

## **MINISTRY AND LIFE OF PRIESTS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE LIGHT OF CONCILIAR AND POST CONCILIAR TEACHINGS**

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### **Abstract**

The article presents a Magisterial Theology on the Ministry and Life of Priests. The study bases on of the Second Vatican Council and Post-Vatican Council Documents. It is presented in five parts. First part gives the Role of Priests in the Ecclesiology, which underlines a strong need for renewal of the ministry and life of priests, necessity of a priestly consciousness that salvation is for all and a distinction between common priesthood and ministerial priesthood. Second part articulates the Image of Priest as a man chosen and called, consecrated and sent. Third part deliberates the Functions of Priests: Priests as ministers of God's Word, ministers of sacraments and pastors of God's people. Fourth part presents the Pastoral Mission and Holiness of Priests, which consists in priestly sanctity, unity and harmony of priests, communion and fraternity among priests and association of diocesan priests. Final part puts forward the Spiritual Requirements in the Life of the Priests: Obedience, celibacy, voluntary poverty. The conclusion gives some recommendations for priestly life and ministry, linking them with the findings of the analysis.

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## Introduction

The vision of priesthood can be seen in the whole Conciliar teaching, especially in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (The Ministry and Life of Priests); *Lumen Gentium* (The Church), 28; *Christus Dominus* (The Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church), 16, 28; *Optatam Totius* (The Training of Priests), 22; *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (The Apostolate of Lay People), 25; and *Ad Gentes* (The Church's Missionary Activity), 39. We trace the vision of priesthood in the Post-Conciliar documents too: Canon Law; *Pastores Dabo Vobis*; and the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests. The Second Vatican Council "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."<sup>1</sup> In effect, with the help of the Council, the Church has reached a new and deeper horizon of comprehension of the priestly ministry, consistent with her essence, that is, priesthood remains for the service of a salvific mission, the very mission of the Lord. Within this dynamism one has to situate the re-reading or re-visiting of the Second Vatican Council.

### 1. Role of Priest in the Ecclesiology

The Holy Spirit brought the fathers to outline in the Decree, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* a clear and updated image of the priest, but this image can only be well appreciated if it is framed within the whole of the ecclesiology and of the evangelizing purpose of the Council.

#### 1.1. Renewal and Evangelization of the Church of Christ

The Second Vatican Council was conceived, from its beginning, as a means and a singular opportunity to promote the renewal of the Church and the timely *aggiornamento* of her pastoral activity. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* emphasizes from the beginning the "extremely important and always more arduous task to be performed [by priests] in the area of the renewal of the Church of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, there is a need for a strong desire for theological, spiritual and disciplinary renewal of the ministry and life of priests, in order to propel the priests and assist them to perform their great and indispensable mission in the present time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Paul II, *Novo Incipiente*, Letter to all Priests on Celibacy and Priestly Life, 1979, 8.

<sup>2</sup>Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, December, 1965, 1. Hereafter *PO*.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Bishop Julian Herranz Casado, "The Image of the Priest in the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*: Continuity and Projection towards the Third Millennium," Presentation at the International Symposium on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the

Pope St John Paul II expresses the same idea in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*:

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 fervour, 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.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2. The Church in Service to the Salvation of All

The Council emphasises the universal saving will of God, manifesting a real *consciousness of salvation*. It rediscovers Christ's vision of economy of salvation, in which the Church too — with her Christian priesthood — rediscovers the essence of her own being. To instil in priests the consciousness of salvation the followings are necessary:

- Priestly life and activity has to continue the life and activity of Christ himself (PDV, 18).

- Priestly life and ministry has to prolong the presence of the Master (PDV, 15).

- Priests have to reaffirm their sacramental configuration to Jesus Christ, in which “lies our identity, our true dignity, the source of our joy, the very basis of our life” (PDV, 18).

