



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

THE IMAGE OF THE PRIEST IN THE DECREE
PRESBYTERORUM ORDINIS
CONTINUITY AND PROJECTION TOWARD THE THIRD
MILLENNIUM ¹

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INTRODUCTION: A RETURN TO THE DOCTRINAL ROOTS OF THE COUNCIL

The light which the Second Vatican Council has brought to the Church in all fields of her doctrine and life is so great, and that which it has projected concretely on the vocation and mission of priests so intense, that it is necessary to begin this intervention by sincerely disclosing even from the outset the limits which we consciously place upon ourselves. This address wishes to be only a synthetic, even if reasonably complete, vision of the whole of conciliar teaching with regard to the presbyterate, ³ especially in the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, in the light of postconciliar teaching on the matter. ⁴ It is a vision reflected upon today in view of the pastoral needs of the years to come.

1 Translated from the original Italian by Rev. Christopher J. Schreck; wherever possible, quoted texts are rendered according to published English translations.

2 Titular Archbishop of Vertara, President of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts.

3 Cf. Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 28; Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*; Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops *Christus Dominus*, 16, 28; Decree on Priestly Formation *Optatam Totius*, 22; Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 25; Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 39.

4 Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus*, 24 June 1967: AAS 59 (1967), 657-697; Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, Circular Letter *Inter ea*, 4 November 1969: AAS 62 (1970), 123-134; Synod of Bishops, Document on the Ministerial Priesthood *Ultimis Temporibus*, 30 November 1971: AAS 63 (1971), 898-922; *Codex Iuris Canonici*, 25 January 1983, cc. 232-264, 273-289, 1008-1054; Congregation for Catholic Education, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, 19 March 1985: EV, S1, 918-1072; John Paul II, *Letters to Priests* on the occasion of Holy Thursday; post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 25 March 1992: AAS 84 (1992), 657-804; *Catechesis on Priests*, in the general audiences from 31 March to 22 September 1993; Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 31 January 1994, *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, Vatican City, 1994.

It does not escape me that, in effect, a comprehensive vision such as that just described has been, in a certain way, already developed not only in the relevant regulations of the new Code of Canon Law, but also in some recent documents, such as the postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* or the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*. To have recourse to their pages would be a journey particularly suited to the attainment of our goal, and one that we will not hesitate to pursue. But, keeping in mind the historical circumstance which we commemorate in this symposium, we will also travel by other thoroughfares. I recall, in fact, a wise consideration with regard to the image of the priest outlined in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* that was raised by the distinguished secretary of the relevant conciliar commission, Monsignor Alvaro del Portillo: *Yes, the Holy Spirit brought the fathers to outline in the Decree a clear and updated image of the priest, but this image can only be well appreciated if framed within the whole of the ecclesiology and of the evangelizing purpose of the Council.*

The thirty years since the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* not only justify but recommend presenting this address, from the methodological point of view, as an analytical re-reading of that source document together with other conciliar texts to which it is directly linked. A new consideration of these texts, which have not ceased to be the object of meditation and study in these three decades, is today a necessity in order to confront particular ecclesial situations — at times conflicting and problematical — which demand clarity and decision in the work of governance. Moreover, the time that has elapsed and the tremendous mass of theological, juridical-canonical, and pastoral work carried out

I think especially of the splendid pontifical teaching of the last decades — permit us today to make a clear and more profound analysis of the doctrinal and disciplinary contents of these teachings.

In effect, in order to return to disclose and sketch today the figure of the priest as understood in Vatican II, it is necessary to reflect on the conciliar theological keys which provide its basis and content. The image of the priest which the Council offers depends strictly upon its fundamental ecclesiological teachings, analogous to the way in which these ecclesiological teachings are found in close relation to its Christological teachings. There is, therefore, a certain route to follow before reaching the goal.

Furthermore, as the then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyła wrote in a valuable comment on conciliar doctrine, one has to keep in mind that: "The doctrine of the priesthood of Christ, and participation in it, lies at the very heart of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and contains, in some way, all that the Council wanted to say about the Church and the world."⁵ This is a profoundly true consideration, whose accuracy can be assessed by looking at the very life of the postconciliar Church with its areas of light and areas of shadow.

Whence, in fact, do some of the serious ecclesial imbalances in this period arise we think, for example, of certain confusions and abuses regarding the nature of pastoral ministry and the exercise of its functions — if not in the realm of a deficient theological and pastoral use of the conciliar doctrine on the priesthood and, more concretely, (its doctrine) on the relationship between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood? And behind these problems is there not hidden a profound ignorance of the ecclesiological and Christological keys of Vatican II? Stated in positive terms: is it not true, for example, that the theological and pastoral contributions of these two contemporary ecclesiological documents — the Apostolic Exhortations *Christifideles Laici* and *Pastores Dabo Vobis* — are oriented precisely toward a clear deepening of the conciliar doctrine of the priesthood of Jesus Christ and toward the distinctive participation of sacred ministers and faithful laity in same?

⁵ Karol Wojtyła, *La renovación en sus fuentes*, Spanish edition, Madrid, 1982, 182 (cf. n. 11).

Inevitably, we find ourselves before an important doctrinal question, loaded with exceptional pastoral significance, whose roots reach the deepest levels of Catholic christology and ecclesiology. As we were able to note a moment ago — and I permit myself to insist on it again, since it concerns one of the central ideas of our analysis — to compile an accurate exposition of the teachings of the Council regarding the ministerial priesthood requires a prior understanding, adequate to the reality, of the knowledge of her own mystery that the Church in Vatican II has attained. The Council's image of the priest — the same could be said of the conciliar image of the other Christian faithful — is a pure reflection of its ecclesiological vision, and what emerges therefrom depends from the beginning on how this vision is set forth.

I think that a few words of the Holy Father John Paul II shed light on the idea that we are expressing: "The Second Vatican Council" — the Pope wrote in his first Letter to Priests — "deepened the idea of the priesthood and presented it, throughout its teaching, as the expression of the inner forces, those 'dynamisms,' whereby the mission of the whole people of God in the Church is constituted." ⁶ In effect, the Church, thanks to the Council, has reached a new and deeper horizon of comprehension of the priestly mystery, consistent with her essence. This new understanding developed along with a consciousness, itself also renewed, of the proper condition of a priestly people, ⁷ destined in Christ for the service of a salvific mission, which actualizes in time the mission of the Lord. Precisely in this vision of the mission of the Church as fruit of the effort to express the inner powers which configure it, there has happily taken place — as the Pope's words point out — the conciliar deepening on the understanding of the priesthood. It is within these dynamisms that we must situate our re-reading and our present analysis.

⁶ John Paul II, Letter to Priests *Novo Incipiente*, 8 April 1979: AAS 71(1979), 393-417; 3.

⁷ Cf. Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 9-10.

