

Priesthood Is A State Of Being by Aidan Odinson

Priesthood is a state of being. That point must be understood before there can be any discussion concerning priesthood, clergy status, or who qualifies. Priesthood is not a job, a title, or something one earns as the result of a course of instruction. Priesthood is not what a person has, but what a person is.

A true call to priesthood refuses to be denied. It will even cross boundaries of denomination and belief system to ensure that the truly called know that they are called. There are those who say that if someone takes down their altar, they never were a Priest or Priestess. I can attest to the fact that someone who takes down their altar and later knows no peace until their altar is back up again is experiencing the power of the call. It is nearly as impossible to keep a real priest or priestess from being one as it would be to keep a fish healthy and happy out of water!

No one becomes a Priest or Priestess as if it were like becoming a soldier, doctor or lawyer. A real one already has their priesthood, probably long before any training has begun. Is anyone going to claim that someone's rituals are worthless today but valid tomorrow if there is an ordination tonight? If I have an accident and the first person to find me is a medical student who is going to graduate the following day, is the help I receive from the medical student any less beneficial today than the next day when he or she is officially a doctor?

Ordination, if it is as it should be, is an acknowledgment of what already is. And that is the correct function of ordination: validation of that which already is. Licensing or any other means of granting authority to a priest or priestess is the means of granting authority to minister in an official capacity to a given group of people. This is an entirely valid function, especially if the priest or priestess is going to perform duties on behalf of, or for the benefit of, a coven or other group. Such a grant of authority, as with ordination, is a validation that a person's combination of education, training, experience, wisdom and knowledge has been found to be sufficient for the performance of certain tasks. This distinction must also be understood.

Anyone who has been licensed to drive an automobile probably had to demonstrate their ability to a diving examiner in order to be licensed. It is entirely likely that the person was able to drive safely the day before the examination, and it would be presumed that he or she gained experience while practicing with a learner's permit. But the grant of the license signifies the state's recognition of the person's demonstrated ability (and hope that he or she will maintain that ability).

Where priesthood is concerned, training and education, whether formal or informal, exists so that the priest or priestess may more effectively use their priesthood. It is a never-ending process. Of the priests and priestesses I have come to respect the most, this is one factor they have in common. Ask a really top-notch priest or priestess what he or she has been up to, and they will probably talk about what they are learning, or what they are trying to explore. If I were to hear a priest or priestess claiming to know "all about" any Craft-related subject, my first impulse would be to run quickly in the opposite direction. I might make an exception if that person were able to prove that he or she was a visitor from the Divine Realm, but only if proven absolutely. Not only is priesthood a state of being, it is a state of continual evolution.

At this point, it is necessary to admit that a reasonable degree of control is necessary. In any faith, there

will be those who have no business being clergy, but hopefully these are rare. There are also those who desperately need to be brought into a formal clergy arrangement so that they can be decently prepared so that they do not waste or dissipate their ability. There is also the desperate need to tell the difference between someone who should not be clergy and someone who needs to learn.

There are some people who should not be clergy for legitimate reasons. As "open" as our priesthood is and has been for some time, many of us have heard of a "wizard" who claims that smoking a "special magickal herb" is "The Only Path To True Spiritual Enlightenment." And, of course, there is the one who occasionally comes down the pike claiming to be a "High Priest" whose main effort seems to be "initiating" as many females as possible in a "ritual" which is defined as statutory rape if she happens to be underage. However, I have also encountered more than one case in which the accused was only guilty of being the victim of gossip. Caution is in order, lest a genuinely deserving person be excluded.

Others need guidance. Most common is the one who is ready to go forth and do wonders after having read most of one book. There is nothing wrong with such a situation that cannot be resolved by training, education, experience and guidance. This particular phenomenon is not much different than the fact that most of us who are over the age of about twenty-five wish that we were as brilliant as we thought we were when we were fifteen. There are also those who are able to learn, but are not able to discern who not to learn from, such as a former student in my coven who gave the knowledge gained in an Internet chat room precedence over what we were trying to teach her. In cases such as these, the right teacher needs to teach them so that they can make use of their ability.

That is not to say that anyone can go into any position that falls within the general description of "clergy." There are indeed some jobs in which it is absolutely necessary to work toward the position. And, it must be admitted that not everyone will be able to handle any responsibility that he or she is handed. But it is a basic fact that anyone who has basic qualification ought to be able to find a role that is productive and beneficial for all concerned. But there must also be "permission to fail" built into the system. Far better that there be lessons learned from something that did not work as planned than what would result if everyone were waiting for the legendary "someone else" to try.

Given what I've stated to this point, I would find it difficult to deny priesthood to anyone having the desire and some sort of basic qualification. *Temple of Gaia* is a teaching coven, and our aim is to help the seeker find their path. If a student finds that they need a different path, we will encourage the student to follow that path. If someone is already more advanced, we are willing to give them the training they need and assist them in starting their own group, perhaps even as a daughter coven. It is worth remembering that success can be found in the most surprising places!

We can look to other faiths to find good and bad examples of the process of admitting people into clergy roles. In one particular denomination of which I was once part, some well-qualified people have been systematically excluded from becoming clergy because their own spiritual quest did not match with the current fashion in church politics. It has happened so much over the last few decades that one group has formed a means for those who are excluded by their own bishops to have access to a "cooperating bishop" in order to gain access to candidacy and ordination.

The Roman Catholic Church in the US, on the other hand, has made use of an excellent idea in the form of an order popularly known as "The Vocation Sisters." While priesthood for women is currently not even being discussed in the Roman Catholic Church, there have been orders of nuns for quite some time. The Vocation Sisters offer a means for a woman wishing to become a nun to make an informed decision as to which order she should join. This is important because the work of a nun can range

anywhere from being a cloistered contemplative to being a nurse to coaching high school basketball, all depending on which order she joins. The fact that a woman might not do well in one order does not mean she won't do well in a different one. This is no different from the fact that someone who would do well in one coven might not fit well in a different coven.

As we grow, I see the advent of the full-time paid clergy as an eventuality. There is a level of competency that can probably only be achieved and maintained through such means as accredited seminary training, Clinical Pastoral Education, etc. But in the meantime as well as for the future, we need clergy who want to be clergy, and there is something to be said about someone who takes on the role of clergy solely because he or she wants to be a priest or priestess. Even if there is a Wiccan church or temple, which is able to have one or two full-time clergy, there will always be enough work so that volunteer clergy will be able to stay reasonably busy. Nobody is able to be an expert in all possible skill areas, and having as many clergy as possible will mean more chances for a broad range of high-quality skills being available.

So, who is qualified to become a priest or priestess? Anyone who is able to hold to the oaths, follow our laws and rules to the best of their ability (this is a whole other essay), learn what the training offers, and do the work that is waiting to be done.

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