## 1.3. The Church: A Priestly Community Organically Structured

The Council's vision of Church is based on the Trinitarian plan of salvation — the eternal will of the Father, the redemptive incarnation of the Son and the gift of the Spirit; and in the Trinitarian communion. So the Church of the Second Vatican Council is known as the communion of those who have received the status of sons and daughters of the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit: She is truly *de unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti plebs adunata* [“a people brought into unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”].<sup>5</sup>

Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 23-28 October 1995. For the full text, visit:[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_cclergy\\_doc\\_23101995\\_imp\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_23101995_imp_en.html)

<sup>4</sup>John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day, *Vatican*, 1992, 18. Hereafter PDV.

<sup>5</sup>Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, November, 1964, 4. Hereafter it is cited as LG.

Undoubtedly, what turns out to be decisive is the intimate connection of this notion — the Church as Communion — 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 holy priesthood” (LG, 10). Therefore, the Church is *communitas sacerdotalis* (LG, 11; PO, 12). Furthermore, *Lumen Gentium* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* recognize and manifest Church as *communitas sacerdotalis organice exstructa* (LG, 11; PO, 12), that is, the entire Church in all her components lives in the mystery of an ‘organic communion analogous to that of a living, functioning body characterized by a diversity and a complementarity of vocation and states of life, of ministries, charisms and responsibilities’;<sup>6</sup> it also means a ‘unity of mission,’<sup>7</sup> 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 whole world.

This mission is carried out in two forms of priesthood: common and ministerial priesthood, about which a correct understanding is needed not only to pursue an academic treatment of our theme but also and above all to “promote the common discipline of the whole Church”<sup>8</sup> and to avoid allowing “abuses [to] creep into ecclesiastical discipline, especially concerning the ministry of the word, [and] the celebration of the sacraments” (CIC 392 § 2). In this sense, according to Pope St John Paul II,

The particular gift of each of the Church’s members have to 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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of on The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, Vatican, 1988, 20. Hereafter CF.

<sup>7</sup>Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, *Apostolicam Autuositatem*, November, 1965, 2. Hereafter AA; CF 55.

<sup>8</sup>The Code of Canon Law, Rome, 1983, 392§ 1. Hereafter CIC.

<sup>9</sup>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.

## 2. The Image of Priest

We understand from the above analysis that the Second Vatican Council aims at a *real* renewal. This renewal becomes effective when the mission of the Church is carried out with “new fervour, new methods and new expressions.”<sup>10</sup> In this mission ministerial priesthood has a vital role, which remains evident in the image of priesthood described in the council documents. 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. Priest is a man *chosen*, a man *consecrated* and a man *sent*. These are undoubtedly, in their unity and inseparability, the fundamental characteristics of the image of the priest outlined in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*.

### 2.1. Priest: A Man Chosen and Called

This fundamental characteristic of priest deals with the vocation of priesthood. 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. This doctrinal reality is ratified by *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’ (Rom 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 (PO, 2).

In emphasizing the divine institution of the ministerial priesthood the accent falls on the divine calling of the priest. Priest is not, therefore, a delegate of the community before God, nor a functionary or employee of God before the people. Priest is chosen by God from among people in order to realize the mystery of salvation in the name of Christ. The call to priesthood is opposed to the so called democratic systems for the election of pastors. To think in line with the democratic election of sacred pastors is a serious problem. It is very closely related to so-called functionalism, which consists in,

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<sup>10</sup>John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical on the Mission of the Redeemer, Vatican, 1990, 30.

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.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2. Priest: A Man Consecrated

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.”<sup>12</sup> 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* emphasizes 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 (PO, 2; LG, 28).

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 (1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6). 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 up-building of the Church (Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14) and for the life of the world.

The ministerial priesthood, through the imposition of hands and the anointing 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 ministerial priesthood was instituted to build up and to give vitality to the Church, in which and for which it exists.

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<sup>11</sup>The Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, Vatican, 1994, 44.

<sup>12</sup>Alvaro del Portillo, *Consacrazione e missione del sacerdote*, Milan: Edizioni Ares, 1969, 55-56.

