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“He taught them to sacrifice love”. Priestly spirituality in the light of the Homily XXXII *On the Church and the Priesthood* of Mar Narsai of Nisibis

Abstract

The ministry of a priest holds a unique and irreplaceable place within the Church's life. A priest's role extends not only horizontally – serving the community – but also vertically, fostering a profound connection with the divine. This dual dimension demands more than mere knowledge; it requires a deep, transformative awareness of one's vocation, shaping in turn a distinct spiritual identity. One of the most exact and profound reflections on priestly spirituality can be found in the *Homily (Mēmrā) XXXII* of Mar Narsai of Nisibis. In this text Narsai masterfully articulates the priests' role, bestowing upon them a series of evocative titles that encapsulate their sacred calling. His insights extend beyond ecclesial boundaries, offering a timeless guide for priests of all traditions. This paper seeks to uncover the guiding principles within Narsai's work that illuminate the essence of priestly spirituality. Beyond its historical significance, his vision remains a compelling invitation to rediscover and embody the priestly vocation in today's world: in a special way, this refers to the practice of love and mercy.

Keywords: Narsai, spirituality, priesthood, sacrifice, love.

„Nauczył ich ofiarować miłość”. Duchowość kapłańska w świetle Homilii XXXII *O Kościele i kapłaństwie* Mar Narsaja z Nisibis

Abstrakt

W życiu Kościoła posługa kapłańska odgrywa niezastąpioną rolę. Zadania kapłana mają bowiem nie tylko wymiar horyzontalny (np. służba wspólnocie), ale także wertykalny (pogłębianie relacji z Bogiem). Taka podwójna perspektywa wymaga czegoś więcej niż znajomości zasad czy nauki; domaga się wewnętrznej przemiany i głębokiego zrozumienia własnego powołania, które kształtuje jego duchową tożsamość. Jedno z najbardziej przenikliwych i dojrzałych ujęć duchowości kapłańskiej odnaleźć można w Homilii (*Mēmrā*) XXXII autorstwa Mar Narsaja z Nisibis. Ów syro-orientalny teolog w sposób niezwykle sugestywny opisuje misję kapłanów, nadając im symboliczne określenia oddające sens ich posługi. Jego refleksja przekracza ramy epoki i wyznania, stanowiąc ponadczasową inspirację dla duchownych wszystkich tradycji. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest ukazanie pewnych intuicji zawartych w jednym tylko dziele Narsaja, które pomagają lepiej zrozumieć istotę duchowości kapłańskiej. Choć wybrany za źródło opracowania tekst ma zna-

czenie historyczne, jego przesłanie pozostaje żywe i zachęca, by na nowo odkrywać i urzeczywistniać powołanie kapłańskie w realiach współczesnego świata: w sposób szczególnie idzie tu o praktykowanie miłości i miłosierdzia.

Słowa kluczowe: Narsaj, duchowość, kapłaństwo, ofiara, miłość.

“While I was still young, before I went on my travels,
I sought wisdom openly in my prayer.
Before the temple I asked for her,
and I will search for her until the end”.
(Sir 51:13-14)

The above passage, taken from the Old Testament Book of Sirach, refers to wisdom. The wise man is constantly searching for it, and since it is a gift from God, he begins his search by praying. This quotation also fits perfectly with the topic of spirituality addressed in this paper. One might be tempted to say that the modern world – especially Western culture – is stuck in a kind of paradox. On the one hand, in its adherence to secular values, it wants to erase from its memory all signs of God, it wants to be enveloped in the oblivion of God. On the other hand, man living in this world seeks spirituality, and in this search goes to various places: not always happily choosing them.

Also, in the Christian milieu new forms of spirituality are constantly appearing. In reference to the priesthood, too, we seek sometimes a kind of spirituality that would meet the needs of our times and the people we live along side. But in searching for that spirituality one shouldn't forget that the ministry of a priest itself stands unparalleled in the Church's array of services. A priest's role operates not only on a horizontal plane – serving the community – but also vertically, in profound connection with the divine. This dual dimension demands a deep awareness of the priest's vocation, an awareness that transcends mere knowledge and shapes a distinct spiritual identity. From this arise some questions: what constitutes priestly spirituality? On what foundation is it built? From the earliest days of Christianity, these questions have been revisited across different cultures and contexts, shaping a vision of the priesthood uniquely suited to divine service.

