

The Holiness Of Priests

A COMMENTARY ON THE DECREE ON THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF PRIESTS
(PRESBYTERORUM ORDINIS -- NN. 12 TO 18)

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I

Introduction

The *Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests* in numbers 12 to 18 discusses the priest's holiness. Before taking up the teaching of the decree it will be helpful to say a few words about holiness. Holiness, in its most obvious sense (what is called moral holiness) when attributed to a man consists of love of God and love of neighbor. But lest we be misled by that much abused word "love" let us say that holiness consists in devotedness, dedication to and identification with the will of God, the "interests" of God, and the true good of our fellow man because he is dear to God. Since it is devotedness it implies great self-forgetfulness, and a whole retinue of other virtues.

This devotedness to God's will is manifested in different fields according to different vocations. The holiness of a housewife will be different from the holiness of a school boy because love of God and neighbor, devotedness, will be realized in different ways. The priest's holiness, therefore, will be specified by his priestly activities. But there are two notable differences. The first is that the priest is *consecrated* to his activities by a special sacrament. The second is that his activities involve such an intense pre-occupation with God and spiritual values that they are *themselves sanctifying* in a way not verified in other vocations.

In order to make the development of the subject easier to understand it will be helpful to give a summary of the structure of numbers 12-18.

The holiness of the priest is first of all *ontological*. What does that mean? It means that the priest is set aside *con-secrated*, made a holy thing, *sacrum*, for the service of God. We may understand this from the example of the Apostles. Peter and John were holy in a way that Zachary and Mary Magdalen were not. These latter may have been holier as possessing a greater charity, but they were not assumed into the *pastoral circle* of Christ. Therefore the holiness of the Apostles was first of all, an ontological holiness consisting in their appropriation, their incorporation into the directorate of Christianity of which Christ was the central and dominant figure. The Bishops succeeded them in this, together with the priests associated with them in their ministry.

Conceivably this official association with Christ does not carry with it moral or personal interior holiness, as history abundantly proves. There have been men with this holy calling who have lived very wicked lives. Nevertheless this was contrary to the inner logic of their vocation. The ontological holiness of this elite says two things. It gives first of all an impelling reason why they should be holy. Their close association with Christ makes holiness an intrinsic exigency. Secondly, because the call is to the practice of the saving ministry of Christ, it means a sanctifying manner of life which will produce results if interior commitment is present.

We may therefore see the priest's holiness in three stages: 1) A designation to a holy mission. 2) An interior sanctity demanded by this. 3) An interior sanctity produced by it.

The efforts of the priest to acquire interior holiness whether in response to the demands of his vocation or in the sincere fulfillment of his duties will encounter certain obstacles. First there is the distracted nature of contemporary priestly life which demands a unifying principle. Secondly, there are the usual obstacles from pride, concupiscence and acquisitiveness, which have to be overcome. Finally, there is the need which the ministry has of other spiritual exercise to keep its spirit alive.

The first obstacle from multiplicity of interests, is met by seeking solely the will of God in the salvation of men. The second obstacles are met by obedience, continence and poverty. The third by the employment of various traditional practices of devotion familiar in the Church. We shall now proceed to consider these steps in more detail.

Priests Like Christ

The first two paragraphs of the Decree (12) give the key to an understanding of the holiness proper to the priesthood. Everything is based on the priest's call to the work of Christ.

By the Sacrament of Orders priests are made like Christ . . .
to carry out the work of Him, the Head, with the Episcopal
Order, and to build up His whole body which is the Church . . .
They have become living instruments of Christ . . . whose place
they take. (12)

Actually in the passage just quoted, it is said that the priest is "configured" to Christ, *the priest*. The words "the priest" have been purposely omitted lest we seem to say that priests are not made like Christ as teacher and pastor. Priests are made like Christ, the Saviour; like Christ, the Pontifex, the bridge builder between God and man; like Christ, *the Priest*, in the comprehensive sense of the word as describing Christ's whole saving mission. "He was a priest from the first instant of his mortal life, intrinsically and in all His acts," Suhard says.¹ The priest in his vocation and consecration, is made like Christ, the source of all supernatural life among men, the Head, as the same passage says. Earlier in the Decree, in almost the same words, we read: "Inasmuch as it is connected

¹ Emmanuel Cardinal Suhard, *Priests Among Men*, p. 7

with the episcopal order, the priestly office shares in the authority by which Christ Himself builds up, sanctifies and rules His Body . . . Priests are marked with a special character and are so made like Christ the Priest, that they can act in the person of Christ the Head."²

Ontological Holiness

The priest therefore possesses what we have called, for want of a better word, ontological holiness. "They have," the Decree says, "been consecrated to God in a new way." (12) The priest is holy as a chalice or an altar is holy. He has been picked out and consecrated to the service of God by a special rite. This "ontological" holiness of the priest is a participation in the ontological holiness of Christ. Christ is the anointed Saviour of mankind. "The unction, by which Jesus Christ was consecrated Sovereign Priest, was the very divinity which filled and sanctified His sacred humanity at the very instant of the Incarnation."² In simple language the Incarnation was Christ's ordination. There the divinity like an anointing and a consecrating oil pervaded His whole being, giving him an *ontological* holiness, setting Him aside for the work of Saviour.

It is true as the Council says (2) "The Lord Jesus 'Whom the Father has made holy and sent into the world' (Jn. 10, 36) has made His whole mystical Body share in the anointing by the Spirit with which He has Himself been anointed." Nevertheless the priest is privileged to share in the anointing in a special way. "Priests by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are marked with a special character, and so are configured to Christ the Priest." (2) "The Father sanctified and consecrated and sent Christ into the world . . . likewise, priests are consecrated by the anointing of the Holy Spirit and sent by Christ." (12)

Logic of Holiness

Ontological holiness in the priest — otherwise than in Christ — does not of itself convey moral holiness. Nevertheless this is its logical consequence, "priests are bound to it by a special claim." (12) The Council shows this by comparing the ontological holiness of Christ and the ontological holiness of the priest. The ontological holiness of Christ led to three other phases of His work. 1) First — there was His full dedication to His work; He "gave himself for us that He might redeem us." (12) 2) Secondly — there was His death in the fulfillment of His task, by which, 3) thirdly, he entered into His glory.