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 (PDV, 16).

“The priest’s fundamental relationship is to Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd” (PDV, 16). So we find the traditional formula in the Council: *agere in persona Christi capitis* (PO, 2), which designates the priest as ‘representative of Christ.’ The formula *agere in persona Christi capitis*, expresses that priest performs actions proper to Christ. “While the priest is in the Church, he is also set *in front of* it.<sup>13</sup> So *Pastores Dabo Vobis* teaches:

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 (PDV, 16).

### 2.3. Priest: A Man Sent

“Priests [of NT] are taken from among people and appointed for people in all things which pertain to God” (PO, 3). Priest is called and consecrated to be sent to people. ‘To be sent’ involves a mission — the salvific action. Therefore, only in relation to this specific mission that proper identity of a priest is realized. The Second Vatican Council reaffirms the cultic or ritual dimension of priesthood (Council of Trent) and at the same time underlines strongly the missionary dimension of priesthood. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* puts forth these traditional principles of priesthood together: worship reserved to the Father and announcement of the Gospel to people constitute a single reality of salvation. “God gives them the grace to be ministers of Christ Jesus among the people. 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” (PO, 2).

*Presbyterorum Ordinis* speaks forcefully about the need of evangelizing presence of priests among people. In other words, the

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<sup>13</sup>*Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 12.

priest must be present in the life of the people in a vital and effective way. If the activities of priests are limited to ritual functions, this desired transformation of the society may not happen:

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 (PO, 2).

### **3. Functions of the Priests**

In the introductory definition *Presbyterorum Ordinis* states that priests by their ordination are promoted to the service of Christ the prophet, priest and king and share in his ministry by which the Church on earth is unceasingly built up as the People of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit (PO, 1). Further the decree teaches about priests' power to offer sacrifice and forgive sins (PO, 2). But this particular task of the priest is inserted with an historical and dynamic vision of the Church, in which "all share in the mission" of the whole body, but "not all have the same function" (cf. Rom 12:4). Again, in chap 2 it states: "Priests as collaborators with the bishops have as their first duty that of announcing to all the Gospel of God" (PO, 4). In brief, we can determine that the decree strongly emphasizes the ontological aspect of priestly existence, power to offer sacrifice, and the primacy of the word or the ministry of preaching. We find here the newness of priestly ministry in comparison to the Council of Trent.

#### **3.1. Priests as ministers of God's Word**

At the International Symposium on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* in 1995, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) points out that, for priests, in preaching the word of God, Jesus remains the model, which is seen in Mk 3:35-39: Jesus retires to a desert to pray; he says: "Let us go to the other towns and preach to them for I came for this;" his preaching is joined with "expelling demons." Jesus indicates here the true goal of his coming. This remains the determining priority for all his ministers. Preaching is not just speaking, but an efficacious action, result of prayer. Our preaching does not take place in a beautiful and healthy world but in a world dominated by demons. He further says that in Christian preaching we do not just deal with words but with the Word, the Logos (Jn 1:1). "I" of Jesus is at the centre of his message. At the same time Jesus did not speak "in his



own name" (Jn 5:43; 7:16). His "I" opens to the "Thou" of his Father bears the whole dynamic of Trinitarian relations. Therefore, the Christological character of the priesthood is Trinitarian in character, because the Son proceeds from the Father and returns to the Father. He communicates himself in the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

This means that the priest does not speak of himself, but he becomes the voice of Christ, to make way for the Logos and leads to communion with the living God by means of communion with Jesus. Speaking of various kinds of preaching *Presbyterorum Ordinis* makes a constant point: "The priest should never teach his own wisdom, but what is important is always the Word of God which urges the truth and holiness" (PO, 4). Ministry of the word demands that the priest dies spiritually to self: "It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

### 3.2. Priests as Ministers of the Sacraments

According to *Presbyterorum Ordinis* priests share in a special way in Christ's priesthood by carrying out sacred functions and act as his ministers in administering the sacraments. All ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are directed towards it because the Eucharist contains the whole spiritual good of the Church (PO, 5).