One of the most intricate and profound reflections on priestly spirituality can be found in Homily XXXII of Mar Narsai of Nisibis († ca. 502), entitled *On the Church and on the Priesthood*.¹ This text is a real treasure, offering in-

¹ Syriac text: Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*. Vol. 2. Ed. Alphonse Mingana, 144–156. Mossoul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum; English translation: Narsai. 1909. *The Liturgical Homilies*. Ed. Richard H. Connolly, 62–74. Cambridge: University Press. The same homily has been num-

sights that could serve as a practical guide – or even a *vademecum* – for any Christian priest, regardless of their ecclesial tradition. In his work, Mar Narsai masterfully articulates the role of priests and attributes to them a series of evocative titles. Through this, he crafts a distinctive spiritual portrait, a metaphorical mirror in which priests can see their reflection and discern the keys to a fruitful ministry.

This paper does not claim to be a patristic study; rather, it seeks to present one possible path toward discovering priestly spirituality, with Narsai himself serving as a kind of guide who shares certain insights. Therefore, the reader should not expect a systematic analysis of Narsai’s entire corpus, but rather a focused exploration of one of his homilies. Nevertheless, we will attempt to uncover certain principles that shed light on priestly spirituality. Beyond their historical significance, these insights offer a timeless invitation to rediscover and embody priestly spirituality in today’s context. In this brief presentation, I will examine Narsai’s understanding of the priest’s duties, and from there, outline the essential features that define the spirituality of the priesthood.

What is the Christian spirituality itself?

To elucidate the topic, it seems necessary to start with a question: what, in fact, is Christian spirituality? Cardinal Tomáš Špidlík († 2010) remarked that the very term “spirituality” is so close to everyone that rarely does anyone define it. Yet underneath this apparent simplicity lies a very complex reality.² Another author observes that the issue of spirituality seems both simple and complicated, because on the one hand it is easy to guess what it points to (the word itself evokes every topic related to the human spirit), while on the other hand it is difficult to determine in what circumstances it can be discussed. It seems, however, that spirituality is more often misunderstood than understood. It is associated by most people with something vague, difficult or mysterious.

Spirituality, at its core, encompasses all aspects of life that unfold within the human heart – making it inherently mysterious. It involves openness to God, the desire to experience Him, and the pursuit of conversion, holiness, prayer, penance, fasting, asceticism, mysticism, and inner longings. It embraces the entirety of the spiritual journey, including its practices and mystical experiences. In Christianity, mature spirituality manifests itself as faith in Jesus Christ. Ultimate-

bered as *Mēmra* 59 in: Aaron M. Butts, Kristian S. Heal, Sebastian P. Brock. 2021. *Clavis to the Metrical Homilies of Narsai*. Louvain: Peeters, 73.

² Cf. Tomáš Špidlík. 1986. *The Spirituality of the Christian East. A Systematic Handbook*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 29.

ly, the spiritual journey leads to holiness, or union with God. Spirituality is thus both the path and the space in which a person nurtures their faith and develops their personality while moving toward God.³

Clearly, there are many definitions of spirituality, but its focus is always directed toward the heart. This perspective is reinforced by the Syriac understanding of the heart, which is seen not only as the seat of emotions but also – as emphasized by Michel Najim – as the center of human rational and spiritual faculties. It is the only place where true contact with God is possible. For the heart to fulfill its role, it must be pure and transparent. The defining characteristic of this state is complete spiritual openness and hope in God. Najim highlights that such purity of heart is most profoundly expressed in prayer that arises from the depths of one's being. As Aphrahat († 345) notes, this spiritual clarity is not limited to monks alone but extends to those living an active life as well.⁴ Both Ephrem († 373) and Aphrahat depict the heart and body as forming an inner chamber, or even a bridal chamber, for Christ. As Sebastian Brock observes, there is no dichotomy between the heart and the mind.⁵ The author emphasizes that the heart functions like “the altar inside the sanctuary of the temple constituted by the body (1 Cor 6:19), where the interior offering of prayer should be made continuously”.⁶

