

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD IN THE LIGHT OF PRIESTHOOD OF THE BAPTIZED

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Abstract

The renaissance of the doctrine of priesthood of the baptized since the Second Vatican Council and the emphasis on the royal priesthood of all Christians from Protestant tradition have led to the emergence of vibrancy and sometimes over zealotry among the laity especially in Anglophone West African Countries. This religious phenomenon appears to put into question, from the pastoral perspective the nature of the ministerial priesthood. From the fourth century to the present age, the priest has always been considered as a person endowed with power to preside over the Eucharistic sacrifice and administer the Sacraments. The theology of the ministerial priesthood is basically Christological. At ordination, the priest takes on a character that configures him to Christ and acts in the person of Christ in his triple priestly function as a Sanctifier, Teacher and a King. This article tries to emphasize the distinctiveness of the ministerial from the baptismal

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priesthood. It traces its historical development from theological perspective. The ordained priests perform sacerdotal functions by offering the sacrifice of the Holy Mass, while the faithful exercise their priesthood in “receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity” (LG, 10).

Keywords: Priesthood of the Baptized, Ministerial Priesthood, *Alter Christus, In Persona Ecclesiae*

1. Introduction

The doctrine of the priesthood of the baptized is not something new to the Christian faith; it has been well presented in Sacred Scripture. 1 Peter 2:4-10 teaches that by virtue of coming to faith in Christ, the baptized is built “into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Paul, in his letter to the Romans appealed to his recipients to present their “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). In this we see Paul giving priestly identity to his audience and this also applies to the Church today.

However, until the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church had not paid much attention to the development of concrete teachings on the priestly identity of the laity. The Fathers of the Council re-examined and affirmed the priestly identity of the baptized as postulated in the Scripture and early Christian tradition. The Council affirmed:

Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men, made the new people “a kingdom and priests to God the Father.” The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Therefore all the Disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them (LG, 10).

The Fathers of the Council maintained the ministerial priesthood in addition to the baptismal priesthood and explained that though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ (LG, 33-

35; PO, 8). It seems that the Council, in emphasizing the priestly nature of the baptized, has succeeded in helping the laity to know and appreciate their priestly identity and to relive this identity even in their everyday activities. This is well captured in the Council's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity:

The apostolate of the social milieu, that is, the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which a person lives, is so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be properly performed by others. In this area, the laity can exercise an apostolate of like toward like. It is here that they complement the testimony of life with the testimony of the word. It is here, where they work or practice their profession, study, reside, spend their leisure time or have their companionship, that that they are more capable of helping their brethren (AA, 13).

Nevertheless, the identity of the baptized as priestly people does not limit the essence of the ministerial priesthood. P.J. Miller defines the ministerial priesthood primarily by function and locates the essence of the baptismal priesthood in the "integral nature of the human person and mankind's place within creation."¹ He continues that the ordained priest leads the entire people of God in offering spiritual sacrifices. It is in and through both the baptized and ordained priesthood "though in different ways and to different degrees, that Jesus Christ offers spiritual worship to the Father."²

However, the problem is how to comprehend the ministerial priesthood and appreciate such a gift realized only in the Sacrament of Orders.³ According to Schmaus ordination to the priesthood differentiates the priest from the people within the Christian community. The priest receives "the sacrament of differentiation within the people of God"⁴ or is set apart by ordination for his priestly duties.

Ratzinger explains the sacrament of ordination to the priesthood to imply "this man is in no way performing functions for which he is highly qualified by his own natural ability nor is he doing the things that please him most and that are most profitable. On the contrary (sic) — the one who receives the sacrament is sent to give what he cannot give of his own strength; he is sent to act in the person of

¹J.P. Miller, *Members of One Body; Prophets, Priests and Kings: An Ecclesiology of Mission*, New York: Alba House, 1999, 126.

²J.P. Miller, *Members of One Body*, 126, cf. 136.

³N. Halligan, *The Sacraments and their Celebration*, New York: Society of St Paul, 1986, 133.

⁴M. Schmaus, *Dogma 5: The Church as Sacrament*, London: Sheed and Ward Inc., 1975, 185.

another, to be his living instrument”⁵ and for that matter is referred to as a priest. In this paper we shall briefly discuss the historical and theological developments of the ministerial priesthood.