SOME KEYS TO READING THE CONCILIAR TEACHING

The documents of the Second Vatican Council, and among them those which refer to our argument, are the fruit of the Church's faith and work, and in particular of the episcopal college. They were elaborated with great exertion, sparing no effort humanly speaking, ⁸ but above all with the intense sense of faith which the Holy Spirit keeps burning in the Church. In remembering today, thirty years afterwards, the genesis of the Council's teachings through which the Bride of Christ has seen her knowledge and articulation of her own ministry mature, and in attentively analyzing their content, it is not difficult to rediscover — if I am permitted to say so with a bold but appropriate expression — some of the profound signs which the hand of God has left behind.

All of the Council's doctrine, and concretely that which refers to priests, was elaborated day after day, session after session, starting from a few fundamental presuppositions which focused and oriented the immense mass of work of Vatican II, and which it seems to me necessary to highlight — even if very briefly — because they are truly keys to the reading and deepening of our question.

⁸ We recall, as an example, the conciliar path of the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*: 5 years of work; 10 successive drafts of a brief document; more than 10,000 votes, studies, proposals, suggestions, and in the final days 2198 *modi*, with final proposals for modifications. To arrive on 7 December 1965 at the 2390 *placets* of the 2394 Fathers of the Council, it was certainly necessary to journey down a long road.

THE RENEWING AND EVANGELIZING PURPOSE OF THE COUNCIL

Do we wish to bring to light the image of the priest intended by the Council with all of its theological, spiritual, and disciplinary presuppositions? Then let us remember first of all what the primary objectives of the convocation and realization of the Second Vatican Council were, in order then to survey the panorama of answers which are disclosed in considering that original purpose, at once so decisively innovative and evangelizing. There we will find a first key to respond to our question.

It is well-known that Vatican II was conceived, from its beginnings, as a means and a singular opportunity to promote the renewal of the Church and the timely *aggiornamento* of her pastoral activity. "Illuminated by the light of this Council" —remarked John XXIII in his speech opening the assembly — "the Church, — we confidently trust — will become greater in spiritual riches and, gaining the strength of new energies therefrom, she will look to the future without fear. In fact, by bringing herself up to date where required, and by the wise organization of mutual cooperation, the Church will make men, families, and peoples really turn their minds to heavenly things." ⁹

The awareness of needed renewal with which the Council was brought to birth was to continue leaving its mark throughout constitutions, decrees and declarations. Therefore, the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* centers its attention, right from the beginning, on the "extremely important and always more arduous task to be performed (by priests) in the area of the renewal of the Church of Christ." ¹⁰ This consciousness of renewal and of evangelization determined also the spirit with which these documents were received, and they began to be put into practice in the whole Church.

"It is to be hoped" — wrote the Archbishop of Krakow, Cardinal Woytyla in 1972 — "that this implementation of Vatican II will be guided by the idea that the renewal initiated by the Council is an historical stage in the self-realization of the Church.

9 John XXIII, Discourse *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* on the Solemn Opening of the Second Vatican Council, 11 October 1962: *Enchiridion Vaticanum* (EV), 1, 37*

10 Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 1: EV, 1, 1243.

In fact, through the Council, the Church has spelled out not only what she thinks of herself but also in what manner she wishes to realize herself." ¹¹

This conviction was fully confirmed and enriched in its formulation during the extraordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1985, called twenty years after the close of the Council to verify and promote even more its realization. ¹² A brief affirmation made there takes on great importance for us: "The council ... had been convoked in order to promote the renewal of the Church with a view to evangelizing a radically changed world." ¹³ Renewal, then, and, inseparably, evangelization of a world subject to profound transformations: these were the two faces of this "gift of God to the Church and to the world," that was Vatican II, and which truly must be considered with the Synod fathers of 1985 as "the great grace of this century." ¹⁴

Here, therefore, is a key to understand the spirit which imbues the Council's image of the priest: a strong desire for theological, spiritual and disciplinary renewal of the ministry and life of priests, in order to propel them and assist them to perform their great and indispensable mission in the present time. This is the same reading key, perfectly grasped and expressed in so many ways by John Paul II, and which is found in a passage of the pastoral exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, that we restrict ourselves to quoting: "Today in particular, the pressing pastoral task of the new evangelization calls for the involvement of the entire People of God, and requires a new fervor, new methods and a new expression for the announcing and witnessing of the Gospel."

This task demands priests who are deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life, marked by a profound communion with the Pope, the Bishops and other priests, and a fruitful cooperation with the lay faithful, always respecting and fostering the different roles, charisms and ministries present within the ecclesial community." ¹⁵

11 "*Alle fonti del rinnovamento. Studio sull'attuazione del Concilio Vaticano II, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981, Introduzione* (Spanish translation cited in n. 3 above).

12 "The end for which this Synod has been convoked has been the celebration, the verification and the promotion of the Second Vatican Council. With gratitude of heart we feel we have truly achieved this result, with the help of God" (Synod of Bishops, Extraordinary General Session, 1985. Final Report *Ecclesia sub Verbo Dei Mysteria Christi Celebrans pro Salute Mundi*, 7 December 1985, *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, Vatican City, 1985; cf. EV, 9, 1780).

13 Synod of Bishops, Extraordinary General Session, 1985. Message *Nos, Episcopi* to the Christian Faithful on the Second Vatican Council as Gift of God to the Church and to the World, 7 December 1985: OR, 8 December 1985; EV, 9, 1775.

14 Cf. *ibid.*, 1778.

15 John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 18. Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, Introduction.

THE CHURCH IN SERVICE TO THE SALVATION OF ALL MEN

The Second Vatican Council was pervaded by a lively sense of the universal saving will of God, already manifested in the works of creation, fully revealed in the redemptive incarnation, and brought to completion without reservation in the gift of the Paraclete. One can say, with some foundation, that reference to salvific divine love nurtures all conciliar doctrine, in which a real *consciousness of salvation* is manifested.

This terminology, "consciousness of salvation,"¹⁶ refers us back to what we above called "consciousness of renewal," and we use it in order to do so. In reality, both are inseparably united in conciliar teaching. In the consideration of the mystery of Christ which the Council offers us and, within that, of the mystery of the Church, both perspectives are, in effect, interconnected. The Pope has recently expressed this reality in splendid terms: "It was a council similar to earlier ones, yet very different; it was a council focused on the mystery of Christ and his Church, and at the same time open to the world. This openness was an evangelical response to recent changes in the world, including the profoundly disturbing experiences of the 20th century, a century scarred by the First and Second World Wars, by the experience of concentration camps and by horrendous massacres. All these events demonstrate most vividly that the world needs purification; it needs to be converted."¹⁷

16 Terminology that we elsewhere find in the work cited of Cardinal Woytyla, *Alle fonti del rinnovamento*; cf. chapters II and III and following.