This too, is to be the pattern of the priest's life, consecrated as he is by his ordination to his mission. 1) He devotes himself entirely to this service. 2) He has to die in fulfilling it: "mortify in himself the deeds of the flesh." (12) and, 3) finally, in this way to grow in sanctity and perfection.

The ontological holiness of the priest therefore makes definite demands upon the priest himself. He is not a cup of gold nor a block of marble, consecrated to the service of God, which remain interiorly unchanged. The priest is a rational, free agent whose actions should reflect His consecrated condition.

² Suhard, p. 8

Sacramental Grace

But this is a very lofty obligation, to be a co-Saviour. It is far beyond any man's powers to accomplish. Here is where the power of the Sacrament is felt. With their consecration the priests receive a grace, and a promise of the help they need to live as worthy representatives of Christ the Head. The Decree assures them that they have this. "Every priest is enriched with a special grace." (12)

Pius XI in *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii* says: "The priest through the Sacrament of Orders receives new and special helps. Thereby if, by his free and personal cooperation, he will loyally further the divinely powerful action of the grace itself, he will be able worthily to fulfill all the duties, however arduous, of his lofty calling. He will not be overborne but will be able to bear the tremendous responsibilities inherent in his priestly duty."³

Therefore though the calling is sublime, the priest will by the special grace he receives, be able to live worthily of his office. Since Christ wants him to act for Him the Head, Christ will enable him, if he tries to do so, "to imitate the perfection of him whose part He takes." (12) In inviting a man to the priesthood Christ undertakes to remove those obstacles to this vocation which weak humanity presents, by making him a sharer in His own holiness. This is the wonderful grace of the Sacrament of Orders; it communicates a spark of the Sanctity of the Head.

Priests Aid Bishops

We have just mentioned the close connection between the Bishop's Order and the priest's. The priest is a co-worker of the Episcopal Order. (12) He is a kind of extension of the Bishop. "They make him (the Bishop) present in every gathering of the faithful." (5) A consideration of the Bishop's peculiar vocation (and field of holiness), and the priest's connection with him will therefore be very helpful in understanding the priest's proper holiness.

Lumen Gentium tells us that Bishops preside over the flock in the place of God. They are its shepherds, teaching, conducting sacred worship, providing for government. Christ our Lord is in the midst of the faithful in the person of the Bishop. Through him Christ preaches, administers the sacraments, directs and guides the people of God. (20 & 21)

This is the vocation of the Bishop, to be the Good Shepherd for the flock of Christ. But the Second Vatican Council consistently describes the priest as the helper, the co-worker of the Bishop. "The Bishops therefore assume care of the community helped by priests and deacons."⁴ Christ is present to the faithful through the Bishops "and the priests are their assistants."⁵ In other words, the Bishop is present through the

³ No. 25, J. Husstein, *Social Wellspring*, II (1943) p. 406

⁴ *Lumen Gentium* nn. 20

⁵ *Ibid* 21

priests. "Thus, established in the order of the priesthood, they are co-workers of the Episcopal Order in the proper fulfillment of the Apostolic mission entrusted to the latter order by Christ." (2)

Alter Christus?

One writer⁰ on this subject has objected to the much quoted expression "Sacerdos alter Christus," "The priest another Christ." He objects not because it is incorrect but because it fails to bring out the precise and proper manner in which a priest is "another Christ." The priest, this writer insists, is Christ present to his flock as *shepherd* from whom the sheep are to receive the truth they are to believe, the means by which they are to be saved and sanctified, the manner of life to which they are to conform. We may say of any Christian, "Christianus alter Christus." It is only of the priests (and of course the Bishop) that we can say, "Sacerdos alter Christus caput corporis mystici."

Priesthood of Laity

It may be objected that every Christian is consecrated to God in Baptism and is in fact consecrated to a priesthood. The *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* says, "the laity too share in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ." (2) And in another place: "Incorporated into Christ's mystical body through Baptism . . . they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself. They are consecrated into a royal priesthood and a holy people that they may offer spiritual sacrifices." (3)

It is true that the Council speaks of the priesthood of the laity, but it also takes pains to distinguish this from the priesthood received in Holy Orders. The laity, as the Council says, offer "spiritual sacrifices." But they are not intermediaries between God and man; they need an intermediary. This is Christ, whose role the priest re-enacts in the Church. We may understand the difference, if we remember the man at the Sheep Pool (Jn. 5, 2-9), to whom Christ said: "Do you wish to be well again?" "I have no one to put me into the pool," the man replied. *Hominem non habeo*. But he had a man, Christ. The faithful have things to offer, spiritual sacrifices, and in that lies their priesthood, but they need a man to make the offering. If it is true that all Christians are to offer their actions as a sacrifice to God, they only do this effectively around the Sacrifice of the Altar, which priests are specially ordained to consummate. "Through the ministry of priests, the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect in union with the sacrifice of Christ the sole mediator. Through the hands of priests and in the name of the whole Church, the Lord's sacrifice is offered in the Eucharist in an unbloody manner." (2)

There is therefore this difference between the Christian call to sanctity and the priestly call to sanctity. The priests are those within the

⁰ A. Manuèche. "L'Eglise en son Temps" in Vauthier "Prêtre qui es tu" *L'Ami du Clergé*. Feb. 22, 1968, 113-124

body of the faithful who especially, we may say *ex officio*, accomplish their sanctification by working for the realization of sanctity in others.⁷ The priest is an *alter Christus* in his total dedication to bringing others to live their own peculiar vocations in a Christlike way. "Whatever you eat, whatever you drink, whatever you do at all, do it for the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10, 31)

Thus, though priests are also sheep, they are more specifically shepherds, caring for the sheep. *Lumen Gentium* says: "The ministerial priest . . . molds and rules the priestly people." (10) And therefore, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* says: "To the acquisition of this (Christian) perfection priests are bound by a special claim; they have been consecrated to God (and) . . . have become living instruments so that they accomplish His wonderful work . . . to build up and establish His body which is the Church." (12)