The identity of the priest is inextricably linked with the Eucharistic sacrifice. To say that a priest is one who renews the sacrifice of Calvary is, in a very real sense, to have said everything significant about him. This affirmation grounds and supports every other theological statement that can be made in relation to him. It also defines the essence of his spirituality, and immediately leads to the assertion that the sum total of his ministry is to build up a Eucharistic community. In the course of an address delivered in 1993, Pope St John Paul II made it clear that:

In order to have an adequate understanding of the ordained priesthood, and to deal correctly with every question concerning the identity, life, service and ongoing formation of priests, it is necessary to be always aware of the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, of which they are the ministers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Life and Ministry of Priests," Presentation at the International Symposium on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 23-28 October 1995. Full text can be viewed at the following site: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_cclergy\\_doc\\_24101995\\_prh\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_24101995_prh_en.html)

<sup>15</sup>John Paul II, Address, 22 October 1993, quoted in Thomas J. McGovern, *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood*, Oregon: WIPF and STOCK Publishers, 2002, 20.

The celebration of the liturgy is what defines the essence of the priest since his principal task is to renew on the altar Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. In recent decades, however, because the sacrificial aspect of the Mass has tended to be eclipsed by over-emphasis on other aspects of the Eucharist, an essential element of priestly identity — the sacrificial — has become somewhat shrouded and obscured. The crisis of priestly identity can be related to a deficient faith in the sacrifice of the Mass. In other words, the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy, a matter of indifference whether or not God exists and whether or not he speaks to us and hears us.

### **3.3. Priests as Pastors of God's People**

*Presbyterorum Ordinis* describes that priests exercise the function of Christ as Pastor and Head in proportion to their share of authority. In the name of the bishop they gather the family of God as a brotherhood endowed with the spirit of unity and lead it in Christ through the Spirit to God the Father (PO, 6; LG, 28). For the exercise of this ministry the priests are given, as in other functions, a spiritual power, a power whose purpose is to build up (PO, 6; 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10). While engaging in this building up of the Church priests have to treat everybody with the greatest kindness after the model of Jesus, our Lord.

Indeed, the priest is chosen, called and consecrated to be a unique living sign of God's love revealed in His Son the Good Shepherd: "The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus" (CCC, 1589). "A good shepherd, a pastor after God's heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy."<sup>16</sup> The priest has to become a treasure and a gift of divine mercy by making present among the people the compassion and love of Jesus the Good Shepherd (cf. Mk 6:34; Mt 14:14; 20:34).

A good shepherd spends his life caring for the sheep, sometimes even giving up his life for them; he goes in search of the lost sheep and carries it back on his shoulders (cf. Jn 10:1-18). The priest as the shepherd making present Jesus the Good Shepherd does this through the function of giving pastoral care. He gives his life in service to his people, present among them, available to them, caring for them in their various needs. Given the complexity of our modern society, the priest does this, not only by himself, but also through the

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<sup>16</sup>Benedict XVI, Letter Proclaiming a Year for Priests, 2009, 3.

collaboration of others, like deacons, religious men and women, and faithful lay persons.

#### **4. Pastoral Mission and Holiness: The Unity of the Life of the Priest**

The Council's reflection on the notion of *unity of life of the priests* requires that one take into consideration priestly sanctity, unity and harmony of priests, communion and fraternity among priests and association of diocesan priests.

##### **4.1. Priestly Sanctity**

We have seen that the entire Second Vatican Council is promoting a renewal of the Church capable of propelling her toward a more effective evangelization of society. Then it is useful to observe that in the section dedicated to priestly sanctity, the same spirit resonates with particular vigour. It is worth knowing:

This sacred Council, in the hope of attaining its pastoral objectives of interior renewal, of worldwide diffusion of the Gospel and a dialogue with the modern world, issues the strongest exhortation to all priests to strive always by the use of all suitable means commended by the Church towards that greater holiness that will make them daily more effective instruments for the service of all God's people (PO, 12).