17 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, to the episcopate, the clergy and the faithful on preparation for the Jubilee of the year 2000, 10 November 1994, 18.

If "our priestly life and activity continue the life and activity of Christ himself";¹⁸ if priests are called to prolong the presence of the Master;¹⁹ if, finally, every priest can say of his sacramental configuration to Jesus Christ: "Here lies our identity, our true dignity, the source of our joy, the very basis of our life,"²⁰ one cannot but keep in mind at the same time that the Council contemplates Christ always with its gaze intensely riveted on his saving mission. This does not mean that the Council overlooks other perspectives, but that this will be, for the most part, the dominant perspective, the perspective that will orient the great doctrinal texts elaborated in the Council aula and certainly the text of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. Vatican II's vision of Christ is, as it were, dazzled before the rediscovered grandeur of the economy of salvation, in which the Church, too — and with her the Christian priesthood — rediscovers the essence of her own being.

In this regard, one probably cannot find a more paradigmatic and significant conciliar passage than the opening of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: "Christ is the light of all nations. Hence this most sacred Synod, which has been gathered in the Holy Spirit, eagerly desires to shed on all men that radiance of His which brightens the countenance of the Church. This it will do by proclaiming the gospel to every creature (cf. Mark 16:15). By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity.

18 John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 18.

19 *Ibid.*, 15.

20 *Ibid.*, 18.

For this reason, following in the path laid out by its predecessors, this Council wishes to set forth more precisely to the faithful and to the entire world the nature and encompassing mission of the Church." ²¹ A contemporary re-reading of this memorable passage — which one of the major protagonists of the work of the Council has called: "The point of departure and, at the same time, the center of reflection, which the Church conducted throughout the Council in regard to her own nature and mission" ²² — allows us to discern, as we said a little earlier, as it were, an imprint of the action of Providence, which continued to mark out in sure steps the direction to follow ²³ for the conciliar and postconciliar Church.

Clearly, a consideration of the mystery of the Church, based on an earlier contemplation of the mystery of Christ, *lumen gentium*, would bring an ecclesiological teaching endowed with characteristic accents — accents which then would be coherent currents in the teaching on the priesthood and the laity, and therefore, according to the nomenclature we are following, keys to decipher the true conciliar image of the priest.

21 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1: EV, 1, 284.

22 Alvaro del Portillo, *Consacrazione e Missione del sacerdote*, Edizioni Ares, Milan, 1990, 24.

23 How can one not recognize this same imprint in the famous speech of Pope Paul VI at the opening of the Second Session of the Council? In it he spoke those unforgettable words which determined the starting point, the route and the objective of the Council: "Christ! ... Christ is our starting point, Christ our leader and our way, Christ our hope and our goal (...). May this our present assembly shine with no other light than Christ, the light of the world. May our minds seek no other truth than that proclaimed by the words of the Lord, our only teacher. May our sole ambition be to give whole-hearted, loyal obedience to His commands" (Paul VI, Discourse *Salvete Fratres* on the Opening of the Second Session of the Council, 29 September 1963: EV, 1, 145*).

THE CHURCH, PRIESTLY COMMUNITY ORGANICALLY STRUCTURED

The application to the Church of the notion of communion, as expression of her mystery, has sunk roots in the theological and canonical doctrine of the last decades and has also found a place for itself in magisterial teaching ²⁴ and in the new legislative corpus of the Church. ²⁵ The Council's vision of the Church, essentially based on the revelation of the Trinitarian plan of salvation, dwells felicitously in the consideration of the eternal will of the Father, the redemptive incarnation of the Son and the gift of the Spirit. Trinitarian communion, the unity of the Father and the Son in their reciprocal love, is diffused among men through the missions of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and is permanently prolonged through the Church, the true locale and source for the communion of men with God and among themselves. The Church of Vatican II is known as the communion of those who have received the status of sons of the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit: she is truly *de unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti plebs adunata*. ²⁶

A vision such as this of the mystery of the Church — "the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the council's documents," as was stated in the Synod of 1985 ²⁷ — establishes a basic orientation with regard to the manner of studying its essential elements (nature and mission of the Church, unity and diversity of members, complementarity of functions, etc.), from which, as is logical, important theological and disciplinary consequences derive.

24 Cf. John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 30 December 1988, 18-20; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter on the Church as communion, *Communio Notio*, 24 May 1992: AAS 85 (1993), 840ff.

25 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, 25 January 1983: AAS 75 (1983), part II. VII-XIV.

26 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 4: EV 1, 288.

27 Synod of Bishops, Extraordinary General Session 1985, *Relatio Finalis*, II, C, 1: EV 9, 1800; cf. John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 30 December 1988, 19.

This conception of the Church as communion resounds in all that the Council and the postconciliar Magisterium²⁸ teach on the priesthood and on the ministry of priests. A current reading of the conciliar texts permits us to understand with greater clarity just how important the influence of the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* has been with respect to everything regarding the definition of an operational model of the Church. Certainly, great importance has adorned the notion of the People of God, already endowed with full meaning on its own, even if inseparable from other notions. Without doubt, what turns out to be decisive is the intimate connection of this notion of the Church with the priesthood of Christ, in which all the baptized "by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood."²⁹ Thus, the Church of Vatican II, *Ecclesia de Trinitate*, Church-communion, must also be described — with words of *Lumen Gentium* taken up by *Presbyterorum Ordinis* — as *communitas sacerdotalis*,³⁰ which not only sheds light on the mystery of her nature, but also points toward the content of her mission and the way to realize it.

Nevertheless, there still remains an essential, determinative element of this priestly community to emphasize. The Church is recognized and manifested in the same texts of *Lumen Gentium* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* as "*communitas sacerdotalis organice exstructa*." 31 "The entire Church in all her components lives in the mystery of a 'missionary communion.' This means an '*organic* communion analogous to that of a living, functioning body characterized by a diversity and a complementarity of vocations and states of life, of ministries, charisms and responsibilities' (*Christifideles Laici*, 20); it also means a 'unity in mission,' (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2; *Christifideles Laici*, 55) which actively involves all the baptized in the work of building up the mystical body of Christ and in courageously proclaiming the Gospel to the world." 32

28 Cf., for example, John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 12ff; Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 21ff.

29 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

30 Ibid., 11; cf. Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

31 Ibid.

32 John Paul II, *Discourse to the Participants in the Symposium on the Collaboration of the Laity in the Pastoral Ministry of Priests*, 22 April 1994, 1. Cf. "*Sacrum Ministerium*" 1 (1995), 62. Cf. *Discourse to the Participants in the International Symposium on Canon Law*, the Vatican, 23 April 1993: AAS 86 (1994) 244-248.