With this general understanding of spirituality, we can now seek to define priestly spirituality more specifically. At its core, priestly spirituality concerns his heart and arises from the imitation of Christ, demanding complete dedication to the service of God and others. Its foundation is the same as that of every Christian: the awareness of belonging to Christ must shape one's attitude toward God, neighbor, self, and all creation.⁷ However, because a priest receives the keys of salvation from Christ himself through his ordination, his spiritual awareness and sense of responsibility must be even deeper, profound, almost heroic. In the language of Aphrahat and Ephrem, priestly spirituality can be described as a state of being in which the heart becomes a perfect bridal chamber for Christ. Yet, achieving such a spiritual state is not easy. Human weakness and sinfulness – recognized by Syriac authors as real obstacles to

³ Cf. Konrad Zaborowski. 2009. Duchowość – co to w ogóle jest? (21.09.2024). <https://www.katolik.pl/duchowosc---co-to-w-ogole-jest-,2098,416,news.html>.

⁴ Michael Elias Najim. 2006. *Antioch and Syriac Christianity. A Chalcedonian Perspective on a Spiritual Heritage* (17.08.2024). <https://www.scribd.com/document/227849179/Antioch-and-Syriac-Christianity>.

⁵ Sebastian P. Brock. 1987. *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and Spiritual life*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, XXVI.

⁶ Brock. 1987. *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and Spiritual life*, XXVI.

⁷ Marek Chmielewski. 2002. Chrzest. In *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*. Ed. Marek Chmielewski, 130. Lublin – Kraków: Wydawnictwo „M”.

priesthood – present constant challenges – this insight I have already noted in one of my papers.⁸

While the validity of the Mass does not depend on the personal virtue of the priest, they also held that it was better for some to remain as lay people than to become unworthy servants of God.⁹ Here, the wisdom of the Church, fully aware of human frailty, reminds us of the sinfulness and weakness even among the ordained. For this reason, the call to repentance permeates throughout the Liturgy, urging all Christians, including priests, to seek renewal and grace.

In fact, the Church’s liturgy serves as the true foundation upon which any priest can build his spirituality. While this spirituality may have many elements and flows directly from union with Jesus Christ, it must also be rooted in the duties that every priest fulfills in his ministry.

The topic of priestly spirituality, in a direct or indirect way, one can find in the writings of many of Church fathers. An interesting example in regard to this is the Homily (*Mēmrā*) XXXII of Mar Narsai of Nisibis.

Narsai of Nisibis

Before analyzing the selected homily, it is essential to present a brief biography of its author. Narsai was born around 399 AD in the Persian Empire, most likely in ‘Ain Dulba in Ma’alta. Orphaned at a young age, he was raised by his uncle, the superior of the monastery of Kfar Mari near Beth Zabdai.

For ten years, Narsai studied at the Persian School in Edessa, where he later returned to as a teacher and eventually became its head.¹⁰ Scholars agree that he taught in Edessa for approximately twenty years. During this time, he embraced the teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia. However, he was later condemned as a “Nestorian” and forced to flee to Nisibis. There, with the support of the local bishop Barsauma, he re-established the School of Nisibis around 471 AD. Under his leadership, which lasted nearly thirty years, the school flourished as a renowned center of theological education. Narsai passed away around 502 AD, reportedly reaching the remarkable age of 102.¹¹

⁸ Mateusz R. Potoczny. 2017. “Saint or sinner? The figure of the priest-celebrant in the pre-anaphoric prayers of the Liturgy of the West-Syriac Tradition”. *Parole de l’Orient* 43: 342.

⁹ Potoczny. 2017. „Saint or sinner?”, 329.

¹⁰ Sebastian P. Brock. 2024. *A Brief outline of Syriac literature* (Moran Etho 9). Kottayam: Seeri, 29.

¹¹ “Narsai”. In Marek Starowieyski, Jan M. Szymusiak. 2022. *Nowy słownik wczesnochrześcijańskiego piśmiennictwa*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Święty Wojciech, 735; cf. Joseph Ssimonius Assemanus. 1725. *Biblioteca Orientalis de scriptoribus Syris Nestorianis*. Romae: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 63–66.