2. Brief Historical Development of the Ministerial Priesthood

The word “priest”, derived from the French *prêtre* and the Greek *πρεσβύτερος* (*presbyteros*) is translated into English as “elder”. The term was mostly used in the late antiquity to refer to the elders of the Jewish and Christian communities. In the course of Christian application of the term, “the semantics of the term shifted from the ordained person’s place in ecclesiastical polity to his role as a cultic celebrant.”⁶ The Latin and Greek word for priest as a “cultic celebrant” is *sacerdos* and *ιερέως* (*hiereus*) respectively. These words emphasize religious connotation in the sense that the *sacerdos* or *ιερέως* (*hiereus*) plays religious functions such as interpreting the meaning of events, performing the rituals of the religion and offering sacrifices.

The New Testament testifies to the appointment of elders to oversee the affairs of the early Christian community (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28). The appointed elders were to watch over the community and be shepherds over the flock that God purchased with the blood of Jesus and have been entrusted into their care. The functions of the elders included guarding the flock against false teachings that may erupt within the community (Acts 20:30). Some ministers were also appointed by the community to serve the internal needs of the community such as distribution of food (Acts 6:1-6). The apostles and elders laid hands on and prayed over those appointed into various ministries within the early Church (Acts 6:6; 13:1-3, 1 Tim 4:14).

Among all the various ministries within the early Church, we cannot identify a particular priestly ministry in the realistic sense. Ministerial priesthood at that time was “identified with ritual offering of animal and other sacrifices to God, and there was no one in the community designated to do this.”⁷ Moreover “the first generation of Christians, who were almost all Jews, accepted the legitimacy of the Jewish priesthood, and showed this by continuing to worship at the temple”⁸ until its destruction in 70 CE by Roman soldiers and consequently the end of the Jewish cultic priesthood.

⁵J. Ratzinger, *On the Nature of the Priesthood* [online] (1990) available at: <http://CatholicCulture.org> [accessed on 24th April 2013].

⁶M. Eliade, Gen. ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. II, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, 529.

⁷J. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to the Sacraments in the Catholic Church*, New York: Image Books, 1982, 464.

⁸J. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 464.

According to Martos, a Jewish Christian who lived in Rome composed a response to the troubling questions that were raised after the destruction of the Temple. In his response, the author developed the idea that the crucifixion of Jesus was a perfect sacrifice to God which replaced the temple offerings. The priest and victim of the sacrifice was Jesus himself and his priesthood superseded that of the Jewish religion because he is not a priest by ancestry but

a high priest of a new and eternal covenant between God and his people, a high priest of the same order as Melchizedek, whose priesthood had no beginning and no end. [The Church was then seen as the replacement of the old Israel with] A new priesthood and a new high priest, by his perfect life and sacrificial death had become the perfect mediator between God and man (Heb 3:1-10:18).⁹

The priesthood of Jesus Christ is a new and better covenant of which he himself becomes the mediator by virtue of his submission and willing offering of himself by embracing death by the cross. He is the only and unique mediator whose sacrifice reconciles God and humanity. The superiority of the new covenant to the old is based on the eternity of its priesthood that is in Jesus Christ.¹⁰ The author of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus is a royal priest, whose death has been the ultimate sacrifice that had rendered continuation of animal sacrifice ineffective. He presents Christianity as a perfect replacement of the old Israel. Christians therefore thought of themselves as constituting the new people of God which was clearly different and separate from Judaism, and as a result became God's covenanted people who needed to replace the Jewish bloody sacrifice.

The needed replacement, as attested by R. Brown was found "when the Eucharist was seen as unbloody sacrifice replacing the bloody sacrifices no longer offered in the now-destroyed Temple."¹¹ As early as the end of the first century or the beginning of the second century, Christians identified the Eucharist not just a sacrifice, but "as an unbloody sacrifice replacing the bloody sacrifices."¹² Brown reiterated that *Didache* 14 instructs believers to "assemble on the Lord's Day, breaking bread and celebrating the Eucharist; but first confess your sins that your sacrifice [*thysia*] may be a pure one ... for it was of this the Lord spoke 'Everywhere and always offer me a pure

⁹J. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 464.

¹⁰Cf. M.M. Bourke, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, London: Burns and Oates, 1995.

¹¹R.E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections*, New York: Paulist Press, 1970, 19.

