

October 20, Ordinary 29B (Hebrews 5:1-10)

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by [Meghan Murphy-Gill](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

Published on October 14, 2024

Before I was an Episcopal priest, I was an editor at a Roman Catholic magazine. We once published a poem called “The Order of Melchizedek,” by the late, great Brian Doyle. It captured my imagination the moment it landed on my desk, especially the last lines:

But my point is how very human the first minute
Is, sprawled out on the floor, not thinking of awe
Or prayers or promises, but of your ice-cold nose.
That’s the exact right honest human way to begin.

Doyle is writing about the practice, in some Christian traditions, of ordinands lying prostrate before an altar during a litany of prayer.

The author of Hebrews talks about Melchizedek, both king and priest, who is mentioned in Genesis 14 (he blesses Abram, after which God makes a covenant with Abram) and Psalm 110:4 (“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”), an ode to David. Framing Christ, too, as both king and priest makes a point about how Christ—unlike priests “chosen from among mortals,” who make offerings for themselves and others—is appointed by God to make his whole life an offering for the rest of us.

Suffering is a theme of this text and others assigned this week, and it can be easy to read this portion of Hebrews as making glory out of what is inglorious. But theological gymnastics aside, the author emphasizes the humanity—particularly its experience of suffering—in which Christ participates and identifies. Even priests, whose work pertains to divine things, are firmly situated on earth, dealing “gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness.” This

weakness, this mortality, is experienced even by Jesus the Christ as great high priest. Priesthood, even for Christ, is exercised not from an exalted place but from the depths of humanity.

When I first read Doyle's poem, I had no real interest in ordained ministry. Not for myself, anyway. I wasn't the sort of Catholic kid who secretly turned my winter scarf into a stole, a paper napkin into a corporal, and a Ritz cracker into a host—the way some of my female classmates at a Catholic seminary described their sense of call, apparent from childhood. I did seem to get involved in every religious conversation that took place on the school bus or at the lunch table, often mulling things over for days afterward. But I never imagined that I would be one to “offer gifts and sacrifices for sins,” to anoint the heads and hands of the suffering and weak, or to bless bread and wine for the hungry. I did not ponder that my own ice-cold nose could push against the hard tile of the floor in a symbolic act that proclaimed to all gathered just where my priesthood would be exercised from.

It turned out that by the time I did sprawl prostrate for my ordination, some 15 years after entering seminary, my nose wasn't cold—because it was pressed against the inside of a KN95 mask, itchy and sweaty with the vapors of my own breath. I closed my eyes not in reverence but against the decades of dirt in the wine-colored carpet laid out in front of the altar. “Face-first and silent and awed before the One,” goes Doyle's poem. This is how I joined the order of Melchizedek. The bishop laid her hands on my head, my fellow priests put their hands on my shoulders and my back, and the pressure of it was painful. There was no elevation in status here, only a pushing down, deeper into this community of mortals I belong to.

For three years, at that same altar, I would, in the language of the Anglo-Catholic parish I served, offer “the sacrifice of the mass,” facing east, my nose figuratively cold as it pressed against the veil between this mortal world and the unknowable Divine. My back was to the congregation—a posture I'd argued against as a Roman Catholic writer and editor but experienced differently, even positively, as an Episcopal priest. For those three years, my humanity—my ignorance, waywardness, and weakness—was palpable to me, if not necessarily to the people I served. Standing at that altar, my feet were mortal feet, firmly planted in this mortal realm.

My feet walk me to a different altar each week these days, one that allows me to look my fellow Christians in the eye as I recall and make present the words of Jesus Christ, who “in the days of his flesh, offered up prayers and supplications.” I offer Christ's words to the gathered congregation, holding up the gifts of bread and wine.

I offer myself to them and invite them, also bearers of Christ's priesthood, to do the same.