As noted by Sebastian Brock, Narsai's surviving works consist primarily of *mēmre* – metrical homilies, written in both 7:7 and 12:12 meters. While tradition attributes to him 360 *mēmre*, one for each day of the year¹², approximately eighty have been preserved. These homilies primarily focus on biblical themes, but a significant portion also addresses the sacraments, particularly Baptism and the Eucharist. Brock describes Narsai as arguably the most important poet of the Church of the East.¹³

Among his works, four homilies hold particular liturgical significance:

- Homily (*Mēmṛā*) XVII – A detailed exposition of the *Qurbana* (the Eucharistic liturgy).
- Homily (*Mēmṛā*) XXI – *On the Mysteries of the Church and on Baptism*.
- Homily (*Mēmṛā*) XXII – *On Baptism*.
- Homily (*Mēmṛā*) XXXII – *On the Church and the Priesthood*.¹⁴

The homily under consideration primarily explores the role of the priest in the Church. As Brian Spinks observes, Narsai also touches upon the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. Some scholars have attempted to identify within this homily an early Syrian pattern of the *anaphora*. However, the central theme remains the theological significance of the priesthood.¹⁵

This homily has been preserved in fourteen manuscripts. The most notable edition was prepared by Alphonse Mingana in 1905 and later translated into English by Richard Hugh Connolly in 1909. These two publications serve as the primary sources for the following research.

Priestly ministry in the view of Narsai's Homily XXXII

In his homily *On the Church and on the Priesthood*, Narsai carefully outlines numerous factors and characteristics essential for developing priestly spirituality. Based on this, we can attempt to formulate Narsai's definition of this specific spirituality. To do so, let us turn to the text itself.

In the homily under examination, we find two groups of terms that can aid our analysis. The first consists of a series of titles referring to the priestly ministry.

¹² "Narsai". In Starowieyski, Szymusiak. 2022. *Nowy słownik*, 735.

¹³ Brock. 2024. *A Brief outline of Syriac literature*, 29.

¹⁴ Richard H. Connolly. 1909. "Preface". In Narsai. *The Liturgical Homilies*, X–XI. Cf. Francis Pittappillil. 2024. "Rudiments of the Theology of East Syriac Qurbana in the Puṣaq Raze of Pseudo Narsai". *Christian Orient* 47 (2): 150.

¹⁵ Cf. Bryan Spinks. 1980. "A note on the Anaphora outlined in Narsai's Homily XXXII". *The Journal of Theological Studies* 31 (1): 84, 86.

This selection reflects the highly symbolic language characteristic of Syriac patristic writings. Narsai employs approximately sixteen different terms to describe the priestly role. Who is the priest according to him?

1. He is an heir to the glory of Jesus Christ¹⁶,
2. he is a physician for both hidden and visible diseases,¹⁷
3. he is an angel of the Lord¹⁸,
4. he is a minister¹⁹,
5. he is a mediator between God and man²⁰,
6. he is a guide²¹,
7. he is a steward of the treasure [treasure-keeper]²²,
8. he is a sailor and a steersman.²³
9. Some of these titles reflect bodily imagery. According to Narsai, a priest can also be described using body parts:
10. He is a limb²⁴,
11. he is a head, guiding his fellow servants²⁵,
12. he is like the eyes, distinguishing truth from falsehood²⁶,
13. he acts as a tongue, proclaiming the Word.²⁷
14. Furthermore, the homily contains additional images describing the priestly role. Among them, the priest is compared to:
15. A mirror.²⁸
16. A trumpet.²⁹
17. A guide.³⁰
18. Salt.³¹

¹⁶ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 145.

¹⁷ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

¹⁸ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

¹⁹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

²⁰ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 148.

²¹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 151.

²² Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 145.

²³ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

²⁴ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

²⁵ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

²⁶ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

²⁷ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

²⁸ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147, 151.

²⁹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

³⁰ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

³¹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 151.

The second group of terms used by Narsai describes the specific tasks of a priest. Here, the author lists nineteen duties. What, then, does a priest do? According to Narsai, priests:

1. Sanctify themselves.³²
2. Forgive and pardon iniquities.³³
3. Justify [men].³⁴
4. Perform the mystical priestly office – in likeness of the heavenly one.³⁵
5. Sacrifice love.³⁶
6. Conquer all by the Spirit.³⁷
7. Uproot errors.
8. Sow the truth.³⁸
9. Clean spots.
10. Teach people to hate iniquity of their doings.³⁹
11. Preach the word of life.⁴⁰
12. Prepare the way towards knowledge.⁴¹
13. Hold spiritual doctrine within their lips.⁴²
14. Sprinkle the dew of mercy.⁴³
15. Sow hope, love, and faith.⁴⁴
16. Reap the promised fruits of goodness.⁴⁵
17. Proclaim resurrection.⁴⁶
18. Shepherd the flock.⁴⁷

Since the priest holds in his hands the keys to the Lord's mercy, Narsai emphasizes that the primary goal of priesthood is the forgiveness of iniqui-

³² Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 145.