The existence in the Church, with respect to the pursuit of her mission, of two forms of priesthood, the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, essentially different even if reciprocally ordered one to the other insofar as both derive from the unique priesthood of Christ, ³³ turns out to be a doctrine of extraordinary importance — a real keystone of Catholic ecclesiology and discipline in describing the conciliar image of the priest. What level of truth would such a description have if the exigencies which derive from this organic ecclesiastical structuring were taken into serious consideration? The correct framing of the question of the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood is certainly fundamental: not only to pursue an academic treatment of our theme but also and above all to "promote the common discipline of the whole Church" ³⁴ and to avoid allowing "abuses [to] creep into ecclesiastical discipline, especially concerning the ministry of the word, [and] the celebration of the sacraments." ³⁵

In this sense, the Pope has recently admonished: "The particular gift of each of the church's members must be wisely and carefully acknowledged, safeguarded, promoted, discerned and coordinated, without confusing roles, functions or theological and canonical status. Otherwise the body of Christ is not built up nor does its mission of salvation correctly develop.(...) We cannot jeopardize the church's hierarchical constitution in order to summon pastors to a humble, loving awareness of service or out of a desire to bring the lay faithful to a full realization of their dignity and responsibility.

We cannot increase the communion and unity of the Church by 'clericalizing' the lay faithful or by 'laicizing' priests.,, 36

33 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

34 CIC, canon 392, 1.

35 CIC, canon 392, 2.

36 John Paul II, *Discourse to the Participants in the Symposium on the Collaboration of the Laity in the Pastoral Ministry of Priests*, 22 April 1994, 3-4. Cf. "*Sacrum Ministerium*" 1(1995), 63-64.

THE THREEFOLD *MUNUS CHRISTI* IN THE CHURCH

We still wish to put in prominence, or rather simply cite, a final point of conciliar ecclesiology, necessary in order to understand the form and content of the priestly mission of the Church *organice exstructa*. We find it expressed in a passage of *Lumen Gentium*, which describes the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ with these words: "It was for this reason that God sent His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things (cf. Hebrews 1:2), that He might be Teacher, King, and Priest of all, the Head of the new and universal people of the sons of God." 37

The explanation of the mission of Christ according to the schema of the threefold *munus*, which enjoyed a solid traditional basis, has turned out to be, as we well know, one of the decisive features of conciliar doctrine. The functions of the different members of the Church in service to her common mission will likewise be described by the Council according to this schema. These functions, although distinct in their concrete contents to the benefit of the diversity of gifts and personal charisms, are nevertheless endowed with the same structure.³⁸ And around this schema, important theological developments of the postconciliar Magisterium have come to fruition as well as, to the degree possible, the regulations of the new Code of Canon Law. We now wish only to emphasize the centrality of the doctrine of the threefold *munus* in order to delimit the bounds of the specific function of the priest in service to the mission of the Church. At the same time, this is determinative in specifying the Council's image of the priest.

37 Ibid., 13.

38 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 25-27; Decree *Christus Dominus* on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, 12-16; Decree on Priestly Life and Ministry *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4-6.

THE CONCILIAR IMAGE OF THE PRIEST: CENTRAL ELEMENTS

Beginning with these key points in the ecclesiology of Vatican II, which we have considered opportune to place synthetically in evidence, we are now prepared to turn our attention to the image of the priest. The clearest impression that one draws from reading the conciliar texts dedicated to the priesthood is that the Council has, in effect, succeeded, as was its general intention, to elaborate a doctrinal exposition of *real renewal*.

The principal cause of such a renewal, insofar as it concretely regards the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, is certainly to be sought in the decisive acceptance of the theological perspectives opened up by *Lumen Gentium*, which allowed the assumption and the bringing together to a higher synthesis of various earlier ecclesiological concepts. The study of the mystery of the Church and of all ecclesial realities, in particular the priesthood, will be framed by the original and profound point of view of the participation of the priest in the consecration and mission of Christ, Head and Shepherd.

By situating the ministerial priesthood of priests and its functions within the framework of the mission of Christ and the Church, one gains a fundamentally dynamic vision of it, as the secretary of the conciliar Commission *De Disciplina Cleri et Populi Christiani* 39 defined it, himself an exceptional witness in the subject matter we are addressing. It is interesting to read one of his 1966 declarations: 40

39 Cf. Alvaro del Portillo, *Consacrazione e Missione del sacerdote, op. cit.*, 26.

40 The text is a passage from a work correctly entitled: *La figura del sacerdote delineata nel Decreto Presbyterorum Ordinis*. The original edition appeared in the review *Palabra* 12-13 (1966), 4-8.

During the conciliar debates on this Decree — reports Monsignor del Portillo — two positions were presented which, considered separately, could have appeared opposed or quite contradictory: on the one hand, the announcement of the message of Christ to all men was insisted upon; on the other hand, emphasis was placed on the worship and adoration of God as ends toward which everything must tend in the ministry and life of priests. Some effort was required to synthesize and reconcile these positions, and the Commission worked, sparing no endeavor, to harmonize the two conceptions, which are neither opposed nor mutually exclusive. In effect, the two different doctrinal positions on the priesthood acquire their full emphasis and significance when both are inserted into a more comprehensive synthesis, in which it becomes apparent that they are absolutely inseparable and complementary aspects which give definition to each other: the ministry for the sake of men is only understood as a service offered to God, while the glorification of God demands that the Priest feel an anxiety to be united to that praise which is proper to all men.(...) In this way, one has a dynamic perspective of the priestly ministry, which by announcing the Gospel produces faith in those who do not yet believe, so that they may belong to the People of God and unite their sacrifice to that of Christ, forming a single Body with Him. ⁴¹

In fact, the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* develops along a Trinitarian and Christocentric plan in which the whole economy of salvation and, therefore, the Church herself, insofar as "universal sacrament of salvation" ⁴² — is contemplated in the light of the priesthood of Christ, or in the light of his priestly consecration-mission, in which he has made the members of his Body, in various ways, participants. Paragraph 2 of the Decree begins with this precise affirmation; and with this beginning, in a certain sense, the essential aspect of the Decree's content is summarized, insofar as consecration and mission are the two notions which underlie and give support to all the Decree's subsequent teaching on priests. The intimate and profound interdependence of these two concepts is the connecting thread of the whole document.

41 Ibid., 26-27.

42 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 48: EV, 1, 416.

The question which we ask ourselves in this setting has also been implicitly the same question that from the beginning guided the drafting of the conciliar Decree: What is the image of the priest — what are the fundamental features of his personality? — among the other members of the ecclesial community and in the midst of the secular structures of the contemporary world? How in our own times do we express the supernatural and human richness of the priest's identity and the beauty and absolute necessity of his ministry? To such questions, which we have said must be answered according to the perspective of the priesthood of Christ, the Council responded by basing its answer on the two fundamental notions previously highlighted: consecration and mission. To these it is necessary to add a third concept, vocation, which precedes the other two and in which they find their foundation.