Cardinal Suhard states this special character of the priesthood as follows: "The priest is not merely a baptized person. He is not a lay person vested with a temporary function, but a man set apart from the faithful,⁸ at once pontiff and head in the community of the baptized."⁹ "The priest is neither the equal nor the delegate of Christians. He is their father. . . . The right and primary role of the priest is to beget, form and watch over the militant laity."¹⁰ *Mystici Corporis* says, "It is through them, that Christ's apostolate as Teacher, King and Priest is to endure." (17)

Pius XI's Encyclical on the Priesthood, *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii* speaks of the priest having power over the Sacramental Body of Christ, the Mystical Body, and the Ministry of the Word. Though the language is somewhat different the idea is the same. The priest has power over the Mystical Body to guide the faithful and, with authority, to administer them the double food of the Eucharist and the Word. He is therefore *alter Christus* in the sense that he is *alter Christus caput Ecclesiae*. He is to the people of the Church what Christ was to the multitude on the hillside above the Lake of Genesareth. Christ taught them, directed the manner of their presence, fed them. (Jn. 6, 1-15) To carry out this work today in a Christlike way is the specific holiness of the priest.

Thus the priest is what one writer beautifully describes as "the sacrament of God's initiative."¹¹ "Because of us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven." This loving invasion continues, now by invisible grace of which the visible sign and agent — the sacrament — is the priest. It is he who administers to men the Church, the Mass, Penance, the means of holiness. He continues God's attack. He is the Good Shepherd, who goes after the sheep. He is a new real presence.

⁷ Of course the laity also achieve their sanctity in apostolic zeal. "There is no member who does not have a part in the mission of the whole body." (2) But their calling is not to responsibility for the people of God as such.

⁸ When it is said that the priest is set apart, this is not to be understood as separating the priest from the people. It distinguishes but does not separate. "By their vocation and ordination priests...are indeed set apart in a certain sense... But this is not that they may be separated from the people...." (3).

⁹ *I.c.* pp. 16 and 17

¹⁰ *ibid* 46 & 47

¹¹ H. Denis, "Points de Repère", cited by Vauthier. Cf. *Supra*. pg. 8

Therefore the very nature of the priesthood, what it is, reveals, points the way to its peculiar holiness. The Decree will go on to explain this at greater length (13), but it now concludes that since the priest is co-Saviour, he will be sanctified simply by being faithful to this role. There is no need to look far afield for *means of sanctification*. The priesthood itself is, if zealously lived, the priest's main means of sanctification.

"And so it is that they grow strong in the life of the spirit while they exercise the ministry of the Spirit and holiness, as long as they are sensitive to Christ's Spirit. . . . For by their every day sacred actions as by the entire ministry . . . they are directed to perfection of life." (12)¹²

Need of Holiness

And yet by a kind of a paradox the very activities which are the source of a priest's holiness themselves require holiness for their effective performance. It is of course true that God can bring about the salvation and perfection of men through the ministry of unworthy priests. But normally this is not the way God works. "Ordinarily," the Decree says, "God desires to manifest his wonders through those who because of their sensitiveness to the action of the Holy Spirit, their intimate union with Christ and their holiness of life, can say with the Apostles: 'It is now no longer I that lives, but Christ lives in me.'" (12)

The Council says that it has this last consideration very much in mind when it exhorts priests to pursue perfection. For the Council has three broad general objectives: renewal of the Church, spread of the Gospel, and dialog (as it is called) with the contemporary world. These goals are in effect goals of the People of God. It largely depends on priests whether the People of God will really achieve them, and this in turn hinges greatly on the holiness of the priests.¹³

II

Priest Sanctified in Work

The priest therefore is set aside for a holy work and this demands holiness in him. But his work also produces holiness. The Decree has said several times that the priest is made holy in his work. In number 13 the Council undertakes to show in detail how this is true.¹⁴ The Council divides these ministries into three: teaching, sanctifying and governing; the priest as prophet, priest and king.

¹² "In the first place the Shepherds of Christ's flock ought to carry out their ministry with holiness, eagerness, humility and courage. . . . They will thereby make this ministry the principal means of their sanctification." (*Lumen Gentium* 41) This is said of bishops but it is obvious from the context that it applies to all priests.

¹³ Earlier the Decree had recommended certain "natural" virtues as helpful in establishing salutary relations with men: "goodness of heart, sincerity, strength and constancy of character, zealous pursuit of justice, civility (*civilitas*)."¹³

¹⁴ For a fuller understanding of the ministry of priests, and therefore of the concrete instruments of their holiness, we should consult numbers 4 to 6 where these ministries are described.

It will be helpful at this point to note an ambiguity which occurs in the use of the word priest. This ambiguity is felt in the previous paragraph where we say that the *priest* is prophet, priest and king. Priesthood has a wider and narrower usage. The *presbyteros* has three functions: teaching (or prophetic), sacerdotal (priestly or sanctifying), and royal (governing or pastoral). A brief sentence in the *Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church* brings this out. "The 'presbyters' are prudent fellow-workers of the episcopal order and are themselves consecrated as true priests." (15)

The Decree undertakes to show how this triple role of the priest will inevitably lead the sincere and zealous man to holiness: "Priests will attain holiness in a manner proper to them if they exercise their offices zealously and tirelessly in the spirit of Christ." (13) Obviously it is not a mere mechanical discharge of their duties which will bring about this effect. The offices must be an expression of faith, *sincere*, self-sacrifice, *indefesse*, and love of God and neighbor, in *Spiritu Christi*.

Teaching Makes Holy

First the Council says that the *teaching* ministry, if so exercised, will lead to the holiness of the priest who exercises it. The various expressions of this ministry are described in some detail earlier in number 4. Here the Council is content to point two activities of the priest in this teaching ministry which will, almost by their own nature, draw him to holiness. First he will daily read and hear the word of God.¹⁵ Clearly this will be necessary. "The task of priests is not to teach their own wisdom but God's word." (4) The presumption is, too, that he will burn with zeal to plant this word in the hearts of others. If so, obviously, he will be no less desirous that the word take root in his own heart. "If they are at the same time preoccupied with welcoming this message into their own hearts, they will become even more perfect disciples of the Lord." (13) Reading and hearing this will inevitably involve meditation upon the sacred text, in view of the need of seeking the best manner of presentation. "Preaching is often very difficult in the circumstances of the modern world. . . . It must apply the perennial truth of the gospel to the concrete circumstances of life." (4) With such meditation priests will perceive the riches of God's truth and be won by it.