In the conciliar texts, and particularly in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, one could note the tendency to set forth a strong spirituality capable of conducting all priests with pastoral duties to Christian perfection. It is a perfection which priests, like the entire 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. Here we find, then, 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.

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 (PO, 12). 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 (PDV, 72).

## **4.2. Unity and Harmony of Priests**

The decree speaks about the difficult problem of the interior unity of life that the priest has to deal with when he is faced with a great number of different responsibilities (PO, 14). In the midst of variety of activities, the priest becomes drained. Therefore, he finds fewer opportunities for the recollection, which would give him the new energy and inspiration. Externally stretched and interiorly drained, he loses the joy of his vocation, which in the end he feels to be an unbearable burden. There is nothing left but flight. The Council offers three suggestions to master this situation:

### **4.2.1. An Intimate Communion with Christ**

The priest can achieve interior unity by following the example of Christ the Lord, whose food was to do the will of the Father (Jn 4:34). It is important that the ontological union with Christ abide in the conscience and in action: All that I do, I am doing in communion with him. By doing it, I am with him. All my activities, no matter how varied and often externally divergent constitute only one call: To be with Christ, acting as his instrument, in communion with him.

### **4.2.2. Asceticism**

Priestly asceticism should not be placed alongside pastoral activity, as if it were an added burden, a further task that goes to hamper the way of life. It is in the action that a priest learns to overcome by himself. In the delusion and failure he learns to forsake himself, to accept sorrow and to be detached from himself. In the joy of the success he learns gratitude. In the celebration of the sacraments, he is interiorly benefited. In fact, he does not perform an external work but speaks with Christ and through Christ he speaks with the Trinity and he prays with other and for others. Thus the priestly ministry itself becomes asceticism in priest's life, conscious exercise and an interior conformity of being and action.

### **4.2.3. Prayer**

The Conciliar decree states that priests will not attain unity or harmony unless they penetrate more deeply with their lives into the mystery of Christ. To live a priestly life priests need to use the proper means: pray, fast and avoid both bad company and dangerous

liberties. Benedict XVI offers a sound advice; drawing from an experience of St Charles Borromeo:

If the tiniest spark of divine love has been lit in you, then do not throw it away nor expose it to the icy wind... Keep your mind fixed on God. Do not neglect your own care and do not spend yourself on others so completely that you have nothing left for yourself. You have to look after the souls you have been put in charge of, but not to the extent that you forget your own... When you administer the sacraments, meditate on what you are doing. If you celebrate Mass, meditate on what it is you are offering. If you recite the psalms in choir, meditate on whom you are speaking to and what you are saying to him. If you guide souls, meditate on whose blood has washed them.<sup>17</sup>

### 4.3. Communion and Fraternity among Priests

All priests are invited to help each other so that they may be fellow-helpers of the truth (cf. Jn 3:8), “for they all contribute to the same purpose, namely the building up of the Body of Christ” (PO, 8). Each priest is united to the other members of the Presbyterate on the basis of the Sacrament of Holy Orders and by particular bonds of apostolic charity, ministry and fraternity (PDV, 17). “He is, in fact inserted into the ‘*Ordo Presbyterorum*’ constituting that unity which can be defined as a true family in which the ties do not come from flesh nor from blood but from the grace of Holy Orders.”<sup>18</sup>

The Congregation for the Clergy in the concluding message to all priests in the world at the International Symposium on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* outlined the following to enhance communion and fraternity among the priests:<sup>19</sup>

- The bishop has to promote community among his priests: he should not hesitate in proposing the organization of times of social gatherings, of meetings, of fraternal sharing, of prayer and of mutual solidarity among his priests. These worthwhile initiatives should be open to both diocesan and religious priests, the young and the elderly and those from the new movements within the Church, in a spirit of openness and respect for the charisms recognized by the Church.