¹²R.E. Brown, *Priests and Bishops*, 17-19.

sacrifice.”¹³ So far as the second century Christian community thought of the Eucharist in a sacrificial context, it was only appropriate to recognize whoever presided over the celebration as a priest who led the worshipping community in offering sacrifice. This recognition given to the one who presided over the celebration significantly contributed to the emergence of the concept of ministerial priesthood alongside the episcopate and diaconate. The offices of episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate emerged as the most important ministries during the second century.¹⁴

Consequently, Macquarrie could assert that “in the first few centuries, throughout the whole Church, the various kinds of ministry of which we read in the New Testament had become consolidated into the familiar three orders of bishops, priests and deacons.”¹⁵ He further elucidates that “the bishops were thought of as the successors of the apostles, who were supposed to have founded [...] the principal sees of the ancient Church; the priests (or presbyters) corresponds to the pastors indifferently called ‘bishops’ or ‘presbyters’ in the New Testament; while the deacons represented those inferior orders of ministry which we can also see in the New Testament.”¹⁶ It seems that the idea of the bishops being the successors of the apostles is more of tradition than of any clear biblical evidence.

2.1. The Bishops

The title “bishop” is translated from the Greek word *episkopos*, which means “overseer”, the bishop, therefore is an overseer of God’s flock. The bishop ought to be wholesome and exhibit if not all, most of the qualities that Paul enumerated in his letters to Timothy and Titus (1 Tim 3:1-8; Titus 1:6-9). The title “bishop” was used to describe “the function of the presbyter (elder)”¹⁷ in the New Testament (NT). The implication of such an opinion is a lack of clear distinction between the bishop and the presbyter; the latter could be referred to as bishop due to his functions. The bishop is a presbyter who presides over gatherings of presbyters. Functioning in this manner earns him the title bishop. In his contribution to the issue of any distinction between presbyters and bishops, Ratzinger postulates

¹³R.E. Brown, *Priests and Bishops*, 18.

¹⁴P. McGoldrick, “Sacrament of Orders,” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 898.

¹⁵J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977, 431.

¹⁶J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 431.

¹⁷P. Toon, “Bishop,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001, 170.

that, Jewish Christian leaders were referred to as presbyters while the leaders of the Gentile churches were referred to as “bishops and deacons”¹⁸ for the first time in Philippians 1:1. This postulation assumes no clear distinction between the two. McKenzie also affirms the position that there is no clear distinction between the bishop and the presbyter as there is between the former and the deacon.¹⁹

2.2. The Deacon

Some theologians including Macquarrie postulate that the diaconate was the least among the three clearly defined special ministries in the NT and recognize its prototype in the ministry of the seven i.e. Stephen and his companions in Acts 6:1-7.²⁰ Burge also traces the beginning of the diaconate to the appointment of the seven whose primary duty was to help with the distribution of food in order for the apostles to continue effectively with preaching.²¹ Although the seven were called to “service” (Acts 6:1, 4), Luke, the author of Acts, does not refer to the seven as deacons however tradition ascribes the institution of the diaconate to the choice of the seven and their praying over by the apostles.²²

2.3. The Priests

Wallace and other authors associate the presbyterate with the beginning of the Church, “taking their [presbyters] place along with the apostles, prophets, and teachers.”²³ He identifies the presbyterate at Jerusalem with James in “the government of the local Church after the manner of the synagogue” (Acts 11:3; 21:18). Gleeson affirms the position that the presbyterate was “a form of leadership in Jewish synagogues (Acts 15:22) and practiced by the first Christians, who were themselves Jews.”²⁴ The presbyters functioned as overseers in the absence of apostles and essentially as teachers and preachers (1 Tim 5:17). We can deduce that the kind of presbyterate practiced by the first Christians is not same in essence as today’s ministerial priests.

¹⁸J. Ratzinger, *On the Nature of the Priesthood* (Online).

¹⁹J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London: Cassell Publishers Limited, 1968, 97.

²⁰J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 432-433.

²¹G.M. Burge, “Deacon, Deaconess,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001, 320.

²²J.P. Dunn, *Priesthood: A Re-Examination of the Roman Catholic Theology of the Presbyterate*, New York: Alba House, 1990, 50.

²³R.S. Wallace, “Elder,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001, 369.

²⁴B. Gleeson, “Ordained Persons and their Ministries: New Testament Foundations and Variations,” *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 7 (2006) 8.

In addition to the happenings in the second century, Gelpi also observes the emergence of *monepiskopos*, which was a reference to one bishop presiding over a local Christian community; later on, “episcopal supervision of Christian cult evolved into episcopal control.”²⁵ By the third century bishops were often (and rarely presbyters) referred to as high priests of the new covenant. He opines that the tendency of referring to the bishops and presbyters as priests attained its highest point during the fourth century through a theological movement called Sacerdotalism. For him, Sacerdotalist theology was a reflection of the new political status of Christianity as a religion recognized by the Roman Empire and later as the sole lawful religion of the state.

