

## **THE PRIEST IN THE CHANGING CHURCH**

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### **Introduction**

At the period before the promulgation of the Decree on the Ministry and Life of the Priest—December 7, 1965—there were considerably tense reactions against the Council from the part of the priests. It was pointed out that Vatican II had gone to great trouble to “upgrade” the episcopal office, giving it a chapter in the Constitution on the Church and then a whole decree to itself. The status of the layman was enhanced by a new theological evaluation in the fourth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, in the decree on the Lay Apostolate and Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today. The Council seemed to be losing sight of the priests, who began to feel neglected or even superfluous in the new scheme of things. And so jokes went around about the bishops having qualms of conscience after so much pleading of their own cause. To show the priests of the world that they had not been forgotten, in spite of all the attention focused on themselves, the bishops worked on the project of a special message to be addressed to the priesthood.

Whether this was what really prodded the Council fathers to address the priests in a more special way, is not at all very important. But that the Council—considering the present set-up of the Church and the world—should really address the priests of our days, this goes without saying. For in fact it would be difficult to go far in any task

of renewal of the Church or her relations with the world, without being brought face to face with the position and function of the priests in the Church's life.

This point precisely is the topic of this article. What is the challenging picture drawn to us by Vatican II of how priestly life should be lived today in the pastoral ministry, under the actual conditions of modern society? What is the image of the priest according to Vatican II's documents?

In a very profound sense, there is nothing 'new' in this picture of the priest of today as drawn to us by the conciliar documents. The general lines of the Church's teachings on the priesthood were already clearly formulated in her authoritative statements, especially in those of the Council of Trent. The Church's ideal of the priestly life had always been in the forefront of her thoughts, and had been re-stated clearly and persistently in recent times in the great encyclicals on the priesthood by Pius X, Pius XI, and Pius XII and further spelled out in a continuous series of exhortations to the Catholic clergy.<sup>1</sup>

It would be a pity, however, if the priests failed to grasp that the Council is delineating to us the image of a priest very different from what was customarily offered to us. To some extent the difference may be one of emphasis, but emphasis is enormously important.

In this attempt to capture the real image of the priest of today as envisioned by Vatican II, we shall make use of principally although not exclusively, five conciliar documents: the Constitution on the Liturgy<sup>2</sup>, the Constitution on the Church, the Church in the World of Today, the decree on Bishops, the decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests.

The Method we shall follow will be something like this: go through each of these five documents chronologically and point out the salient

<sup>1</sup> One may consult the collection of papal documents on priests in Msgr. Veuillot's *The Catholic Priesthood*, tr. by Fr. John O'Flynn. Gill. Dublin 1957, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> We shall use this abbreviations: CC, the Constitution on the Church; CL, the Liturgy; CCWT, Constitution on the Church in the World of Today. DB, The Decree on Bishops; DMLP, the Degree on the Ministry and Life of Priests.

and new perspectives on the catholic priesthood. Then using the conclusions drawn from these documents, enumerate what special qualities in addition to his traditional character and outlook the post-conciliar priest is expected to have if he is to fulfill the expectations of the Vatican Council II.

### **THE PRIEST IN THE CONSTITUTION ON THE LITURGY**

The priest is a member of a college surrounding the bishop: this is the first great statement about the priests in the first conciliar document. The bishop is the high priest of the flock. The pastor takes the place of the bishop in a parish. The most dramatic manifestation of this union takes place when the bishop celebrates the Eucharistic sacrifice in a single prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.<sup>3</sup>

What is really new in this outlook? Certainly not the idea. For it is already found in the ceremony of ordination of a priest and was the favorite topic of the Apostolic Fathers. What is really new is the re-emphasis. For a long time since the rapid spread of Christianity this idea lost ground, and was slowly relegated into the background. It was only lately that it was once more presented in the foreground.

The second new insight which can be gleaned from the liturgy constitution is that of the priest as president of the assembly of the faithful, charged, in the bishop's name, with the task of proclaiming the Word of God to them and leading in prayer. His duty is to lead the people to an ever fuller understanding of the rite in which they are taking part and a more active and intelligent participation in it. The priest's preaching ministry receives a new emphasis corresponding to the new importance attached to the place of the Word of God in liturgical celebration.

