so much based on what he does – teaching, sanctifying and governing – but on who he is. One way this identity is deepened comes from the awareness of our hands. Last spring a brother priest came to the Casa to train for the ministry of exorcism in his diocese. He asked me at the breakfast table one morning to accompany him to a church in the city to observe the work of one of Rome’s exorcists. The priest wanted help translating from Italian so that he could better understand the exorcist’s extemporaneous words, and the words being hissed or shouted at him. That morning was an extraordinary experience in which my own priestly identity was deepened. About twenty minutes into the session, the exorcist asked the five priests in the room to raise their hands from a distance in a type of epiclesis and to quietly invoke the Holy Spirit over the victim. The reaction was strong. The demons cursed, writhed, begged, raged, whimpered and threatened. A low, sinister voice cried out again and again, “Get them off! You are burning me!” To the demons the hands of a priest seared as though on fire, yet to the victim those same hands soothed as though still wet from holy chrism. The demons were painfully aware of a reality to which we are often blind: these hands are configured to those of the incarnate Son of God. They are His hands. Our chrismed, burning hands reveal the

hidden depths of the priesthood He has given us. They remind us of who we are.

Yet a priest’s hands also remind him of who he is supposed to become for they are also a sinner’s. Though our hands are configured to Jesus’, places in the heart have yet to give their complete Yes to Him. The priest who manfully strives to embrace his calling knows the difficult and often muddling work of subjectively appropriating his objective consecration. This work, as we know, means nothing less than undergoing a death and resurrection, first in the purification of the senses and then in the purification of the spirit. Priestly hands remind us of the need for a more purified priestly heart.

A story from the life of St. Francis of Assisi illustrates how the awareness of a priest’s hands can help bring about a deeper purification in the heart. The saint was close to the end of his life, unable to walk and suffering from an eye disease and the stigmata. As he was brought through a region, some people from a nearby town came to ask for his help with their parish priest. They had discovered that their priest was involved in a scandalous relationship with a woman of that town. The saint was brought to the town and placed before the priest in front of everyone. They thought that the saint would upbraid the fallen priest. St. Francis instead fell to his knees, took the priest’s hands into his own stigmatized hands, kissed them and said, “All I know and all I want to know is that these hands give me

Jesus.” It was said that the priest was converted.

An even more incredible story about a purified priestly heart comes from Father John Houghton, the Carthusian monk and prior, and English martyr. He was a graduate of Cambridge, and described as “slight of stature and shy in look”. Refusing to take Henry VIII’s Oath of Supremacy, Father Houghton was sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered at Tyburn in London on May 4, 1535. After being hung, cut down and allowed to recover his senses, he was eviscerated. The executioner experienced some difficulty in locating Father Houghton’s

heart, and when he did so the saint looked at it pulsating in the man’s hand and said, “Sweet Jesus, what will You do with my heart?” One can only imagine Our Lord’s response to him at that moment. His heart and entrails were then thrown into the fire that burned nearby.

Our hands were configured to Jesus’ in ordination. They reveal the hidden depths of our priesthood. These priestly hands remind us of who we are, and who we are supposed to become – a priest whose heart as well as hands are conformed to Jesus.†