Secondly, the priest as teacher will realize his own helplessness; and this for two reasons. First, left to his own resources he is incapable of saying anything supernaturally eloquent. Secondly, the hearts he is addressing will remain closed to his efforts unless the Holy Spirit touch them. Priests will thus be thrown upon "Christ the Teacher," and think of themselves and their work as simply an aspect of the charity of God, of the work of salvation, and identify themselves with Christ.

Sacerdos

This is, therefore, the first way that the ministry of the priest makes him holy. The second role of the priest is *sacerdotal*, the sanctifying role. Again, earlier in number 5 this function of the priest is discussed

¹⁵ Though Abbott's translation says here "They should every day read and listen to the word of God," (13), the Latin is simply declarative: "cotidie legunt et audiunt". The Council was at pains not to be too exhortatory, "preachy."

in greater detail: "God who alone is holy and bestows holiness willed to raise up to himself as companions and helpers men who would humbly dedicate themselves to the work of sanctification." (5)

It is the teaching of the Decree that priests in performing this sanctifying role, sanctify themselves if indeed they have the necessary dispositions. "As ministers of the sacred realities . . . priests represent the person of Christ in a special way."

The Latin says: "sacrorum ministri" and the meaning is "holy things or actions" that is, the liturgy principally, but also other non-liturgical functions by which the faithful become holy. In *Mediator Dei*, Pius XIII spoke with commendation of several such non-liturgical actions: "There are other exercises of piety which while they do not pertain strictly to the Sacred Liturgy, nevertheless have a special power and worth so that they may be considered in a certain way to be grafted on the liturgical order. Prayers which are accustomed to be offered during the month of May to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, or through the month of June to the Most Sacred Heart, and likewise novenas and triduums, and stations of the Cross and other things of this kind." (211) He had previously spoken with praise of the Rosary (203), and of days of recollection and retreats. (207)

Though these are among the "sacred realities," the Decree is thinking principally of the Liturgy, as its examples show. The priest will himself become holy in ministering sacred actions because in these he represents Christ in a special way. Why is that true? Christ's *whole* activity on earth was and is to make men holy. His *teaching* was no mere theology, but a means to make men know and worship God. His *kingdom* also exists for this. The prophetic and royal roles are therefore subordinate to the priestly role of rendering due homage to the heavenly Father. It is for this reason, as we have said above, that the whole salvific activity of Christ is priestly, a mediation between God and men, a mission to bring mankind to a proper attitude toward the Most High God.

This is why the priest, in trying to make men holy, "represents the person of Christ in a special way." Trying to bring men into the proper relation of *latría*, love and obedience to God is the most Christlike of the priest's roles. If Christ "gave himself a victim to make men holy," it was as the crowning point of a whole life spent in the same purpose. "Hence priests are invited to imitate the realities they deal with." These realities have as their whole meaning the sanctification of men through Christ's redemption death. A priest can hardly minister them sincerely without fully endorsing this purpose and pursuing it in a spirit of sacrifice. And if he does, he will himself be holy.

The Mass

The first sacred "reality" by which the priest will be made holy is the Sacrifice of the Mass, his principal duty. And the reason why it is his principal duty is because the whole work of redemption is continued in it. The Mass continues to accomplish the aims of Christ: to give praise and thanksgiving to the Father, to make propitiation for sin, to ask for grace. The priest who is aware of what he is doing, will become holy in this awareness. He will be inspired to rise to the demands of the social act, which he is performing *for Christ* in His mystical body.

And it is for this reason that the decree goes on to urge priests to celebrate daily, even if there is no "congregation" present.¹⁶ The act retains the same character, the same social significance and rich fruitfulness.

A second reason why the Mass is sanctifying for the priest is that, while acting in his social capacity, he is also an individual offering himself to God every day.¹⁷ Receiving holy Communion he is united more closely to Christ the Head and grows in charity like him, "who gives Himself as food for His faithful ones." Spiritual writers have often observed that whereas when men eat ordinary food they change it into themselves, when they eat this heavenly food they are rather made like to It.

The Sacraments

The second liturgical action is the administration of the sacraments. "The purpose of the Sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, to give worship to God."¹⁸ They are therefore also a means by which Christ carries on His work of salvation and love. The priest who recalls this and tries to lose himself in Christ's intention will grow in charity. Certainly this is an effect of the sacraments that the priest easily forgets. The long hours in the confessional, the lines of Communions, the baptisms, marriages, sickcalls, easily become matters of duty, loyally performed, it is true, and therefore rich in merit, but lacking their full effectiveness as a means of personal sanctification. The priest must try to see what they really are, see, that is, with the eyes of faith, that every time he raises his hand in absolution, or pours water in baptism or places the Body of Christ on the tongue of a Christian, or performs other sacramental rites, he is continuing Christ's work of saving love, bringing people to Christ, promoting worship of the Father. Thus understood each sacramental act is rich in grace for the priest and makes him holier.

Penance

Speaking of the Sacraments the Council has a special word of praise for the Sacrament of Penance. It "especially" exercises this sanctifying influence on the priest with emphasis on their disposition, "when they show themselves always and entirely ready." It is in this generosity and faith that the administration will accomplish its richest results. Penance is probably singled out for special mention because it does, quantitatively speaking, play such an important part in the priest's life. Secondly, it easily becomes routine and drudgery. Finally frequent confession has been under attack in certain quarters, and so the priests are by implication urged to show themselves always and entirely ready to administer it.¹⁹ Towards the end of this commentary we shall see that priests themselves are urged to confess frequently. It should be consoling for the

¹⁶ There is reference here to a recurring error that "private" Masses are wrong. There are really no private Masses. The error was rejected in *Mediator Dei* (13) and in *Mysterium Fidei* (St. Paul Publications Edit. P. 17) However, it dies hard.

¹⁷ The priest is elsewhere urged to "instruct the faithful to offer to God the Father the Divine Victim in the Sacrifice of the Mass, and to join to it the offering of their own lives." (5) How can they fail to be the first converts of their own instruction?