### **THE PRIESTS IN THE CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH**

To say that the Constitution on the Church is the central pronouncement of the Council sounds nowadays almost like an old favorite tune. With something like unanimity it has been hailed as the

<sup>3</sup> Arts. 41, 42.

most momentous achievement of the Council both because of the important contents and because of its central place among the Council documents. The other constitutions, decrees and declarations for the most part deal either with particular sections of the Church or with particular activities, or with the relationship of the Church to outside groups, or with the sources of the Church's doctrine or with the relations of the Church and civil society.

Something like that can be said with the Council's treatment of the priesthood. The decree on priestly formation, which is an excellent summary of the ideals to be striven for in the preparation of seminarians for the threefold tasks of teaching, sanctifying and shepherding the People of God, can scarcely be said to add anything to the picture of the priest that has already taken shape in the Constitution on the Church.

What does the Constitution say about the new priests?

The Priest is treated in two distinct contexts in the Constitution: first in the chapter on the hierarchical structure of the Church and secondly in the chapter on the universal vocation to holiness. The former is in chapter III, while the latter is in chapter V of the Constitution.

The Second Vatican Council will go down in history as the one which supplemented the ecclesiological teaching of the I Vatican Council on Episcopacy. In the course of chapter III, the Council lays down two particularly important doctrines: *the episcopate is a sacrament*, the fulness of the sacrament of Order; and *the bishops of the Church with the Pope form a college in succession to the apostles, as shepherds of the universal Church*. Both doctrines have some importance in the Constitution's distinct approach to the position of the priests.

Let us quote from the Constitution: "They (the bishops) have legitimately handed on to different individuals in the Church various degrees of participation in the ministry... Priests, although they do not possess the highest degree of the pontificate, and although they are dependent on the bishops in the exercise of their power, nevertheless are united with the bishops in sacerdotal dignity"<sup>1</sup>. Now, if the bishop's priesthood is the fulness of Order, the priesthood of the pres-

<sup>1</sup> Art. 28.

byter or simple priest is a lesser, though real participation in Christ's sacerdotal ministry. In other words, the bishop and priest have a participated priesthood in as much as their priesthood is a participation in that of Christ Who is the unique priest of the New Law. Christ's priesthood then was given in its fullness to the bishop, and this was shared by him with his presbyters to the extent to which it is needed by them for the fulfillment of their particular function in the service of the Church.

The second point is parallel to that of the idea of the priest being a member of the college whose head is the bishop, as laid down in the constitution liturgy. However, there is a marked distinction. While in the liturgy constitution the emphasis is *liturgical*, here it goes beyond merely liturgical context. The constitution on the Church teaches that the bond between the priests and the bishops and between the members of the presbyterium itself is one of mutual charity and of cooperation in the service of the community.

What are the consequences of this special bond between the bishop and the priests?

First, in relation to the bishop, the priests, 'associated with their bishop in a spirit of trust and generosity make him present in a certain sense in the individual local congregations, and take upon themselves a part of his duties and burden.'<sup>5</sup>

Second, the bishop, the father; the priestly body, the co-workers. Because bishop and priests share the same priesthood, the priests should look at their bishop as their father and reverently obey him. The bishop for his part is to look at the members of his priestly body 'as his co-workers and as sons and friends, just as Christ called his disciples not servants but friends'<sup>6</sup>. Because the basis of this union is charity and because of their common interest, the bishop is expected to listen to his priests more attentively, more than in fact to his other subjects.

Thirdly, the priests among themselves should be bound together

<sup>5</sup> Art. 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

by ties of brotherhood which they must honor by helping each other in every possible way spiritually and even materially.

Fourthly, the priests should be to the laity as fathers and shepherds, at once leading them and serving them, making of them a local community which will deserve to be called a Church of God. There must be a two-way dialogue between the laity and the priests.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter V of the Constitution on the Church establishes the point that there is only one holiness, but it expresses itself in the many 'forms and walks of life.' One's particular calling in life enters also into one's calling to holiness. The priests, like the bishop, whose priesthood they share, will achieve their response to God's call to holiness in the exercise of their ministry. They 'should grow daily in love of God and their neighbor by the exercise of their office.'<sup>9</sup> They can hope to grow in holiness by their mutual charity, the witness of their priestly lives, their prayer and sacrifice, their apostolic action nourished by contemplation, their dedication to their own community and the universal Church and their bishop.<sup>10</sup>

## THE PRIESTS AND THE DECREE ON BISHOPS

The decrees on the Pastoral function of Bishops in the Church re-states and in some cases develops the teachings of the liturgy constitution and of that on the Church.