The theologians within the movement (Sacerdotalism) intended to guard episcopal authority from imperial invasion. Basil of Caesarea is cited to be the first theologian to lay the foundation of the theology of Christian ministerial priesthood by teaching that “bishops participate directly in the priestly authority of Christ in church matters in a manner analogous to the emperor’s direct participation in divine authority in secular matters.”²⁶ Sacerdotalist theologians also portrayed bishops as the Levitical priests of the new covenant. This kind of teachings gave bishops priestly functions different in essence from that of the priesthood of the baptized or the entire faith community. Within the fourth century, presbyters or priests became second in terms of clerical authority to the bishops as the former began to preside over the Eucharistic celebration mostly in the rural areas where bishops could not be present²⁷.

Other authors assert that the scholastic theologians of the Late Middle Ages identified priests as the foremost ministers of the Christian Eucharistic sacrifice. For the theologians, the priests were endowed with power by ordination to transubstantiate bread and wine, forgive sin, baptize, and administer the last unction or the sacrament of anointing of the sick.²⁸

Priests in medieval Christianity “were the primary mediators between God and man in almost every aspect of Christian life.”²⁹ Thus priesthood in that period was mostly thought as “sacramental,

²⁵D.L. Gelpi, “Priesthood,” in E.P. Fink, ed., *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 1015.

²⁶D.L. Gelpi, “Priesthood,” 1015.

²⁷D.L. Gelpi, “Priesthood,” 1015.

²⁸Cf. D.L. Gelpi, “Priesthood,” 1015.

²⁹J. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 499.

liturgical and cultic ministry in terms of authority, office, and jurisdiction.”³⁰ Some theologians of that period limited the priestly function to the offering of the Mass and considered other functions such as preaching and administration as mere ministerial functions that are not necessarily priestly, and this kind of thoughts indirectly might have prepared the ground for the Protestant rejection of the ministerial priesthood.

The Second Vatican Council affirms that by the sacred power of Orders, priests are empowered to offer sacrifice and forgive sins and the ordained are to attend to their priestly duties in the name of Christ. The Council taught that the office of the priestly “ministry has been handed down, in a lesser degree indeed to the priests” (PO, 2) through the bishops who are successors of the apostles. The bishops as successors participate in the mission that Jesus handed over to the apostles. Jesus sends out the bishops just as he sent out the apostles. The priests are therefore working together with the bishops to accomplish the mission. They share in the priesthood of the bishops. The Council made it clearer that priests “can be co-workers of the episcopal order for the proper fulfilment of the apostolic mission entrusted to priests by Christ” (PO, 2).

From the discussion so far, we observe that the ministerial priesthood has been going through gradual developments since the second century. From the fourth century through the Middle Ages to the Second Vatican Council, the priest has always been considered as the one endowed with power to preside over the Eucharist and administer the sacraments. The Second Vatican Council also places emphasis on the preaching of the Gospel as a priestly duty and not a mere ministerial function.

3. Theology of the Ministerial Priesthood

The concept of priesthood is inseparably tied to that of worship. The notion of worship of a deity and priesthood are ancient phenomena that are as old as humankind. It is therefore not out of place for a community to appoint one of its members as a priest to organize and lead in the worship of a deity. The danger here is that there could be a notion of priesthood which could be of human standard without any divine essence. “The Gospel does not establish a religion which mankind set up for the worship of God, but a

³⁰J. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 499.

religion which God himself came down to reveal.”³¹ The priest in this religion is not an ordinary man chosen by the community to lead and organize worship, but Jesus Christ who is the sole mediator between God and man. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is not a mere human invention; it is divinely revealed. The Catholic ministerial priesthood is therefore derived from this divine revelation and the priest with his functions can only be comprehended through the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

It is clearly stated in the Second Vatican Council’s document that the Lord Jesus Christ “has established ministers among his faithful to unite them together in one body in which ‘not all the members have the same function’ (Rom 12:4). These ministers in the society of the faithful are able by the sacred power of Orders to [...] perform their priestly office publicly for men in the name of Christ” (PO, 2). The Council affirms and elucidates that Christ instituted the sacramental priesthood and differentiates it from the common or universal priesthood that is attained by baptism. The difference is known by virtue of the former functioning publicly as priest in the name of Christ.