¹⁸ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 59

¹⁹ *Mystici Corporis*, 99; *Mediator Dei*, 208

priest to remember that the long hours he spends in the "box" makes him very pleasing to God, if he tries to penetrate this ministry with a spirit of faith and charity.

The Divine Office

The third classical division of the Liturgy is the Divine Office. The priest, the decree teaches, in performing this public prayer of the Church is doing something which sanctifies him. It is surprising that this should be said; surely the Office is prayer, and prayer is a sanctifying action. However, the point is emphasized because this is special prayer. This is the prayer of the Church. "What we call the 'Divine Office' is the prayer of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, which is offered to God in the name of all and for the benefit of all, when it is performed by the priests and the other ministers of the Church and by Religious delegated for this work by the institution of the Church itself."²⁰

It would be unrealistic to say that priests do as a matter of fact, get much help from their Office. For many it is a daily grind. It seems that recognition of the official public character of the act would enable priests to say it better and derive more profit from it. However, the main thing is this: the Divine Office is *in itself* a sanctifying action of special efficacy. That we do not so exploit it, means that here — even more perhaps than in the celebration of the Mass and the administration of the Sacraments — we have to awaken our faith to what we are doing. To be the mouthpiece of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, to carry on officially the prayer He Himself offered and offers to His heavenly Father makes us holy if we enter into our task sincerely.

A second fact — not mentioned in the Decree — is that the Office is largely Sacred Scripture. Now, reading of the Scripture is recommended by the Council to all the faithful as a means of holiness. The Divine Office provides this for the priest. But the words of the Constitution on the Liturgy are important. "The better to achieve this ideal, let them take steps to improve their understanding of the Liturgy and the Bible, specially the Psalms" (90) The Church is now introducing changes in the office, which, it is hoped will make the fervent (and therefore more fruitful) recital of the Office less difficult.

In summary, the "priestly" actions of the priest are themselves powerful influences leading him to holiness. If he performs them sincerely, he will not only sanctify others; he will inevitably sanctify himself.

Pastor

The third function of the priest is to rule. The details of this activity are described earlier in number 6. Here in number 13 we read that "guiding and nourishing ('pascentes' — acting as pastor to) God's people" they will grow in charity, faith and hope. How will that happen?

²⁰ *Mediator Dei*, 163; cf. also *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* which says that Christ introduced into this earthly exile the hymn sung in heaven, and joins mankind to Himself in singing this divine praise. He continues this through the Church, which is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the world, not only by celebrating the Eucharist, but also by praying the Divine Office. (83)

The model of priests as pastors is the Good Shepherd, of whom Christ said, "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." If, as a matter of fact, priests look to Him as their model they will entertain towards the souls entrusted to their care such a generous love that they will be ready to make great sacrifices for them. Even the possibility that they will die for them is not ruled out. Not a few priests have, even in our times, died for their people. It would not be hard to document this from contemporary mission history in Africa, from the heroism of chaplains in Vietnam, of priests in atheistic countries and elsewhere. The last world war gave many examples of such heroism, such charity, such holiness.

Secondly, their office of pastor will increase their own faith. They are to form their flock in faith, not merely to *teach* them about God but to awaken in them a total *commitment to God*. They can hardly do this unless they excel in faith themselves, their own hearts filled with faith.

Finally, since the people will look to them for support in their troubles and reverses, the priest must be a tower of strength, full of confidence and hope in God, so that he will be able to communicate his strength to those who rely on him. Of him as of Peter it must be said, "You in your turn must strengthen your brethren." (Lk. 22, 32). So the very exigencies of his pastoral office require that he be a man of great faith, hope and charity. And this is to be holy.

There is also a self-denial involved in the very office of pastor. This has already been pointed out above where it was suggested that he must be ready on occasion to give his life for his sheep. But it will be a *constant* demand. The office of ruler having as its end the good of the flock and not the good of the pastor, he must sacrifice his own convenience in pursuit of the general welfare, of more abundant results, and of new and more efficient methods.

Spiritual Unity

In what has been just said about the priest's ministries as a source of holiness, it is understood that no mere mechanical discharge has this efficacy. There must be an *interior* orientation to Christ whom the priest represents. And here there arises a practical difficulty. The multiplicity of tasks that clamor for fulfillment do not permit the priest to collect his thoughts. He is almost by the nature of his hectic life forced to remain on the surface of things. He is doing about all that he can hope to do, if he gets through his work. He is business man, educator, social worker, builder. He has many organizations to moderate, meetings to attend, civil obligations to meet.

In some measure he can reduce this confusion to order by organizing his life, and eliminating the emergency, impromptu character of the demands upon him. Also fidelity to prayer will give his interior motivation a certain durability under this pressure. But neither of these solutions is enough.

The solution must be sought in a certain simplification of approach. The priest must follow the example of Christ who found His unifying and interiorizing principle in seeking the will of His Father in the salvation of men.

Christ is still doing the will of His Father in the salvation of men, but now through His ministers the priests. Hence Christ's principle should continue to be the principle of unity, achieved now in His mystical body through His priests. In the midst of the distracting demands upon their time and energies, this single profound motive — the will of the Father in the salvation of men — will give the interior simplicity that is needed.²¹

And this one, simple attitude will be especially nourished in the Sacrifice of the Mass. We have seen this above. The Sacrifice of the Mass is the continuation of Christ's redeeming work, which was to bring men to the Father. So the priest who understands his Mass will receive from it each time an impulse informing the diverse activities of the whole day. There is a beautiful simplicity about this. The one embracing motive energized in the one great priestly act, reducing order out of chaos, commuting the hectic clamor to a clear steady note of divine praise.

These considerations might seem to lead to the conclusion that the Mass is all the spiritual life a priest needs. In a sense this is true, but the Mass itself requires a receptive soul. "The priest must through prayer penetrate into the mystery of Christ." (14) We shall see more of this below.

Doing God's Will

Of course what has been said supposes that what the priest is doing is really God's will. And therefore a kind of preliminary investigation must be undertaken to ascertain whether this is true and whether the motive is applicable. *Is he doing God's will in the salvation of men?* This will not normally be a matter of doubt for the priest. God's will in the salvation of men is easy for him to find: in his office, his flock, his lot in life. (15) However, where there is doubt, he must have recourse to the interpreter of God's will on earth, to the Church, what is called by the decree the "laws of the Church's evangelical mission." In the concrete, the Church which will make this decision must be his Bishop.