The priest is a member of the People of God, chosen from among other members with a particular call (vocation), in order to be consecrated by a special sacrament (consecration) and sent (mission) to perform specific functions in service to the People of God and to all humanity. A man *chosen*, a man *consecrated*, a man *sent*. These are undoubtedly, in their unity and inseparability, the fundamental characteristics of the image of the priest outlined by the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. Therefore, only by deepening our reflection on these characteristics will it be possible to find the correct answers to the questions (old or new, true or false) which can be posed to us on the life and ministry of the priest, in the Church and in society.

A MAN CHOSEN AND CALLED

Chosen by whom? By the Christian community? Chosen perhaps by himself? Already when the Second Vatican Council was being celebrated, as we do on the present occasion, it seemed useless and even foolish to pose a question like this which can only receive the same and always invariable Catholic response. But there existed then, and there continue to exist now, different positions from which — with relatively diverse but basically very similar arguments — these insidious problems are hurled against the Church and before public opinion. ⁴³ It is patently clear in conciliar teaching that the vocation of the priest is absolutely inseparable from his consecration and his mission. The one who chooses him is also the same who consecrates him and sends him: that is, Christ himself, through the apostles and their successors.

Note how this doctrinal reality is ratified by the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* in one of its initial points: "Now, the same Lord has established certain ministers among the faithful in order to join them together in one body where 'all the members have not the same function' (Romans 12:4). These ministers in the society of the faithful would be able by the sacred power of their order to offer sacrifice and to remit sins. They would perform their priestly office publicly for men in the name of Christ." ⁴⁴

43 As, for example in our own times, E. Schillebeeckx in his work on ecclesial ministry *Kerkelijk ambt. Voorgangers in de gemeente van Jezus Christus*, Bloemendall, 1980, in which he upholds the thesis that a layman chosen by a Christian community to be leader or director is by that very fact rendered capable of presiding at the eucharistic celebration; cf. *De sociale context van de verschuivingen in het kerkelijk ambt*, in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 22 (1982), 24-59. In his new 1985 work on the same theme (*Pleidooi voor mensen in de Kerk. Christelijke identiteit in de Kerk*, Baarn, 1985; cf. *Per una Chiesa dal volto umano*, Brescia, 1986), Schillebeeckx somewhat reformulates his position, even if serious difficulties remain on the idea which he maintains with regard to the relationship between ordained ministry and apostolic succession. As is well known, the theses of the Dutch Dominican were rejected by the Magisterium (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Problems Regarding the Ministry of the Eucharist*, 6 August 1983; *Notificazione della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede*, 15 September 1986; in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 September 1986).

44 "Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2: EV, 1, 1245.

In emphasizing the divine institution of the ministerial priesthood (or of the presbyterate, to which the Council text actually refers), the accent falls on the divine calling of the priest. He is not, therefore, a delegate of the community before God, nor a functionary or employee of God before the people. He is a man chosen by God from among men in order to realize the mystery of salvation in the name of Christ. The notion of *divine vocation* —inseparable, we repeat, from the other two aspects already mentioned and which we will next address — is essential to oppose certain overly democratizing notions, nevertheless present and unfortunately influential in some Church circles.

Such an overly democratizing conception of the Church, as was pointed out in an important symposium convened at the Vatican in 1994, 45 can arise only from a defective view of the very nature of the Church. Even if this is not sensed to be a problem as such by the majority of the Christian people, certainly this conception is being disseminated in particular circles in Central Europe and North America. Nevertheless, the majority of the faithful, even those who lack solid doctrinal formation, have a Catholic *sensus Ecclesiae*, consistent with revealed doctrine, as well as a clear awareness of the distinction between priests and laity by reason of the sacrament of orders. They do not, therefore, pose problems with regard to the hierarchical nature of the Church because they well know that Christ has willed it so. But there are also some small groups and communities that while affirming that they are not denying the hierarchical character of the Church, advocate an unbalanced egalitarianism between laity and sacred ministers far removed from Catholic ecclesiological doctrine on key points, as — for example — the affirmation of the essential distinction between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood; or those who by equivocally invoking the concept of the *inculturation* of the Church, demand the assumption of democratic systems for the election of sacred pastors.

Today, this is a serious problem, very closely related to so called functionalism, which consists, in the words of the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, in: "An erroneous mentality which reduces the ministerial priesthood to strictly functional aspects. To merely play the role of the priest, carrying out a few services and ensuring completion of various tasks would make up the entire priestly existence. Such a reductive conception of the identity of the ministry of the priest risks pushing their lives towards an emptiness, an emptiness which often comes to be filled by lifestyles not consonant with their very ministry." ⁴⁶ We find ourselves, then, addressing theological tendencies and disciplinary situations which demand from authority the necessary doctrinal clarity and the adoption of appropriate pastoral measures.

45 Symposium on the Collaboration of the Laity in the Pastoral Ministry of Priests, organized by the Congregation for the Clergy, 19-22 April 1994. For a brief synopsis of the content, cf. *Sacrum Ministerium* 1(1995), 59-67.

46 Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 44.

A MAN CONSECRATED

Although chosen by God to perform the priestly function under official auspices, in the name of Christ, priests clearly are something more than mere holders of a public office and sacred exercise in service to the community of the faithful. The priesthood "is essentially and above all a configuration, a mysterious and sacramental transformation of the person of the man-priest into the person of Christ himself, the only Mediator." ⁴⁷ The conciliar image of the priest is that of a man configured ontologically to Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church, in order to perform a specific mission.

Presbyterorum Ordinis — keeping in view the noteworthy development which doctrine on the episcopate and on the common priesthood of the faithful had achieved in other documents of the Council — wished to emphasize the special sacramental consecration of priests, which makes them participants in the very priesthood of Christ, the Head of the Church. And so it has done, demonstrating the connection of the ministerial priesthood with the priestly fullness and pastoral mission of the bishops — whose collaborators priests are — and likewise at the same time clearly distinguishing the ministerial priesthood from the common priesthood of all the baptized.

"So it was that Christ sent the apostles" — one reads in the Decree — 'just as He Himself had been sent by the Father. Through these same apostles He made their successors, the bishops, sharers in His consecration and mission. Their ministerial role has been handed down to priests in a limited degree. Thus established in the order of the priesthood, they are co-workers of the episcopal order in the proper fulfillment of the apostolic mission entrusted to the latter order by Christ.'" ⁴⁸ Thus was brought to fruition the important doctrinal contribution of *Lumen Gentium* on the degrees of the sacrament of orders as different participations in the priestly consecration and mission of Christ, ⁴⁹ and the priesthood was described in the light of the episcopate. In this way, the presbyteral priesthood was well situated within the context of the communion of the episcopal college, in a perspective of great theological and spiritual richness.