³³ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 145.

³⁴ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 145.

³⁵ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 145.

³⁶ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 145.

³⁷ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

³⁸ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

³⁹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

⁴⁰ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

⁴¹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 146.

⁴² Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

⁴³ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

⁴⁴ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

⁴⁵ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

⁴⁶ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

⁴⁷ Cf. Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 151.

ties. The priest carries out all these tasks so that men may turn from error to knowledge.⁴⁸

Describing the priestly ministry, Narsai underscores that the priest must perform the “priestly office” – that is, offering sacrifices. However, instead of traditional sacrifices, he is called to “sacrifice love”.⁴⁹ In my opinion, this concept serves as the key to understanding Narsai’s spiritual vision of priesthood.

When we gather all these titles and characteristics, it becomes clear that in Narsai’s teaching, the ministry of mercy holds a central place. The priest acts like Jesus and in the name of Jesus. Like Jesus, he is a physician who brings spiritual healing to the flock entrusted to him. All these spiritual responsibilities – such as forgiving sins, pardoning iniquities, justifying men, uprooting errors, and cleansing stains – must begin with love: love for the flock, love for the priestly ministry, and, above all, love for Jesus Christ himself.

Priestly spirituality in the view of Narsai’s Homily XXXII

By listing all the terms quoted above, Narsai emphasizes that priestly spirituality is, above all, a liturgical one. However, liturgy in this context should be understood in a broad sense. While the Qurbana is undoubtedly the primary source of spirituality, other ministerial functions also contribute to the priest’s spiritual awareness (in the homily itself the mystery of Baptism has also been underlined⁵⁰). Priestly spirituality is built on recognizing the significance of the tasks entrusted to each priest through his mission. The awareness of being appointed as a steersman, guide or guardian should first and foremost inspire the priest to diligently care for both his people and his own spiritual well-being. This, in turn, becomes the foundation for cultivating personal holiness and authentic imitation of Christ.

As a channel between man and God, the priest must strive to live according to the very teachings he imparts. Narsai states that the priest should be like a mirror that reflects “an image of virtues”.⁵¹ This imagery has deep roots in Syriac literature. In one of his studies, Sebastian Brock notes that Syriac writers employ two different approaches to the image of a mirror. In the first, the mirror symbolizes anything capable of reflecting divine reality:

⁴⁸ Cf. Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 148.

⁴⁹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 145.

⁵⁰ See: Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 148.

⁵¹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

Instead of the mirror being external, something that a person, using their interior eye, sees outside themselves, the mirror is itself an *interior* mirror, being “the mirror of the heart” or ‘soul.’ The intended role of this interior mirror is to reflect the image of God in which humanity is created (Genesis 1:26-27), but in order for this to happen, the mirror has to be in a high state of polish.⁵²

It is this second approach that we find in Narsai’s homily. To fully grasp the metaphorical meaning of the mirror, we must remember that in Narsai’s time, glass mirrors like those we use today did not exist. Instead, mirrors were made of metal and required constant polishing to function properly.⁵³ This suggests that being like a mirror should motivate a priest to live as virtuously as possible, according to God’s plan, reflecting holiness and moral excellence. As I have previously noted in another study⁵⁴, it seems that for one who celebrates the Most Holy Mysteries, self-discipline must be stronger and more vigilant than that of laypeople. A priest, as a mediator between God and His people, must also be a leader in holiness.

Many Church Fathers considered the priesthood so demanding that some chose to flee rather than risk becoming unworthy servants of the Most High. In this regard, Narsai states:

It behoves the priests more than all men to observe these things, even as the order they possess is more excellent than (the condition of) all men. [...] The priest who sins - great is his condemnation, and grievous are his stripes; and according to his order shall be either his torment or else his exaltation.⁵⁵

Such an approach to life fosters an attitude of courage, enabling a priest to be like a trumpet that “cries every hour in the ears of men”⁵⁶ and like salt that seasons a world otherwise “without savour.”⁵⁷

The spiritual identity of a priest is shaped by the ministry he fulfills, yet ultimately, spirituality does not stem from ritual but from love. The ministry of love, in a special way, includes the mission of pardoning iniquities and performing acts of mercy toward others. In Narsai’s homily, this aspect of priestly ministry ap-

⁵² Sebastian P. Brock. 2005. “The Imagery of the Spiritual Mirror in Syriac Literature”. *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 5: 4.