"Pastoral love requires that the priest always work in the bond of union with the bishop and his brother priests lest his efforts be in vain." (14) With this unity will come consolation and joy. Outside of it there is only frustration, however consoling the results may seem.

Our present Pope has compared the highly personalized apostolates that are proliferating in the Church, often with great good will, to springs that rise in the desert, watering and invigorating a limited area, giving an appearance of luxurious growth, and then sinking into the sands, without ever joining the main stream of the Church's saving action. Since bishops are men they are limited and their decisions will not always be recognizable as the best for the salvation of souls. But this

²¹ Christ's unifying principle, "the will of the Father in saving men," is beautifully illustrated in the Samaritan woman incident: "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me.... The fields are white for the harvest." Jn. 3. 34-36

is Christ's Church and the way it works. If the priest accepts this design of life, "he will find the unity of his own life in the very unity of the Church's mission. Thus he will be joined with the Lord." (14) Unacceptable though it is to some, it still remains true, and the Council insists on it. In some parts of the world, "underground" Churches have come into existence, but they are not spiritually viable, cut off from the center of life. The Decree says simply their efforts are a waste of time, borrowing St. Paul's expression "in vacuum current." (Gal. 2, 2)

The holiness of priests therefore is mainly in the performance of priestly ministries, with the proper disposition. This disposition can be maintained by finding always in their work (whatever form it takes) the will of God for the salvation of men, a disposition which each day should find new vigor in the Mass where they continue that sacrifice in which Christ offered himself to the Father for the salvation of men.

III

Special Spiritual Needs of the Priest

If it is true that priests are made holy by the very exercise of their ministry, it is also true that this supposes a loyal performance with the right disposition. But in the face of competing values such a performance is not easy, and so the Decree says that there are certain "virtues most necessary for the priest's ministry." (15) They are briefly, poverty, chastity and obedience, and they are discussed in numbers 15, 16 and 17.

It is sometimes implied that poverty, chastity and obedience are a kind of monopoly of religious. This is certainly false. Every Christian must possess these three attitudes in some measure, even to save his soul. For what are they? They are a Christian's response to the great threats that endanger the soul's salvation. First there is the danger of avarice for material things. Second, there is the danger of lust from the reproductive instincts. And finally, the danger of pride in self-love, self-will opposing God's will, especially when this is proposed by His representatives. Every Christian must be sufficiently master of himself in the face of the allurements of material things, of the attraction of sex and of the desire of independence to be able to respond to God's will, and as far as necessary to silence contrary tendencies. So in this sense, poverty, chastity and obedience are the universal ornament of all Christians. For the loftier ideals of the priesthood and its more complete self-dedication to God these virtues will be needed in a more perfect measure. No priest can reach his proper perfection except in great obedience, chastity and poverty.

Obedience

The decree begins with obedience, first in a wide perspective of submission to God's will and of humility, then more specifically in subordination to superiors. It says, "Among the virtues which are demanded in a very high measure for the ministry of priests is that disposition of soul

by which they are always ready to seek not their own will but the will of God." (15) There are two reasons in the priestly ministry for this great need. First it is a *supernatural* ministry and secondly it is *ecclesial*. As a supernatural work it is completely beyond the priest's powers to perform. He will be aware that only as long as he subordinates himself to God's plans can he hope for any measure of success.

The second reason for obedience is that the work is ecclesial. Obviously the priest must seek God's will where he is, in His ministries, in serving the souls entrusted to Him. But these are *entrusted* to him. The ministry of souls is not his *private* enterprise, but a ministry of the Church. It will therefore be carried out in obedience to the Pope, the Bishops and other superiors. It is only in this way that it can be a work of the Church, namely be woven into the *unity* of one work, done by priest with priest and priest with prelate. In this way all work to build up Christ's Body.

However, this does not mean that priests are to exercise no initiative or originality. On the contrary their very enthusiasm for the work of Christ in His Church, namely the very root of their obedience, will make them alive to new opportunities, and ways of doing things. These they should propose for the consideration of their superior, urging the merits of their suggestions for the good of souls. Obedience and humility on the other hand, make them ready to accept what the Bishop decides.²²

It should be pointed out that there is nothing in this responsible obedience which is unworthy of the dignity of man. Man's greatest dignity is in being the son of God. Seeking only God's will untrammelled by other bonds, he possesses a freedom unlike any in human experience. This is what is meant by the freedom of the sons of God, a peculiarly Christlike attitude. He became obedient to death.

Celibacy

The second evangelical counsel which is indicated for the ministry is perfect and perpetual continence. Of this the decree says that it was recommended by Christ, has been, and is, in fact, practised by many of the faithful, and has always been held by the Church in high esteem for priests. The reasons why it has been esteemed of great value for the ministry are all connected with *pastoral charity*, which celibacy signifies, stimulates and renders effective. This is chastity "for the kingdom of God," embraced in the generous conviction — a conviction encouraged by Christ and His Church — that it enables the soul to be united with Christ. It thus is a *sign* of identification with our Saviour in his redemptive mission. This identification in turn will be a *stimulus* to zeal in the works of His mission. It will consequently be a source of great *spiritual fruitfulness*.

²² On the relation of bishops and priests: "The bishop should regard priests as his brothers and friends.... He should gladly listen to them, indeed consult them and have discussions with them about those matters which concern the necessities of pastoral work and the welfare of the diocese." (17)

It is of course not necessary for the priesthood, though possessing a many-sided appropriateness (*multimodam convenientiam cum sacerdotio habet.*) Why is celibacy so appropriate for the priesthood? We can, it seems, distinguish five reasons in the Decree. The first is because the priesthood by its very character is concerned with *another kind of life*, to the begetting of children in God "not out of human stock, or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself." (Jn. 1, 13)

Secondly, celibacy is in fact a *practical measure* for the propagation of this new spiritual life. It is a new consecration to the ministry, enabling the priest to render a service that is singleminded, unencumbered and efficient. This is not of course to say that celibacy itself is easier, but that if celibacy is pledged and observed, the service of God becomes easier. It is the mind and experience of the Church that celibacy will normally be observed, and, if it is, its effects will be salutary for the service of God.