47 Alvaro del Portillo, *Consacrazione e Missione del sacerdote*, *op. cit.*, 55-56.

48 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2: EV, 1, 1245.

49 Cf. Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

Since these aspects will certainly be treated in a more detailed manner in other interventions of this symposium, I shall limit my presentation to commenting only on one point of the conciliar passage quoted above, which I consider essential to grasp and to defend in our historical context. I refer to the question of apostolic succession and the ordained ministry.

The whole Church is apostolic insofar as she inherits and continues the Church of the apostles. And within the Church, the ordained ministry (the episcopal ministry and the presbyteral ministry as its collaborator) inherits and continues the ministry of the apostles. "In the Church" — the International Theological Commission opportunely reminded us — "every hierarchical ministry is linked to institution by the apostles. Such ministry, willed by Christ, is essential for the Church; and through her mediation, the salvific act of the Lord is made present sacramentally and historically for all generations."⁵⁰

50 International Theological Commission, *El sacerdocio catolico*, 1970, thesis 1.

The spiritual power which the ordained ministry possesses does not, in fact, derive from the community, but from the apostolicity of its mission, transmitted through the sacramental imposition of hands.⁵¹ Ordained ministers are bearers of a charism (consecration-mission) which begins in the sending of the Son from the Father, is transmitted to the apostles, and confers the necessary authority to lead the community. Ordained ministry is established on the foundation of the apostles, for the upbuilding of the Church (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14) and for the life of the world.

Finally, the presbyteral priesthood, through the imposition of hands and the anointing — proper to the sacrament of orders — continues the mission received by the apostles from Christ; it is empowered by apostolic authority and is a witness with that authority to the Tradition. The presbyteral priesthood was instituted to build up and to give vitality to the Church, in which and for which it exists. It is in this sense that John Paul II has written: "Consequently, the ordained priesthood ought not to be thought of as existing prior to the Church, because it is totally at the service of the Church. Nor should it be considered as posterior to the ecclesial community, as if the Church could be imagined as already established without this priesthood."⁵²

The ontological configuration of the presbyter to Christ the priest through the sacramental character of orders was expressed by the Council in a traditional formula: *agere in persona Christi capitis*,⁵³ and consequently, *in persona Ecclesiae*, inasmuch as Christ the Head and his Body form a unity. This formula theologically designates the capacity to act as "representative" of Christ and of the Church. "The priest's fundamental relationship" — the Pope further explained in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* — "is to Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd. Indeed, the priest participates in a specific and authoritative way in the 'consecration/anointing' and in the 'mission' of Christ (cf. Luke 4:18-19).

51 Cf. 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22; and 2 Timothy 1:6.

52 John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 16.

53 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2: EV, 1, 1246.

But intimately linked to this relationship is the priest's relationship with the Church. It is not a question of 'relations' which are merely juxtaposed, but rather of ones which are interiorly united in a kind of mutual immanence. The priest's relation to the Church is inscribed in the very relation which the priest has to Christ, such that the 'sacramental representation' to Christ serves as the basis and inspiration for the relation of the priest to the Church."⁵⁴

The formula *agere in persona Christi capitis* thus allows us to express exactly the essence of the ministerial condition as capacity to participate, through the reception of the sacrament of orders, in the actions proper to Christ, Head and Shepherd, in regard to the Church. The basis of this participation is the power received, while its purpose is to make salvation present, here and now through specific actions (*Ministerium verbi et sacramentorum*), as the life of the Church and, through the Church, the life of the world. One can observe, then, in this formula the sacramentality of the specific actions of the ordained ministry with respect to the life of the Church.

The ministerial image of the priest makes full reference to this sacramentality, in that "while the priest is in the Church, he is also set *in front of* it."⁵⁵ In fact, as *Pastores Dabo Vobis* teaches:

"Thus, by his very nature and sacramental mission, the priest appears in the structure of the Church as a sign of the absolute priority and gratuitousness of the grace given to the Church by the Risen Christ. Through the ministerial priesthood the Church becomes aware in faith that her being comes not from herself but from the grace of Christ in the Holy Spirit. The Apostles and their successors, inasmuch as they exercise an authority which comes to them from Christ, the Head and Shepherd, are placed — with their ministry — *in the forefront of the Church* as a visible continuation and sacramental sign of Christ in his own position before the Church and the world, as the enduring and ever-new source of salvation." ⁵⁶

54 John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 16.

55 Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 12.

56 John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 16.

A MAN SENT

"Priests [of the New Testament]" — again teaches *Presbyterorum Ordinis* — "are taken from among men and appointed for men in the things which pertain to God."⁵⁷ The priest is a man called and consecrated to be sent to all men, in service to the salvific action of the Church as shepherd and minister of the Lord. Therefore, only in the performance of their specific mission, realized in the light of the mystery of Christ and of the communion of the Church, will priests be able to find their proper identity.⁵⁸ The third essential aspect of the image of the priest outlined by the Council appears so clearly.

Vatican II wished to recall and to reaffirm the cultic or ritual dimension of the priesthood, in continuity with the tradition of the Council of Trent, but at the same time Vatican II wished to underline strongly the priesthood's missionary dimension, not as two distinct moments, but as two simultaneous aspects of the same exigency for evangelization. The objective of the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* was not to unite two diverse conceptions of the priesthood but to set forth the doctrine on the priesthood from the starting point of the basic principles which inspired the Council's ecclesiology, which principles we have recalled synthetically at the beginning of this presentation. In Christ the priest, the worship reserved to the Father and the announcement of the Gospel among men, his brothers, constitute a single reality of salvation. And, in an analogous manner, the Council will say to priests that they are configured to Christ and are able to act as his representatives and in his name and that, therefore, "God gives them the grace to be ministers of Christ Jesus among the people.

57 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3: EV, 1,1249.

58 Cf. Synod of Bishops, Document on the Ministerial Priesthood *Ultimis Temporibus*, 30 November 1971, part II, 1: EV, 4, 1178.

They shoulder the sacred task of the gospel, so that the offering of the people can be made acceptable through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit." ⁵⁹ The announcement of the Gospel is, therefore, considered from a profoundly cultic point of view.

Beginning with the normative reference to the priestly existence of Christ and of the apostles, the Decree speaks forcefully of the needed evangelizing presence of priests among men: "Hence they deal with other men as with brothers. This was the way that the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, a man sent by the Father to men, dwelt among us and willed to become like His brothers in all things except sin." ⁶⁰ The priest must be present in a vital and effective way in the life of men; such would not be the case if his activities were limited to ritual functions or if he waited for others to come to break through his isolation.