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<sup>17</sup>Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Life and Ministry of Priests.”

<sup>18</sup>*Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 25.

<sup>19</sup>Congregation for the Clergy, “Concluding Message to all Priests in the World,” International Symposium on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 28 October 1995. For details of full text, visit: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_cclergy\\_doc\\_28101995\\_concm\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_28101995_concm_en.html)

- The bishop should personally know each priest entrusted to him. In the smaller dioceses this can be done directly by the bishop himself; in the larger ones several priests, who are truly trusted by the bishop and in firm communion with him, should be appointed to dedicate themselves to the spiritual care of their brothers in the priesthood. At the timely behest of the competent authorities, the territorial size of dioceses should be examined with a view to the creation of smaller dioceses so as to enhance the pastoral dimensions of ministry.

- The diocesan Ordinary must care for his priests: he should ensure that none are abandoned to risky situations, such as lonely assignments, spiritual or moral alienation, etc. Wherever possible, parishes would be entrusted to a group of priests always according to the norm of law.

- The priest, for his part, should foster these filial and fraternal encounters with his proper bishop and his brothers in the priesthood through a constant effort of good will, "anticipating one another with honour." He should be always aware of and avail himself of the various worthwhile initiatives operative in various dioceses.

#### **4.4. Association of Diocesan priests**

The Association of Diocesan Priests has to be encouraged. Bishops can manifest full confidence in their Diocesan Priests by taking the initiative of asking them to organize themselves into an Association. This is ratified in the Councillar teaching:

Worthy... of high regard and zealous promotion are those associations whose rules have been examined by competent Church authority, and which foster priestly holiness in the exercise of the ministry through an apt and properly approved rule of life and through brotherly assistance. Thus these associations aim to be of service to the whole priestly Order (PO, 8).

The special bond with other diocesan priests has to be promoted and cultivated through the formation of 'association of diocesan priests' "in order that priests may find mutual assistance in the development of their spiritual and intellectual life, that they may be able to cooperate more effectively in their ministry and be saved from the dangers of loneliness which may arise, (and so that) some kind of common life or some sharing of common life (may) be encouraged among priests (PO, 8). Moreover, recognising that "the secular clergy have the right of association with others for the achievement of purposes befitting the clerical state" (CIC 278 §1), the Bishops of India have first approved and then encouraged formation of associations for diocesan priests. The Conference of Catholic Bishops of India

(CCBI) has established the Conference of Diocesan Priests of India (CDPI), with its units at the diocesan and regional levels and has given to it permanently approved statutes.

## **5. Special Spiritual Requirements in the Life of the Priest**

The Council talks about the special spiritual requirements to be found in the life of priest.

### **5.1. Obedience**

The first requirement is obedience to the Church, to the Holy Father and their own bishop or superior: "By this humility and by willing responsible obedience, priests conform themselves to Christ. They make their own the sentiments of Jesus Christ who 'emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant,' becoming obedient even to death" (PO, 15). This implies that a priest's promise of obedience remains not only to a bishop and to all those who come as his successors but also to God's plan for him. At the ordination, during the chanting of the Litany of Saints, the priest submits to the mystery of God's call and God's plan in his life. Hence the priest has to discern continually God's will and plan in his life. The obedience invites the priests to forsake stability, in order to embrace mobility, as per the need of the diocese.

### **5.2. Celibacy**

The second requirement (expressed without prejudice to the different custom in the Eastern Church) is celibacy, which is "held by the Church to be a great value in a special manner for the priestly life" and is "a sign and stimulus for pastoral charity and a special source of spiritual fecundity in the world" (PO, 16). Priests are exhorted to "magnanimously and wholeheartedly adhere" to celibacy, acknowledging it as an "outstanding gift of the Father which is so praised and extolled by the Lord" (PO, 16). Positively, celibacy has to be understood as a charism of empowerment and freedom. The celibate priest's spirituality is further shaped by this additional recognition of dependence upon God's love, mediated through a faith community, a circle of friends and family. To remain faithful on this promise, the celibate priest can be greatly assisted by a spiritual companion or director and a few close friends with whom he can be himself.