First of all it recognizes the place, presbyterium or body of priests in the pastoral task of the bishop: the diocese is a 'portion of the People of God which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded with the co-operation of the priestly body.'<sup>11</sup>

As regards the duties of the bishop to the priests, it says that the bishop should regard his priests as 'sons and friends.' This he should put into action by being always prepared to listen to their advice with confidence and admit them into an intimate part in promoting the entire pastoral work of the whole diocese. There is even an explicit re-

<sup>8</sup> Art. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Art. 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Art. 16.

ference to the bishop inviting his priests to discussion especially of pastoral problems not merely when occasion arises but if necessary at fixed times.

Correlative to this, are the duties of the priests of his diocese. Obedience of the diocesan priests to their bishop, their mutual-cooperation, care of the faithful, admission of the laity into their rightful share in the Church's apostolate, pastoral visitation and care of the youth, of the poor, the sick, and the workers are among the points emphasized in this decree.

### **THE PRIESTS IN THE DECREE ON MINISTRY AND LIFE OF PRIESTS**

The main interest of this decree and its real positive fruit lies in the strong emphasis laid on the priest's duty of preaching in contrast to his function in the cult, in the more organic view of the priestly office in relation to the people of God, in the orientation of the priesthood to the pastoral needs of the faithful, and in view of priestly relations.

The description of the priest as minister of the Word' is particularly impressive: "Toward all men, therefore priests have the duty of sharing the gospel truth in which they themselves rejoice in the Lord. . . the task of priests is not to teach their own wisdom but God's Word, and to summon all men urgently to conversion and to holiness."<sup>12</sup> In the present set-up of today's society, the priest will most certainly find it difficult to preach in terms which will move his hearers in the best way. And yet he must try not to confine his exposition of the Word of God to the general and the abstract; he must apply the eternal truth of the Gospel to the circumstances of modern life.<sup>13</sup>

Another impressive element is the call to priests to lead the faithful to true christian maturity. "Since priests are educators in the faith, they and their helpers must encourage the faithful to follow out their vocation, to exercise a sincere and active love, and to attain the freedom with which Christ has made us free. Ceremonies no matter how

<sup>12</sup> Art. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Art. 5.

beautiful, and confraternities, no matter how flourishing, will be of little help, if they do not educate Christian men in gaining Christian maturity.<sup>14</sup>

But the most striking part of the decree is the inducement given to establish a strictly priestly spirituality stemming from the active exercise of the ministry, that is, from pastoral work. Here the decree gives a new insight in this field. Here the decree modifies the monastic spirituality of withdrawal from the world. A start is made with restoring to the priest the full religious consciousness of his function, so that he can find the fulfillment of his vocation in the exercise of his mission.

Another perspective of this priestly spirituality is found in the decree's emphasis on this point: that the priest's spirituality is found in the exercise of this ministry as the continuation in the world of today of Christ's complete submission to the Father's will.<sup>15</sup> Thus it finds a basis for the priest's obedience that is not inconsistent with the initiative demanded by his care of souls in the new and difficult situation of today.<sup>15</sup> It makes the priest's celibacy not a mere discipline suggested by the needs of the Church, but a sign to be joyfully accepted of the continued presence of Christ in the world and a pledge of the final redemption of all things in him.<sup>16</sup> And it combines an appreciation of the highest ideal of life in the twentieth century when it faces the practical difficulties of the exercise of Christian poverty on the part of priest, by its demands for adequate provision for the support of the clergy and their care in old age and infirmity.<sup>17</sup>

These are the contours of the image of the new priest as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council. Let us now, by way of summarization, enumerate the special qualities which the post-conciliar priest must have.

Picture to yourselves the new priest reflecting on himself; first of all he will be conscious of his close relationship with the *Church of*

<sup>14</sup> Art. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Art. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Art. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Art. 17.



*Christ.* He will realise that the real reason for his presence in the world is to build up the Body of Christ, to strive for that glory of God which will be achieved when 'men consciously, freely, and gratefully accept God's plans as complete in Christ and manifest it in their whole life.'<sup>18</sup> Therefore he will think of himself and of his mission not merely as a local function circumscribed by narrow juridical bounds but as a generous and mature responsibility which looks primarily indeed to the welfare of the flock entrusted to him but does not stop there. Not only the whole diocese but the world is his mission-field and he will try to become conscious himself and to make his local community conscious of the existence, the thinking and the needs of the universal Church.

Next he will reconsider his relations with his bishop. His special task in the building up of Christ's Body in the world derives from his status as a co-worker of the bishop. Now this demands reverence and obedience to the bishop, but a reverence and obedience that will acquire a new meaning and dimension from a new consciousness of the lead of the priest and bishop as co-workers.