With admirable spiritual energy, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* proclaimed a teaching that I have no hesitation to define as fundamental in the field of our study: "Priests of the New Testament are indeed set apart in a certain sense within the midst of God's people. But this is so, not that they may be separated from this people or from any man, but that they may be totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord has raised them up. They cannot be ministers of Christ unless they are witnesses and dispensers of a life other than this earthly one. But they cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of men. Their ministry itself by a special title forbids them to be conformed to this world. Yet at the same time this ministry requires that they live in this world among men." ⁶¹

59 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2: EV, 1, 1247.

60 *Ibid.*, 1249.

61 *Ibid.*

The presence of the priest in the world will always be characterized by this dialectical aspect — especially significant with regard to priestly lifestyle and behavior in the midst of any society tendentially materialistic which is inherent to the nature of his mission. "This is why such a mission will be able to be fulfilled only if the priest — consecrated by the Spirit — knows how to be among men (*pro hominibus constituitur*) and, at the same time, *separated* from them (*ex hominibus assumptus*); if he lives with men, he will understand their problems, appraise their values, but at the same time in the name of *another* reality, he will witness to and teach *other* values, *other* horizons of the spirit, *another* hope." ⁶² In this way, priests will likewise succeed at solving a problem which is sometimes exaggerated or distorted on the sociological level. I refer to their valid entry into the social life of the community, into the ordinary life of men. Today, in fact, more than ever the lay person — the intellectual, the worker, the employee — wants to see in the priest a friend, a man of simple and cordial traits (a man, they say, *within reach*), who well knows how to understand and to appraise noble human realities. But at the same time, the lay person wants to see in the priest a witness to the *things to come*, to the *sacred*, to *eternal life*, a man who knows how to gather and to teach the laity, with fraternal care, about the supernatural dimension of their existence, the divine destiny of their life, the transcendent reasons for their thirst for happiness: in a word, *a man of God*. ⁶³

If I may, I would like to be permitted, before concluding, one final brief consideration on the image of the priest outlined by the Council. The three essential theological features just now presented must be integrated with a deep need for the ascetical order: sanctity through the spirituality specific to the priesthood.

62 Alvaro del Portillo, *Consacrazione e Missione del sacerdote*, *op. cit.*, 41.

63 Cf. Julian Herranz Casado, *I rapporti sacerdoti-laici*, in *Studi sulla nuova Legislazione della Chiesa*, Rome, 1990, 246-247.

PASTORAL MISSION AND SANCTITY: THE UNITY OF THE LIFE OF THE PRIEST

In the third chapter of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, concretely in the first article dedicated to the *call of priests to perfection*, we find another aspect of the conciliar image upon which we are reflecting. One could even say that this is the most characteristic aspect insofar as the doctrine set forth in these passages — I refer essentially to numbers 12-14 of the Decree — based on originality, profundity, and beauty, not only presupposes all of the preceding teaching on the priesthood and on the ministry specific to priests, but, in a certain sense, brings it to completion. In these passages, in my view, our Decree reaches its summit.

If we take account of the fact that what undergirds the entire Council is promoting a renewal of the Church capable of propelling her toward a more effective evangelization of society, it is useful to observe that in these pages dedicated to priestly sanctity the same spirit resonates with particular vigor. It is worth listening: "This most holy Synod *desires to achieve its pastoral goals of renewal within the Church, of the spread of the gospel throughout the world, and of dialogue with the modern world.* Therefore it fervently exhorts all priests to use the appropriate means endorsed by the Church as they ever strive for that greater sanctity which will make them increasingly useful instruments in the service of all of God's People." ⁶⁴

In the conciliar texts, and particularly in our Decree, one notes the tendency to set forth a strong spirituality capable of conducting all priests with pastoral duties in a special way, secular priests, to whom the text is directed — to Christian perfection. It is a perfection which priests, like all the baptized, are called to reach in accord with the will and the gifts of God, but for priests this carries a particular obligation due to their own sacramental configuration to Christ since they work in his name as his representatives. ⁶⁵ Here is outlined, then, a spirituality based simply and strongly on the gospel, and in perfect harmony with the Decree's constant concern to manifest the unity between consecration and mission of the priest, or between dedication to pastoral service of the mission of the Church and involvement in the human community.

64 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12: EV, 1, 1285 (emphasis added).

65 Cf. *ibid.*, 1282.

From this it follows that from the beginning the Decree stresses an essential aspect: the priest is called to reach sanctity through the exercise of his own ministerial functions, which not only demand of him this commitment to perfection, but promote it and foster it.⁶⁶ Consequently, the spiritual life of the priest must tend to reach a level which renders it suitable and proportioned to the ministry received. The call to holiness and the exercise of the ministry reciprocally restore and sustain each other in the priesthood. The sacramental gift which the Spirit has infused in the priest demands, by means of a dynamic proper to him, intimate union with Christ and sanctity of life. "The Spirit, by consecrating the priest and configuring him to Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd, creates a bond which, located in the priest's very being, demands to be assimilated and lived out in a personal, free and conscious way through an ever richer communion of life and love and an ever broader and more radical sharing in the feelings and attitudes of Jesus Christ."

67

By performing his proper ministry according to the example of Christ, whose food was to do the will of the Father, the priest reaches *unity of life*, that is, the desirable union and harmony between his interior life and his duties, so often disparate, which derive from his own pastoral ministry. The reference to priests' unity of life and to its foundation, which consists in "uniting themselves with Christ in acknowledging the Father's will and in the gift of themselves on behalf of the flock committed to them," ⁶⁸ is one of the most significant elements in the Decree's ascetical doctrine on conciliar spirituality.

66 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12: EV, 1, 1284.

67 John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 72.

68 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 14: EV, 1, 1291.

Theological reflection on such a notion of *unity of life* requires that one take into consideration another concept no less important, which the Council mentioned in relation to the first: the notion of "pastoral charity," on which there has since been so much reflection and teaching in the Church. We cannot now linger any longer on this, but as confirmation of its centrality in the priestly image outlined by *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, let it suffice to recall some words of the recent Directory developed by the Congregation for the Clergy: "Pastoral charity constitutes the internal and dynamic principle capable of uniting the multiple and diverse pastoral activities of the priest and, given the socio-cultural and religious context in which he lives, is an indispensable instrument for drawing men to a life in Grace. Informed by such charity, the ministerial activity must be a manifestation of the charity of Christ. With this charity the priest will demonstrate in his bearing and conduct the total self-giving of himself to the flock with which he has been entrusted." ⁶⁹

It seems to me that it is to this notion of pastoral charity, even before other ecclesiological and eschatological reasons, that one attaches the Christological reason for perfect and perpetual continence for the kingdom of heaven, which, while not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, "with respect to priestly life, the Church has always held in especially high regard."⁷⁰ In fact, by priestly celibacy — teaches the Decree — "priests are consecrated to Christ in a new and distinguished way. They more easily hold fast to Him with undivided heart. They more freely devote themselves in Him and through Him to the service of God and men. They more readily minister to His kingdom and to the work of heavenly regeneration, and thus become more apt to exercise paternity in Christ, and do so to a greater extent."