A third reason is what is called in our day, "witness." Celibacy is a sign to the world of the priest's nuptials with Christ, and of the priest's desire to effect in the Church those nuptials by which the Christian people, as St. Paul says, are given to the one spouse Christ. The priest's own celibacy is a kind of first fruit of this desire.

Fourthly, a celibacy is a reminder that this life is a prelude to another life. Here the priest begins, in faith and charity, that life where men neither marry nor are given in marriage. It is thus an eschatological reminder.

And finally, celibacy is "in imitation of Christ." This recalls what *Lumen Gentium* says about the religious life. "The counsels have a special power to form Christians to that poor and chaste life which Christ our Lord and His Virgin Mother chose." (46)

It must be admitted that these reasons, though possessing considerable persuasiveness, are not categorical. Their cogency must be sought in faith, and this is what the decree says, they are based on the "mystery of Christ and His Church." Celibacy is a testimony to the superiority of spiritual things over the values the world esteems. Marriage is good and is not in conflict with the life of the spirit. Nevertheless it is helpful that some Christians should call men's attention to the higher demands of the spirit. It is this confidence in celibacy as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit's wise provision for the Church that persuaded the Council to reaffirm it. It is not indispensable, but it is holy and fruitful for priests and their work. It is not too much to ask of men called to the priesthood.

The Decree urges priests to "recognize this surpassing gift." Celibacy therefore, is a gift, a vocation, something that comes from God. As in the case of the priesthood itself, one may feel morally certain about celibacy if he has embraced it with mature reflection, prudent advice, and a period of testing. Subsequent difficulties are no sign that a vocation was not present. The vocation carries with it the guarantee of sufficient grace for perseverance.

St. Bernardine of Siena says:

There is a general rule applicable to all extraordinary graces given to men. It is this. Whenever the divine favor chooses someone for an extraordinary grace, or some sublime state, it gives all the helps which are necessary for that person and his office, and does so generously.²³

Priests must therefore think correctly about this virtue. They must recognize it as a mystery to be approached with faith. "Many men today call continence impossible." (15) This is perhaps because they think of it in purely human terms. The priest on the contrary knows with faith that it is not only possible but relatively easy, but under certain conditions. First he must dedicate himself to it magnanimously and wholeheartedly. A half-chastity, what Rahner calls peeping through the fence, is the beginning of defeat. Secondly, since it is a grace, it needs prayer, on the part of the priest and on the part of the faithful, which God will not fail to answer. Finally, it is folly to rely on God unless one uses the means that are at one's disposal. "Let priests make use of all the supernatural helps which are available to all. Let them not neglect to follow the norms, especially the ascetical ones, which have been tested by the experience of the Church, and which are by no means less necessary in today's world." (16)

It will not be out of place to apply to priests what the Council says to religious regarding chastity.

Religious do well to put their faith in the words of the Lord. Trusting in God's help rather than their own resources, let them practise mortification and custody of the senses. They should take advantage of natural aids for mental and bodily health. As a result they will not be influenced by erroneous claims that complete continence is impossible or harmful to human development. Moreover, a certain spiritual instinct should lead them to spurn everything likely to imperil chastity.²⁴

The Council had the courage to call for mortification and custody of the senses. Certainly it is folly to expect without them to preserve chastity in any state of life.

Poverty

Having treated of chastity, which in the concrete is the problem of preserving celibacy unsullied and unassailed, the Council takes up poverty. Since poverty is an attitude towards material things and might seem something merely negative, the Council affirms the goodness of human values and created things. One of the preoccupations of the Council, especially developed in *Gaudium et Spes*, was to rescue and rehabilitate human values, which had been imperilled by a false notion of unworldliness.

²³ Sermon on Saint Joseph

²⁴ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12

The first sentence on poverty sounds strangely out of context, but what the Decree is trying to say is that priests should not fear to use and enjoy the gifts of God, especially in fostering warm social relations with others. Beneath this is the suggestion that recreation and relaxation are not to be suspect, especially as aids of charity. There is, it seems, a gentle apologia here for enjoyment of the arts, of games and sports, and similar pleasures. These, too, are God's gifts.

Having uttered this caution against Manicheanism, the Council does not, however, wish to be interpreted as content with low standards of asceticism. "Still," it says "they (priests) are not of this world. Using the world as though they used it not, they will attain to freedom from excessive concern and become more sensitive to the divine voice." (17)

Created things and human values *on the one hand* are good yet they are not without their danger, and so a priest must acquire a certain skill in the use of them. He must achieve liberty with regard to them, what St. Ignatius Loyola called, "indifference" or "detachment." Thus he will be able to use them — for use them he must and should — rightly with the spirit that St. Ignatius made famous under the expression *tantum-quantum*, or as the Council says: "a right use of goods according to God's will and (rejection) of whatever would be harmful to their mission." (17)

The Decree then indicates in a general way what the uses are to which a priest may dedicate the material things he possesses. It distinguished between goods which are *strictly ecclesiastical* and property *acquired through some ecclesiastical office*.

The general rules for the use of *strictly ecclesiastical goods* are "norms of Church law and the nature of the goods." (17) The Decree gives as specific examples of their legitimate use, divine worship, the decent support of the clergy, and the works of the social apostolate, especially helping the poor. The second division is *wealth acquired on the occasion of some ecclesiastical office*. This should be devoted, first, to the decent support of themselves, which includes their obligations to their family and to others with whom they live, and to the carrying out of their duties; also provision for future old age and sickness. If having done this anything is left over, it should be applied to the needs of the Church or works of charity. Therefore priests may not consider ecclesiastical office as a means of enriching either themselves or their families. They should not fix their heart on riches, and should avoid all avarice and every appearance of doing business.

Regarding property which in no way has ecclesiastical origin, priests will be guided first of all by principles common to all Christians. *Gaudium et Spes* has some general norms:

Attention must always be paid to the universal purpose of created things. . . . A man should regard his lawful possessions not merely as his own but also as common property in the sense that they should benefit not only himself but others.