Priests today, somewhat exaggeratedly, but not without considerable truth, think of themselves as 'second class clergymen.' They play a decisive and commanding role in very few areas of their life, but a decided and commanded role in many of them. There is still in fact, if not *de iure* a division of the clergy into 'higher' and 'lower' category, giving the lower clergy the impression that their function in the Church is that of a subject whose only prerogative is to carry out the decisions that come from above. Typically, the 'lower' clergy is administered from a central authority, establishing a relation between bishop and priests that bears all the hallmarks of secular administrative officialdom schematic and impersonal, with a cheerless, mechanical handling of 'cause and cases' according to the prescribed regulations. One sign of it is the generally preferred written character of communications which alone marks off a wide zone of no-man's-land between the bishop and priests, hence the emphasis on the idea of 'co-workers' is I think very timely. If this is followed, we can hope that this will eventually lead

<sup>18</sup> DMLP, Art. 2.

to more room for dialogue between the bishops and priests and for an initiative on the part of the priest that would be more concerned with the needs of the People of God than with the niceties of hierarchical precedence of the personal ambitions, pretensions, or sensitivities of the holders of ecclesiastical office.

Then the reflecting priest will next turn to his other companions—the other priest with whom he forms what the Council terms as the *presbyterium*, and their relations as a body to the Bishop. It does seem to open up fresh possibilities in the attitude of diocesan clergy in their approach to pastoral problems. By giving opportunity for *all* voices of the clergy to be heard in the sharing of diocesan policy and bridging the gap between generations, it could prevent the sort of stagnation of outlook and the digging in of clerical thinking in the so-called traditional positions and policies that were so much a characteristic of the past.

The post-conciliar priest will not look anymore for perfection in some sort of attempt at an imitation of the monastic life or try to find the necessary unity and harmony of his pastoral life “merely by an outward arrangement of the works of the ministry or by the practice of spiritual exercise alone.”<sup>19</sup> The monastic spirituality of withdrawal from the world is hard enough to put in practice in the case of active religious orders. It is even more difficult for the secular priest for it estranges him from the world in which he is to work and serve. Of course this does not mean to say that spiritual exercises like mental prayer and spiritual reading, etc. will have no more place in the life of a new priest; this will be a disastrous thing. What I think is meant by the Council is that all these spiritual exercises must now be done by the new priest not as something like intervals snatched from the distractions of pastoral work. Rather they are enriched by this work of teaching, sanctifying and ruling the People of God: while these tasks in their turn will be the overflow of the spiritual power of the priest’s soul which the Council calls ‘pastoral charity’, and which is drawn from close contact with the Christian mystery, especially in the Eucharist. In brief, the priests of the future will have learned from

<sup>19</sup> DMLP, Art. 14.

Vatican II a new insight into his spirituality: namely that his pastoral life is at once the source and the fruit of his life of prayer: 'It is through the sacred actions they perform everyday as through their whole ministry which they exercise in union with the bishop and their fellow-priests that they are set on the right course to perfection of life; while on the other hand, 'the very holiness of priests is of greatest benefit for the fruitful fulfillment of their ministry.'<sup>20</sup>

Within the context of this priestly spirituality, the priest who was the object of Vatican II's study must reflect on his celibacy with a deeper and new insight. For him, whatever doubts may have been cast on the wisdom of the law of celibacy, whatever suggestions made and from whatever motives, that it was outmoded, must disappear before the council's reiteration of the spiritual meaning of perfect continence in the life of the priest. The post-Vatican priest will draw new courage and enthusiasm from the assurance that it is not merely a personal sacrifice but has relevance for his particular state of life as being 'at once a sign of pastoral charity and an incentive to it, as well as being in a special way a source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world.'<sup>21</sup>

Everywhere that the priest's ministry is described the first duty to be mentioned is always that of preaching the Word of God, announcing the Gospel, teaching the People of God by various methods. Quite obviously this will demand of the priests a new outlook on the place of the Word of God in his own life, in the life of his people and in the whole mission of the Church to mankind. What exactly are the consequences of this new outlook in concrete practice, it would be just difficult to say at this stage, but it will certainly be a factor of considerable importance in the life and the mission of the future priests.

