



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY

VII. THE COMMON PRIESTHOOD OF THE FAITHFUL IN ITS RELATION TO THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

VII.1. *Two Forms of Participation in the Priesthood of Christ*

The Second Vatican Council gave renewed attention to the common priesthood of the faithful. The expression “common priesthood” and the reality that it covers have deep biblical roots (cf., for instance, Ex 19:6; Is 61:6; 1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rom 12:1; Rev 1:6; 5:9-10) and received abundant commentary from such Church Fathers as Origen, Saint John Chrysostom, and Saint Augustine. And yet this phrase had very nearly vanished from the vocabulary of Catholic theology because of the antihierarchical use made of it by the Reformers. Still, it is appropriate to remember here that the Roman Catechism mentioned it quite explicitly. *Lumen gentium* gives a remarkable role to the theme of the “common priesthood of the faithful”. It affects both the individual persons of the baptized and the Church community, which is called “priestly” in its *ensemble* (LG 11).

Elsewhere the Council has recourse to the expression “the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood” (*LG* 10) to designate “the sacred ministry ... exercised (in the Church by bishops and priests) for the good of their brethren” (*LG* 13). Although this phrase does not appear directly or explicitly in the New Testament, it has been used constantly in Tradition since the third century. The Second Vatican Council went back to it regularly, while the Synod of Bishops of 1971 devoted to it a document all its own. The Council links the common priesthood of the faithful to the sacrament of baptism. It also says that for Christians this priesthood has as its goal and content the offering of “spiritual sacrifices ... through all [their] ... works”, or again, in Saint Paul’s exact phrase, Christians are “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1). The Christian life is seen, therefore, as a praise offering to God, the worship of God carried out by each person and by the whole Church. This priesthood finds its expression in the holy Liturgy (*SC* 7), and in witnessing to faith and proclaiming the Gospel (*LG* 10) on the basis of that supernatural sense of faith that all the faithful share (cf. *LG* 12). It is actualized concretely in the daily life of the baptized, in which the very stuff of existence becomes a self-offering incorporated into Christ’s paschal mystery. The common priesthood of the faithful (or of the baptized) brings into sharp focus the profound unity that links liturgical worship to the spiritual yet down-to-earth worship of everyday life. We should stress here that such a priesthood can only be understood as sharing in the priesthood of Christ. No praise arises from earth to the Father except through Christ’s agency as the only Mediator. This implies that Christ

is sacramentally active here. And this is so. In the Christian economy, the offering of one's life is only fully realized thanks to the sacraments and most especially thanks to the Eucharist. For are not sacraments at once sources of grace and the cultic expression of self-offering?

VII.2. Relation between the Two PriesthoodsThe Second Vatican Council restored its plenary meaning to the expression “the common priesthood of the faithful”. But it then had to put the question of how this common priesthood was related to the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood. Clearly, both have their basis and source in the unique priesthood of Christ: “The priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways, by both his ministers and the faithful” (*LG* 62; cf. 10). In the Church both carry a sacramental reference to the sanctifying Person, life, and activity of Christ. For the full blossoming of life in the Church, which is Christ’s Body, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood can only be complementary or “ordered to each other”. There is, however, this nuance, that from the viewpoint of the finality and full maturation of the Christian life the common priesthood must be primary, even if from the viewpoint of the visible, organic pattern of the Church and its sacramental functioning priority lies with the ministerial priesthood. *Lumen gentium* is clear and definite about these relationships in its tenth paragraph: “Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless ordered one to another; each in its proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power that he has, forms and rules the priestly people; in the person of Christ he effects the eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people. The faithful, indeed, by virtue of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise that priesthood, too, by the reception of the

sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation, and active charity”.

VII.3. *Sacramental Foundation of the Two Priesthoods*

As these words demonstrate, a theological account of the interrelation of these two priesthoods and their articulation must be in terms of the sacramental, and above all eucharistic, reality present in the Church's life. We have already underlined the fact that the sacraments are at once sources of grace and expressions of the spiritual offering of all one's life. Now the liturgical worship of the Church in which such self-offering reaches its fullness can only be realized when the community is presided over by someone who can act *in persona Christi*. This is the absolutely necessary condition if the “spiritual worship” is to receive its plenitude by being included in the sacrificial self-offering of the Son himself.