In this same vein Kloppenburg, reiterating the teaching of the Council of Trent, could affirm that “Christ at the Last Supper, wishing to leave his Church a visible sacrifice, gave his body and blood to the Apostles, ‘making them priests of the New Testament at that time.’”³² Christ made the Apostles priests while instituting the Eucharist or the Last Supper in order for them to fulfil the command he gave for the continuation of the Supper in his memorial (Lk 22:19). The Apostles also transmitted the power to preside over the Eucharist to their disciples and the same power is transmitted to Catholic priests at Ordination. Hahn therefore could affirm:

In time, those men [the apostles] passed on their priestly ministry through a sacramental rite: the laying of hands (see Acts 6:6). The apostles ritually placed their hands upon the men who would be their co-workers and successors. By this rite of ordination, the apostles conferred the gift of priesthood on a new generation (see 2 Tim 1:6). And so it has passed through the millennia, to the priests who serve us today. Through this action, those who are ordained receive the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and so they receive power to perform actions that are properly divine.³³

³¹J.M. Perrin, *The Minister of Christ*, Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son Ltd, 1964, 19.

³²B. Kloppenburg, *The Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974, 273.

³³S. Hahn, *Many are Called: Rediscovering the Glory of the Priesthood*, New York: Doubleday, 2010, 33.

The imposition of hands is a symbol of invocation of the Holy Spirit upon those men who became co-workers and successors of the apostles. It also signified the new office or order that those men were to assume. Granting that the same power given to the Apostles had been transmitted to them, then all ministerial priests are partakers in the office of the Apostles implying that they are obligated to continue the celebration of the Eucharist and also continue the mission of the twelve as mandated by Jesus Christ. In this mission the priests are called to the proclamation of the Gospel to the entire human race. The focus of the proclamation of the Gospel is the conversion of unbelievers to faith in Jesus Christ the high priest.

Jesus Christ the high priest established the ministerial priesthood and those belonging to this priesthood attend to their priestly duties publicly in the name of the one who established the sacred office. Kloppenburg affirms:

The mystery of Christ is present and operative only through the ministerial priesthood. The priest, the man chosen by God, is the visible sign, the means and living instrument, of Christ the eternal Priest amid the community of believers. Through the special sacrament he receives, the priest is ontologically qualified to build, sanctify, and rule the Church in the name and person of Christ and with his authority. As a possessor of genuine sacred power that is to be exercised publicly for men in the name of Christ, the priest can present himself to the people as the authentic representative or Vicar of Christ, in whose name and with whose authority he preaches, sanctifies and directs.³⁴

The priest who presides over the Eucharist does not play the role of Jesus, rather he allows himself to be taken over and be used by Jesus Christ who is the source of all priesthood and the true celebrant. However, other men can only have a share in that priesthood insofar as Christ the High Priest empowers them. Whenever the priest proclaims the Word, forgives sins, and transubstantiates bread and wine, he is only acting *in persona Christi* and *persona ecclesiae* — “in the person of Christ and in the person of the Church.” During these rites the power of Christ and the power of the worshipping community are concentrated on him.³⁵

The implication is that the priest derives his authority from Christ and the Church. In this context, the Church is a worshipping community of which the priest is a member. Being a priest and a member of “the body of Christ” does not make him the head because

³⁴B. Kloppenburg, *The Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, 292.

³⁵W.J. O'Malley, *Sacraments: Rites of Passage*, Chicago: Thomas Moore, 1995, 223.

Christ is the sole head of the body. What makes the ordained priest different from the lay priests or other members of “the body of Christ” is his triple function of Sanctification, Teaching and Governing. He is a Sanctifier because he offers sacrifice, as a Teacher he proclaims the Gospel and as a King he governs and guards the properties of the Church.

Hahn affirms that, “through holy orders, the Church’s priests are conformed to Christ in a unique way. In our priestly family, they serve in the person and place of the divine first born, the only begotten son of God. It is from him, above all others that they learn to be priests. They succeed as they imitate him.”³⁶ We can deduce that the ministerial priest is not a man of his own; rather a man of Christ and a man for all those who also share in the priesthood of Christ through baptism. The priest is “conformed to Christ in a unique way [to] serve in the person and place” of Christ.

One significant role of the priest, as stipulated by McCauley, is to be the Christian community’s “public reminder of the word and action of Christ.”³⁷ In his capacity as “a simple reminder” the priest is obliged to relive Christ’s priesthood in all spheres of life. The Christian community must be reminded of who Christ is through the actions of the priest. In living and proclamation of the Gospel, the celebration of the Eucharist and administration of other Sacraments, the priest responds to his vocation and becomes the “simple reminder” of who Christ is to the Christian community.