As a corollary of the preceding consideration, the priests of tomorrow will be much more aware of the role of study in his life. Now that he is much more aware of the intellectual ferment going on in the Church as she faces the new challenges of modern thought and modern scientific discovery and now more aware than before of his duty to keep in touch both with the Church's and the world's thinking

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, Art. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, Art. 16.

there will be no room for the distorted idea that the hours spent at the study of his religion are a waste of the pastoral priest's time: "Since in our times human culture and the sacred sciences are making new advances priests are urged to develop their knowledge of divine and human affairs, aptly and uninterruptedly. In this way they will prepare themselves more appropriately to undertake discussion with their contemporaries."<sup>22</sup>

First of all the clergy must never consider themselves as men apart in the sense of not having to live as brothers with other men, or constitute some kind of superior class. The difference between priests and other members of Christ's Body is one of function, not of rank. The fourth chapter of the Constitution on the Church goes a long way towards dispelling any statement on the contrary. It reminds us of the constant teaching of the Church concerning the equality and brotherhood of all the People of God both laity and clergy, and of their universal vocation to holiness. And it says further that while 'a certain number are appointed by Christ as teachers, stewards of the mysteries and pastors for the sake of others, yet all are on a truly equal footing with regard to the building of Christ's Body.'<sup>23</sup> And in the decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests: "Priests in common with all who have been reborn in the font of baptism are brothers among brothers as members of the same Body of Christ which all are commanded to build up."<sup>24</sup>

What about the classical question about the relationship which should obtain between the laity and their pastors? The new priest from now on should be aware that the laity have to receive the spiritual goods of the Church from them, especially sound doctrine and the sacraments.<sup>25</sup> Pastors must recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity. They should as advised, depend upon them, and encourage their initiative.<sup>26</sup> They should be attentive to their projects, suggestions, and desires, and manifest a genuine solicitude for

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, Art. 19.

<sup>23</sup> CC, Art. 32.

<sup>24</sup> DMLP, Art. 9.

<sup>25</sup> CC, Art. 37.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

the value of human liberty. At the same time, the laity should confidently make known their needs and desires to their pastors. Indeed, if in virtue of their special qualifications they have something to say concerning the welfare of the Church they are *obliged* 'in a spirit of sincerity, courage and prudence combined with a respectful charity towards the men who sustain the role of Christ by reason of their sacred office',<sup>27</sup> to express their opinion. There is a great deal of food for thought in this account of the right relationship between laity and pastors. In effect, it is an appeal for an adult responsible Christianity; and it illustrates that such Christianity is operative only where there is both a mature clergy and a mature laity. For in the ultimate analysis it is the priests who have the obligation of creating by their ministry a mature Christian community, equipped to carry out its Christian vocation and responsibilities implied in a serious acceptance of the Christian precept of charity in its two-fold aspect of love of God and the neighbour.<sup>28</sup>

The new priest should be then more aware of the importance of this two-way dialogue which he should carry with the faithful. Since there is something quite holy about this process of communication, it should be carried out in spirit of reverence and charity, carefully avoiding any suggestion of sensationalism, exhibitionism, or superciliousness. The dialogue must be carried on in a spirit of deep concern for the welfare of the Church. The main point which both the new priest and the laity should bear in mind in this dialogue is: if clericalism and suspicion of the laity are occupational hazards of the clergy, which should be avoided at all times, it is also true that laicism and anti-clericalism are equally insidious occupational hazards of the laity, and should be likewise avoided with equal determination.

## CONCLUSION

It has been said that Vatican II will go down in history as the one which published the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and especially, as the council which declared (without defini-

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Art. 6.

ing it) that the collegiality of the bishops is the authentic and solemn teaching of the Catholic Church. And to this we have no quarrel. Only we should like to make this observation. This is quite true in the doctrinal plane: but in the practical pastoral plane I think what ultimately will determine the success or failure of the implementation of the Conciliar decrees will rest in a very large extent on this fact: whether the priests will live up to the expectation of the Vatican II as they are pictured in her documents. Because on the main, the real burden of the pastoral ministry is shouldered by the priests. To paraphrase the remark of one of the Council Fathers in an early session, the ancient dictum of the Church may have been that 'nothing ought to be done without bishops,' but the fact of the matter is that nowadays nothing can be done in the Church without the priests! For this simple reason the success of the post-conciliar era largely depends on how the priests live up to the challenging image presented to them by the Council.

All these things obviously imply a good deal of re-thinking of traditional attitudes. It will demand much courage combined with prudence as well as a considerable amount of effort and hard work both from the part of the priests themselves, and most particularly from the part of the bishops. This is the great challenge that the Council has given to the post-conciliar priests.