“Through the ministry of priests the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is completed in union with the sacrifice of Christ, the only Mediator, which in the Eucharist is offered through the priests’ hands in the name of the whole Church in an unbloody and sacramental manner until the Lord himself comes. The ministry of priests is directed to this and finds its consummation in it. For their ministrations, which begins with the announcement of the Gospel, draws its force and power from the sacrifice of Christ and tends to this, that ‘the whole redeemed city, that is, the whole assembly and community of the saints should be offered as a universal sacrifice to God through the High Priest who offered himself in his Passion for us that we might be the Body of so great a Head’ (St. Augustine)”. (PO 2)

The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood of bishops and priests are strictly correlative because they derive from a single source, Christ’s priesthood, and aim at a single, definitive end: the offering of the whole of Christ’s Body. This is so true that Saint Ignatius of Antioch was able to affirm that without bishops, presbyters, and deacons one cannot speak of the Church at all (cf. *Ad Trail.* 3, 1). The Church only exists as the structured Church, and this is equally true if one uses the “people of God” idea, an idea that it would be quite wrong to identify with the laity alone, with bishops and priests left to one side.

Similarly, the “supernatural appreciation of the Faith” concerns “the whole people, when, ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful’, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals” (*LG* 2). It is utterly implausible to set over against each other the sense of faith of the people of God and the hierarchical Magisterium of the Church. The appreciation of faith to which the Council testifies is one that, “aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth”, only truly receives the Word of God when guided by the sacred teaching authority (cf. *LG* 12).

Within the single new people of God, common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood of bishops and priests are inseparable. The common priesthood embraces the fullness of its own ecclesial possibilities, thanks to the ministerial priesthood, while the ministerial priesthood itself only exists for the sake of the exercise of the common priesthood. Bishops and priests are indispensable for the life of the Church and the life of the baptized. Yet bishops and priests are also called to live out fully this same common priesthood, and, in this sense, they too need the ministerial priesthood. “I am a bishop for you; I am a Christian with you”, remarked Saint Augustine (*Sermo* 340, 1).

Because of their different orientations, the common priesthood of all the faithful and the ministerial priesthood of priests and bishops are distinguished by one essential difference (which is not simply a difference of degree). Acting in the “role” of Christ, bishop and priest make him present vis-à-vis the people. At the same time, they also represent the whole people before the Father.

Of course, there are some sacramental acts whose validity depends on the fact that their celebrant has, in virtue of ordination, the power to act *in persona Christi*, “in the role of Christ”, or *in munere Christi*, “in Christ’s office”. However, one should not rest content with this statement in arguing for the legitimacy of the place of the ordained ministry in the Church. That ministry belongs to the essential structure of the Church and thus to her “face”, her visibility. The essential structure of the Church and her self-presentation include a “vertical” dimension, the sign and instrument of the initiative and priority of the divine action in the Christian economy.

VII.4. *The Vocation of the Laity*

The above reflection is helpful in explaining certain statements of the new Code of Canon Law about the common priesthood of the faithful. Following the thirty-first paragraph of *Lumen gentium*, canon 204, 1, links baptism to the way Christians share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal functions of Christ.

“Christ’s faithful are those who, since they are incorporated into Christ through baptism, are constituted the people of God. For this reason they participate in their own way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ. They are called, each according to his or her particular condition, to exercise the mission that God entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world”.

In the spirit of that mission of the whole of God’s people, which laymen exercise in both Church and world, canons 228, 1, and 230, 1 and 3, envisage the admission of laymen to ecclesiastical office and charge: for example, to the ministries of lector, acolyte, and others (cf. CIC 861, 2; 910, 2; 1112). But it would be a woeful misreading of these authorizations to see them as licensing a suppression of the difference between the respective roles of bishops, priests, and deacons and those of laymen. The role of the layman in ecclesiastical office and charge, as seen in the canons cited above, is certainly fully legitimate. Indeed, it is absolutely necessary in certain situations. But it cannot possess the fullness of that ecclesial sign quality that belongs to the ordained minister in his proper capacity as the sacramental representative of Christ. The extension of ecclesiastical office and charge to the laity should not lead to any obscuring of the visible sign of the Church, the people of God as hierarchically ordered, and that by Christ its Head.

Nor should the eligibility of laymen for these offices betray one into forgetting that, just as bishops, priests, and deacons or—at a different level—religious men and women have their own proper vocation within the totality of the Church’s common mission, so do the laity. As the thirty-first paragraph of *Lumen gentium* puts it: “By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will. They live in the world, that is, they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life, which, as it were, constitute their very existence. There they are called by God that, being led by the Spirit to the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially by the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope, and charity, they must manifest Christ to others”.