

The following is an excerpt from a speech given by Ervad Behram Panthaki:

Priesthood in the Next Century

By Ervad Behram Panthaki

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, let me thank Mr. Rustom Bhojti for having invited me to talk on "Priesthood in the next century on the North American Continent".

The topic given to me has raised some questions in my mind:

Will the community need priests in the next century?

What will the community expect of these priests? What role will the priests be expected to play?

How should future priests be equipped/trained to meet the expectations of the community?

Religion, or the following of it, satisfies certain requirements and needs, say the need to believe in a superior power or being. It provides us with an identity, and the opportunity to interact with others of the same identity. It is a source of inner strength.

In recent years, there has been a revival of our faith with increasingly more people turning to religion. And while some might adhere to a ritualistic interpretation of the religion others seek a more philosophical view. This presents an opportunity for priests to meet both, the spiritual and the socio-religious needs of the community. The challenge presented by this expanded role can be and should be regarded as a positive incentive wherein priests see themselves growing beyond being just ritual performers.

It is common knowledge that the way of practicing the religion has changed over time. Where as the previous generation laid stress on ritualistic worship, the present generation's approach is rational and pragmatic. A spirit of enquiry has urged increased awareness about the religion, our history and our roots. Unless the priest is able to fulfil the need for knowledge and satisfy the questioning of rational minds within his community, and make the religion relevant to the day-to-day life of its members, he will lose his position at the center of religious focus or else he may find himself abandoned by the majority.

In order to maintain religious focus and keep the fold together priests will have to wear more than one hat. They are in a position to play a lead role in bringing knowledge and awareness about the religion, the community, its history, achievements, and moral values which contributed to its success whether in Iran, in India, in Pakistan, or in the Western Hemisphere. Priests should continue to perform their spiritual role providing solace and comfort at the times of sickness and death while moving towards more pragmatic practice sought by the modern generation. They should challenge the new generation to keep the flag flying high. This can be done in the form of structured classes, talks, lectures and also more subtly at informal gatherings.

For a more enriching all round experience, priests should motivate their congregations, especially the youth and the children, to participate jointly during social and religious occasions. This, combined with a short talk on the significance of the prayer or of the occasion will have a far greater impact on the collective psyche and result in a common bond, a common faith and a common belief.

I shall go a step further, and say that we can give explanations, depending on the occasion, outlining the significance of Navjotes, weddings and funerals to enlighten the initiates or newly weds and the community in general, emphasizing the beauty of the holy message and its relevance to life regardless of time. These are stirring messages, whose potential to draw people into the fold, should not be underestimated.

To fulfill this role, priests will have to first acquire the basic knowledge themselves through private study and through interaction with their peers and scholars.

The community is fortunate that its present crop of priests, the majority of whom grew up in India and Pakistan, have a great deal of experience in their profession, having received their formal training in established seminaries, and practicing the profession under the guidance of their fathers and uncles before emigrating to this Continent. This may not be the case with the upcoming batch of young priests. These young men will have to work extra hard to acquire the knowledge and confidence necessary to serve the spiritual needs of the community.

This concern has already been recognized and necessary steps have been taken. The North American Mobed Council organized its first ever training camp for young mobeds last summer in Washington DC which was hosted by ZAMWI. The camp was a success and will hereafter become an annual event.

In addition to this, young mobeds will have to take sustained interest in enhancing their knowledge of the religion. From my personal experience I find that the present crop of young mobeds and paramobeds is suitably motivated. They should be encouraged by the community for the sake of future generations and the continuity of the practice of our religion on the Continent.

Another aspect to keep in mind is that priesthood on this Continent is not a fulltime vocation but an honorary voluntary service. That individual who opts to be a priest will have to be genuinely interested, keenly devoted, highly motivated and fully committed to maintain a happy balance between his job demands, his family and the community. Keeping in mind, the pace at which the world is moving, the stress and strain of the workplace and continued commitment to his family, a young priest will have many conflicting demands to cater to. His willingness and desire to serve the community will need greater appreciation on one hand and the constraints of time will need to be understood and accommodated, on the other, and will require a more adjusting and adaptable community.

One also has to keep in mind the age group of our current set of priests and realize that most of them are nearing the age of 60 and in time will need to be replaced by a younger crop. One cannot say with certainty that sons of present day fully ordained priests will follow the footsteps of their father.

The community will have to find volunteers, with genuine interest and commitment to be trained as mobedyars or paramobeds. Present day priests should also shoulder the responsibility to search for youngsters who have potential, take them under their wing, motivate them and encourage them to devote their time to the community.

We will have to be flexible and accept as priests Zarthushtis who are sincere, and interested in the religion, and are keen to acquire knowledge of the philosophy and practice of the Zarthushti Din.