We can with Burghardt outline four general functions of the priest which are that “the priest is ordained to proclaim the word of God”; he is to build the Christian community by assuming his leadership responsibility. Furthermore as an ordained priest, he must render service to humanity and most importantly the priest is ordained to preside over the Eucharist, which is the fulcrum of the Catholic faith.³⁸

In his contribution to Catholic theology of the priesthood, Power emphasizes that the priest is also assigned through “ordination to the threefold ministry of Word, sacrament and pastoral care.”³⁹ The

³⁶S. Hahn, *Many are Called*, 134.

³⁷G. McCauley, “The Priest: A Simple Reminder,” in *The Sacraments: Readings in Contemporary Sacramental Theology*, New York: Alba House, 1981, 177.

³⁸W.J. Burghardt, “What is a Priest?” in *The Sacraments: Readings in Contemporary Sacramental Theology*, New York: Alba House, 1981, 168.

³⁹D.N. Power, “Order,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Vol. II, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 292.

inference is that priests are ordained to proclaim the Gospel and this should not be sacrificed for anything. Furthermore, they are also ordained to administer the sacraments and shepherd the people of God entrusted to their care. In addition, priests ought to offer guidance and counselling to the people of God, as they are obliged by their ministry to do so.

Discussing the origin of the ministerial priesthood, Ekem, a protestant theologian affirms that the Catholic Church considers her priesthood as a direct derivation from the Christological priesthood expounded in the letter to the Hebrews. The priests of the Catholic Church are in a realistic sense “participants in Christ’s unique priestly sacrifice, serving as mediators through whom the latter is vividly brought home to others [...] during celebration of Mass.”⁴⁰ It is very significant to note that priests being “participants in Christ’s unique priestly sacrifice” does not imply that they played a role in Christ’s sacrifice of willingly giving up himself to be crucified for the salvation of all humanity. Rather it should be seen in the light of re-enacting the exact sacrifice of the crucifixion at Calvary whenever they preside over the celebration of the Holy Eucharist or the Mass. In other words being “participants in Christ’s unique sacrifice” means that through the grace that they receive in the sacrament of ordination, they act *in persona Christi*.

In contrast to the understanding of the ministerial priesthood, Mathew posits that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers nullifies the existence of what he refers to as “unbiblical doctrine of sacerdotalism and the existence of a Brahman-like priestly class within the church.”⁴¹ However, Hardon postulates that the priesthood of Christ is the sole fundamental priesthood in the Church and all other priests are participants in that Christological priesthood. The participation is of two forms namely, the royal priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood which is realized in the sacrament of Holy Orders. Hardon defends the ministerial priesthood by referring to the Last Supper, arguing, in that very night the Lord instituted not only the Last Supper but also the priesthood. His argument underscores the notion that the Last Supper and the

⁴⁰J.D.K. Ekem, *Priesthood in Context: A Study of Priesthood in some Christian and Primal Communities of Ghana and its Relevance for Mother-Tongue Biblical Interpretation*, Accra: Son Life Press, 2009, 118.

⁴¹P.G. Mathew, *The Priesthood of All Believers* [on line] (1996) available at: <http://members.dcn.org> [accessed in March 2011].

priesthood are inseparable and places the Last Supper in a sacrificial context. In such a sacrificial context, it will take only priests to preside over the celebration of the Last Supper.

P.G. Mathew's position against the ministerial priesthood as seen in the above paragraph suggests that any baptized Christian can preside over the celebration of the Last Supper that the Lord instituted. This may create chaos and indiscipline in the Church as each member may claim the right to officiate the celebration by virtue of his baptism. Again, on this position, we observe that in the celebration of the Last Supper in protestant traditions such as the Methodist and the Presbyterian churches, it is always officiated by an ordained minister and not just any baptized member of the community even though their understanding of the Last Supper is different from that of the Catholic tradition.

4. Conclusion

We have tried to elucidate the concept of the ministerial priesthood from the perspective of history and Christology. The ministerial priesthood is distinct from the royal/baptismal priesthood or priesthood of all believers. The distinction lies in the fact that ministerial priesthood is different in degree from the baptismal/universal priesthood of all believers although both are derived from the same priesthood of Jesus Christ. Ministerial priests are *alter Christus* and acts *in persona Christi* when offering priestly duties such as administering the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The theology of the ministerial priesthood is built on the priesthood of Jesus Christ; it is Christological in nature. It is therefore, the prolongation of Christ's loving and self-giving presence in the world through the church.