71

CONCLUSION: THE PRIEST ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

In the re-reading of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* which we have done in the context of Vatican II — we have attempted to connect, at least implicitly, an analysis of its contents (only those most significant for our theme) with the pastoral projection of conciliar doctrine, which is always lively and full of stimulating ideas.

69 Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 43.

70 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16: EV, 1, 1296.

We returned to the Decree in order to search its pages for the image of the priest it has bequeathed us, but reading from our precise ecclesial and socio-cultural situation, in which, along with the lights and the needs of all time, there appear the typical characteristics of the present times. We have made use of different testimonies of the postconciliar Magisterium, in which we have been able to appreciate the echo and the fruits of the Council's fertile sowing.

From the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* to the *Directory for the Ministry and the of Priests* by way of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* to cite only the three basic documents of our symposium — thirty years have passed, thirty years of life lived and endured in the Church, years of theological reflection, of pastoral work, of evangelizing action. In the light of these documents the present times speak to us, above all, of fidelity and development, of continuity and realization. Or, they speak to us of what has occurred in these years, during which we have seen that the Council's teaching has been widely received by the whole Church, along with a general urgency to put it faithfully into practice, even if there has been and will be no shortage of difficulties, some of which it seemed fair to point out.

The Second Vatican Council, as we have repeated in various points of this presentation, came to light in the Church with a call to renewal and evangelization. And it is certain that, at a distance of three decades from its conclusion, there are so many easily perceivable signs of the positive influence of its spiritual and pastoral dynamism. The conciliar spirit of renewal, under the providential guidance of the Roman Pontiffs who have succeeded to the See of Peter, has imbued liturgical life, canonical norms, and catechetical instruction during these years. The Church has truly renewed her doctrine, her legislation, and her life in accordance with Vatican II, and is ready to pursue her apostolic mission at the lofty level that the times demand. Moreover, the Church has been engaged for some years, at the impetus of John Paul II, in an enterprise of evangelization,⁷² which must be, in the words of the same Pope, "new in ardor, methods, and expression,"⁷³ and which, by this fact, "demands priests who are deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life."⁷⁴

72 Cf., for example, his exhortations in this sense, beginning with the Discourse at the European Act of Santiago de Compostela (9 November 1982): *Insegnamenti* V, 3, 1982, 1257-1263, and passing over so many other successive documents until, for example, the recent encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 6 August 1993, nn. 106-108.

73 John Paul II, *Discourse to the Bishops of CELAM*, 9 March 1983, III: *Insegnamenti*, VI, 1(1983), 698.

74 John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 18.

Beginning, then, with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and its doctrine on priests, so faithfully developed by the postconciliar Magisterium, we now look ahead with the Pope to this "new springtime of Christian life" ⁷⁵ which is announced in advance with the proximity of the third millennium and which will become reality "if Christians are docile to the action of the Holy Spirit., 76

The direction pointed out to the Church universal for the immediate future by John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, leads through "a renewed commitment to *apply*, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church." ⁷⁷ It is a commitment that all the faithful must accept, but, we may add, that priests must accept in a special way, since they are called to the front lines in the battle of the new evangelization, insofar as they are sacramentally configured to Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd, who goes ahead of his flock.

⁷⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, to the episcopate, the clergy and the faithful on preparation for the Jubilee of the year 2000, 10 November 1994, 18.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 20 (emphasis added).

The new evangelization, which must vigorously manifest the centrality of Christ in the cosmos and in history, has not only an ascendent dimension Christ as fulfillment of all man's yearnings — but is also and above all a descending mediation: "*In Jesus Christ*" — says the Pope to humanity — "God not only speaks to man but also *seeks him out*. The incarnation of the Son of God attests that God goes in search of man." ⁷⁸ This divine search, which recalls the image of the good shepherd and the lost sheep, is indispensably part of the instrumental action which we priests, as shepherds in the Shepherd, are called to undertake during these years with renewed zeal.

To seek out men, to encounter them with the offer and the gifts of our role of service: to this we ministers of Jesus Christ have been called by our specificity as priests. To seek them out where they are, in the context of contemporary anthropological and ecclesial realities and concerns, as well as those that are ecumenical, this is the context in which the whole Church — all her faithful, laity, priests, and religious, with the variety of their gifts, charisms, and vocations must appear as a sign of this God who seeks men out to engage the "dialogue of salvation." ⁷⁹

The history of salvation is structured around the binomial *word-sacrament*, memory-celebration, on which priestly existence must also hinge. The *sacramental* moment, constitutive and foundational, must be accompanied by the *word* of the life of each person, by the Christian witness of faith, hope, and charity.

The priest, *man of faith*, especially must have, and show forth, a distinctly Christological outlook. Impersonating Christ in virtue of the sacrament of orders, the priest must be and must manifest a sacramental actualization of the presence of Christ, the center of history, "the one savior of the world, yesterday, today and forever." ⁸⁰

78 Ibid., 7 (emphasis added).

79 Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* on the ecumenical task, 25 May 1995, 35.

80 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, to the episcopate, the clergy and the faithful on preparation for the Jubilee of the year 2000, 10 November 1994, 40.

The priest, *man of hope*, must help men to discover the authentic key to interpret the future. Even if "quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation which will come at the end of time" ⁸¹ is the mission of all the faithful, and in particular of the laity, it properly belongs to the priest, through word and sacrament, to make present and efficacious in the faithful "the one who builds the kingdom of God within the course of history..., the principal agent of the new evangelization," ⁸² that is to say, the Holy Spirit, without whom it would be impossible to bring such a mission to completion. The priest, *man of charity*, in love with God and his ministry, and fully identified with its tasks, must be capable of pointing all toward the Father, source of every gift, source of the infinite love which never fails.

We priests must be perceptibly a *living word* of faith, hope, and charity. And this requires a full personal availability to translate into *effective witness*, that which, already from the beginning, is a sacramental reality. Without such personal availability the life of a priest will never evangelize. Quite the contrary, the priest would turn out to be only an efficacious but inert instrument of grace for those who are already in Christ.

As a result of his full availability to be bearer and icon of Christ, Head and Shepherd, among his brothers, the image of the priest acquires a necessarily Marian contour. Together with Mary, the *fiat*, not only pronounced but lived, transforms the life and ministry of the priest into a powerful force that urges the Church and the world toward the Trinity. "In this broad perspective of commitments" — we can conclude with the Holy Father — "Mary most holy, the highly favored daughter of the Father, will appear before the eyes of believers as the perfect model of love toward both God and neighbor. As she herself says in the canticle of the 'Magnificat,' great things were done for her by the Almighty, whose name is holy." ⁸³

81 *Ibid.*, 45.

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*, 54.