The right to a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone. . . . Men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods . . . let all individuals . . . undertake a genuine sharing of their goods. (69)

If this advice is given to men in general, how much more so to priests who take the place of Christ, who lived simply and showed such a concern for the poor. Priests are in fact invited — though they have no strict obligation thereto — to embrace voluntary poverty to become more like Christ and to fit themselves for their sacred ministry. Christ gave an example and this was followed by the apostles.

Some kind of sharing of resources is also recommended, after the example of the early Christian community. In any case, whatever the form of their life, priests and bishops²⁵ should avoid anything which would give offense to the poor or savor of vanity. Especially their homes should be easily open to all. Moreover the poor have a preferred place in their ministries. "Let them gladly spend themselves and be spent . . . even in the more lowly and poor tasks." (15) "A priest has the lowly and poor entrusted to him in a special way. The Lord Himself showed that He was united with them and the fact that the Gospel was preached to them is mentioned as a sign of Messianic activity." (6) By the same sign priests will be known as, and truly be, Christlike ministers of the Gospel.

Means of Fostering the Spiritual Life

It has been seen that the priest should foster union with Christ, and that in the midst of the many duties that oppress and distract him, he must join himself to Christ as an instrument of the Father's will in the Salvation of men. There are now some practical measures pointed out by the Decree that will be very helpful if indeed not indispensable for this union. Some of these are old, some new. Some are recommended, some are enjoined. But in any case, they are all the fruit of the Holy Spirit's action on the People of God.

First and foremost is constant nourishment from the two-fold table of Sacred Scripture and the Mass. In recommending to the priest the reading of Holy Scripture no perfunctory perusal is meant.²⁶ Nor is there question of scientific study such as might be transacted in a seminary class. What is meant is the "lectio divina," dear to the Benedictine tradition. The recent thirty-first General Congregation of the Society of

²⁵ Though this decree treats of priests, it was felt in the Council that an exhortation to poverty from the bishops would sound better if it included the bishops. In the *Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office* in the Church, they are urged to "give an example of holiness through charity, humility and simplicity of life." (5)

²⁶ "All clergy must hold fast to the Sacred Scripture through diligent holy reading and careful study, especially priests of Christ. . . . lest any of them become 'empty preachers of the word outwardly, who are not listeners to it inwardly'." *Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation*. 25.

Jesus indicated this as one method of fulfilling the Jesuit's obligation to mental prayer. It is the prayerful reading of the Bible, not primarily an intellectual exercise, but a savoring of God in His revealed word.

The priest's union with Christ is also perfected by frequent confession, which in turn is made fruitful by a daily examination of conscience. It is clear that these confessions will ordinarily be confessions of devotion. Thus the Council gently takes sides against the critics of such confessions. Spiritual reading is also a help to the priest in seeing God's action and His will in the various events of life. Since this is mentioned in addition to reading of the Scripture, we may take for granted that there is question here of the "spiritual book" in its traditional sense, like the writings of Lean and Marmion, to mention only a few masters of the spiritual life. By spiritual reading the priest becomes daily more docile to the mission he has undertaken in the Holy Spirit. In other words, if one is to appreciate spiritual values, find holy joy in works of zeal, he must keep *in tune* with the language of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual reading is a great aid to this; it not only affords communion with holy thoughts at the actual moment of reading, but it leaves echoes through the day.

Our Lady is given in the Decree as an example of such docility. Surely her history is one of docility, and it is not far-fetched to associate her docility with spiritual reading. Something like "lectio divina" must have been her frequent occupation. The Council has a brief but beautiful passage here on Mary and the priest.

They (priests) can find a wondrous model of such docility in the Blessed Virgin Mary. Led by the Holy Spirit, she devoted herself entirely to the mystery of man's Redemption. With the devotion and veneration of sons, priests should lovingly honor this mother of the supreme and eternal Priest, this Queen of the Apostles and Protectress of their ministry.

Our Blessed Mother's own vocation brings her very close to the priest. She is Mother of the Mystical Body and closely associated with her Son in His redemptive work. Priests are very like her; their role too is *parental*. Suhard says of the priest that he is the father of Christians ... "The right and primary role of the priest is to beget, form and watch over the laity."²⁷

Bishop Guilford C. Young who writes the commentary on this decree for the Abbott edition of the Conciliar Documents felt that some explanation was needed for the omission here of mention of the Rosary. He says that the Decree was directed to priests of the whole Church, "and in the Eastern Churches our Lady is honored by other prayer forms."

Whatever may be the truth of that, the Rosary is sufficiently implied in the longer treatment of devotion to our Lady in *Lumen Gentium* which says:

This Most Holy Synod admonishes all the sons of the Church, that the cult, especially the liturgical cult of the

²⁷ *Supra* pg. 10

Blessed Virgin, be generously fostered. It charges that practices and exercises of devotion toward her be treasured as recommended by the teaching authority of the Church in the course of the centuries. (67)

If the Rosary does not fit that description, it is hard to conceive what devotion to our Lady would. The Rosary is indicated there almost as explicitly as if it were spelled out.

Visits to the Blessed Sacrament are recommended. Here again we have an echo of *Mysterium Fidei* which, because certain unsound teachings on the Holy Eucharist had begun to win support, reasserted firmly the excellence of the worship of Christ reserved in the tabernacle.

Retreats are commended, praised, and there is not only question of the "annual retreat" but of all similar exercises, like the monthly recollections promoted in most dioceses. The Council does not say how often retreats are to be made, nor does it specify any method. Very probably when the new Code of Canon Law is published it will contain more specific directives in this matter.

Finally, mental prayer and other forms of prayer are recommended. *Lectio divina*, as described above, certainly is mental prayer, but it need not be the only kind that priests perform. Therefore the traditional methods of prayer of various schools of spirituality retain their place of honor.

There are many problems in which the priesthood in our day is involved. But there is none which will not be solved by holiness. The degree and character of involvement in the "world," dialog with the laity, relations with prelates, — the holy priest will be able to meet these problems, not without headaches, it is true, but without ultimate disaster. The priesthood is a supernatural vocation, it is God's call and the priest is God's representative. Whatever the work he undertakes in good faith under his superior with a pure intention for God in the discharge of his priesthood must demand God's protection.