### **5.3. Voluntary Poverty**

The third requirement is detachment from temporal goods or the practice of voluntary poverty. Priests have to achieve freedom "from

all inordinate anxiety and become docile to the divine voice in their daily life," (PO, 17) for priests have the Lord as their "portion and inheritance" (Num 18:20). Poverty is related to charity. The possession of goods can lead a man away from charity, but voluntary poverty frees a man from thinking of worldly goods and so helps habituate and deepen the exercise that best increases charity. Hence the decree states: "They [priests] should be willing to devote whatever is left over to the good of the Church or to works of charity" (PO, 17). Furthermore, ecclesiastical goods themselves should be administered by priests with the help of capable lay persons and should as far as possible always be employed for those purposes in the pursuit of which it is licit for the Church to possess temporal goods: divine worship, honest sustenance for the clergy, and apostolic and charitable works (PO, 17). Finally, priests are invited to embrace voluntary poverty by which they are more manifestly conformed to Christ and become eager in the sacred ministry (PO, 17).

## **Conclusions**

The above discussion on the ministry and life of priests in the light of Conciliar and Post-Conciliar teachings brings out the following conclusions:

i. The Conciliar Post-Conciliar and documents reinforce the notion of teamwork, collaborative ministry. Priests are closely identified with Christ, but more importantly, they serve in a community of clergy and laity, and are urged to join with others to discern and follow Christ's will in the context of an increasingly secular world.

ii. The documents embrace the notion of reform and encourage a thorough and critical look at the ministry of priests. The spread of the Gospel and the universal call to holiness are the primary considerations, over and above the cultural particulars of the Church's cadre of priests.

iii. Collaboration with the laity is not just a convenience, but an important part of the Second Vatican Council vision for a more effective Church. We need to tap the capacities of the laity and the full range of their competencies to remain as an evangelizing force in the world.

iv. Since the documents of the Second Vatican Council reinforce the notion of team work, communion, fraternity and collaborative ministry among priests, there should be common living in the presbyteries through common prayer, meals, sharing and team



ministry. The Council's endorsement to have association of diocesan priests gives us an opportunity to find mutual assistance in the development of our spiritual, intellectual and pastoral life.

v. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* gives the parish priest lots of food for thought. Yet how familiar are Catholic clergy with the document? Do you think seminaries devote time to study *Presbyterorum Ordinis* or the other documents dealing with the clergy?

vi. The Council talks about *aggiornamento*, updating. For a successful priestly life and ministry, "updating" ourselves becomes necessary. Priests need to qualify in one area or other. This is possible through personal initiatives. Updating is also linked to giving importance to on-going formation. "Updating" can assist us in contributing in a wider circle. Think beyond the parish/diocesan territory that we are in; explore possibilities of exercising ministry in collaboration with NGOs; initiating children's or youth parliaments; aiming Basic Human Communities and engaging in prison ministry, hospital ministry, etc.

vii. Purpose of the Council is to renew and review our life and ministry; renewing our life and ministry through proper celebration of the Eucharist and reviewing through periodical reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And having a day of 'desert experience' — a day alone in prayer and reflection — once a month can assist us in renewing and reviewing our life and ministry.

viii. The Mission of the Church is not a program, but a way of life, a way of life that takes us into the deep waters of our culture and context.

ix. The Council emphasizes both the ritual and missionary dimension of our ministry. I wonder we are satisfied with the former. Proclamation of the Word is being sidelined. Priests need to be missionaries. The new evangelization requires spirit-filled evangelizers.

x. The Council's vision of *ecclesia* is communion. Hence community building need to be our priority. But today the trend is construction of structures. I don't deny the need of building up of infrastructure, but it shouldn't be the only priestly ministry.