⁵³ Brock. 2005. “The Imagery of the Spiritual Mirror in Syriac Literature”, 3.

⁵⁴ Cf. Potoczny. 2017. „Saint or sinner?”, 341.

⁵⁵ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, p. 152. English translation: Narsai. 1909. *The Liturgical Homilies*, 70.

⁵⁶ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 147.

⁵⁷ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 151.

pears to be the most significant. Throughout his writings, he repeatedly emphasizes the importance of mercy and forgiveness. In this context, he offers a particularly striking statement:

The priest is a physician who heals the diseases that are in the midst of the soul; and it behoves him that sick in his mind to run to him continually. He knows how to lay the drug of the Spirit upon the thoughts; and he cuts off iniquity with the iron of the divine mercy.⁵⁸

It seems that this ministry of mercy is one of the most vital sources of priestly spirituality. A priest, constantly confronting the weakness and sinfulness of his fellow believers, is repeatedly called himself to self-examination. Even if the luminous eye⁵⁹ were to darken, the awareness of being an instrument of divine mercy – a priest who sacrifices nothing but love – should at the very least compel him to reflect on his own spiritual state.

Of course, Narsai is not naïve. Understanding human nature, he warns priests against being unfaithful or false. Above all, he condemns those who possess the “oil of mercy” yet fail to show mercy and forgiveness to others. He likens them to the foolish virgins “because they kept the body (chaste) but have not been sanctified from malice.”⁶⁰ He further asserts that “the title of priesthood is a great work, and not (a great) authority.”⁶¹ These words serve as a solemn reminder for priests to nurture their own spiritual lives and cultivate a genuine spirituality of love within their hearts. At the end of his homily, Narsai reiterates:

Let the priests be as mediators by their words; and let them offer the contrition of their mind, as it were a bribe. Then it behoves to offer sacrifices of love, and to make atonement for the iniquity of men and of themselves.⁶²

⁵⁸ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 156. English translation: Narsai. 1909. *The Liturgical Homilies*, 73.

⁵⁹ Cf. Sebastian P. Brock. 2005. *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (Moran Etho 2). Kottayam: Seeri, 44–46.

⁶⁰ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 153. English translation: Narsai. 1909. *The Liturgical Homilies*, 71.

⁶¹ Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 153.

⁶² Narsai. 1905. *Homiliae et Carmina*, 155. English translation: Narsai. 1909. *The Liturgical Homilies*, 72.

Conclusions

Why does this paper begin with a quotation from the Book of Sirach? The answer is very easy: in the 21st century, both laity and clergy – priests and religious alike – are constantly searching for a spirituality that resonates with our times. And yet, there is no need to seek something entirely new. The homily discussed in this paper reminds us that priestly spirituality has always been, and will always remain, a patristic and liturgical spirituality – one that reveals the merciful face of God and is ultimately centered on the sacrifice of love.

While preparing this study, I came across a statement by Ben Boss Chellappan Clarammal:

In today's society, people are forgetting to live their lives in the process of preparing to live. They become more self-centered and money-oriented. Human values are watered down by problems of consumerism, ecological imbalance, social, economic, and political injustices. Everyone is busy. No one has time for another – or rather, fewer and fewer people make time for others.⁶³

If the priests are to remain truly human, truly Christian, and truly priestly, one of the most important things they must do is re-discover the spirituality hidden within the mysteries they celebrate.

This is why I have chosen Narsai's phrase "He taught them to sacrifice love" as part of the title of this study. According to Mar Narsai, priestly spirituality is a spirituality of love – one that embraces both an awareness of human weakness and a constant dependence on God. It calls the priest to adopt the posture of both the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), who seeks mercy, and the merciful father, who grants it. In Syriac language and spirituality, love and mercy are concepts that stand very close to each other. If a priest truly understands his vocation and his duty to offer love and mercy, he will find the surest path toward shaping his own spirituality – the authentic spirituality of a true follower of Christ.

⁶³ Ben Boss Chellappan Clarammal. 2013. *Spirituality of a Diocesan Priest* (10.11.2024). https://www.academia.edu/44393079/Spirituality_of_a_Diocesan_Priest, 10.

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