

CHAPTER ONE

The
UNCHANGING
HEART
beneath the
CHANGING
FACE

CRISIS OF SOUL

The face of the Catholic priesthood is changing! Although this has always been the case, presently it may seem to us that the priesthood is perhaps changing more at this time than at any previous epoch in the history of the Church. If this is indeed a time of singular flux and change in the identity of the priest, and if it seems that these changes may be driven by crisis and scandal, it is all the more important for us to remember that behind the changing face of the priesthood remains the saving face of Jesus Christ,¹ who is the *unchanging heart* of the priesthood, and in terms of whom any change must be assessed.

As Jesuit Cardinal Avery Dulles notes in his excellent theological reflection *The Priestly Office*, new theological paradigms of priesthood have arisen, especially since the Second Vatican Council.² Father Hans Küng in his 1972 book *Why Priests?* could not seem to find a satisfactory answer to his own question. Observing, as Vatican II has reminded us, that all believers are priests, Küng states that the terms “priest” and “hierarchy” should be abolished: instead, “leaders” and “presiders” should administer the Eucharist and forgive sins. He further asserts that in the absence of these presiders anyone can administer the sacraments. Dominican Father Edward Schillebeeckx agreed in his 1981 book *Ministry*:

Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ, in which he rejects any “ontological” understanding of the character of sacramental priesthood, concluding that any non-ordained believer could validly celebrate the Eucharist in an emergency.³ The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reacted critically to both of these theologians, though the influence of their thinking continues. Indeed, the question of whether there is even an adequate biblical foundation for the sacramental understanding of priesthood has been raised many times in the history of the Church, especially since the Protestant Reformation.

Even more serious than the challenge that has been raised concerning the nature of the priesthood is that concerning the state of those who are already ordained: the question of whether priests themselves are undergoing a crisis of soul. Serious questions have been raised about the sexual misconduct of priests and seminarians.⁴ Scandal has swept through the Church over priests who do not live up to the promise of celibacy or who lead double lives in other ways, sometimes even engaging in criminal behavior such as pedophilia or other forms of sexual abuse or addiction.⁵ Those who have worked many years in priestly formation have sometimes questioned the quality of candidates. They have voiced their concerns about what is really going on in priestly life, noting an underlying lack of sexual integration among the candidates and lamenting the poor preparation they have been given for a life of celibacy.⁶

My response in this book will likewise come from inside the priesthood—certainly from my own priestly life, which has been primarily dedicated to the ongoing formation of men for the priesthood. I propose first to consider the foundations for a theology of priesthood, and then to consider some of the issues raised by those who wonder whether there is a crisis in the priesthood. I will devote particular attention to celibacy, sexuality, and intimacy as these are lived out in the reality of priestly ministry in the present life of the Church.

THE THREE FUNCTIONS OF PRIESTHOOD

Cardinal Avery Dulles has entitled his book on the priesthood *The Priestly Office*. In what sense is priesthood an “office,” and what are its functions? Let us immediately insist that the notion of priestly office can only draw meaning from Christ and His self-emptying love within His unconditional self-gift to the Father. Any theology of priesthood, ministry, office, or institution must be developed out of the *kenosis* (cf. Phil. 2:6) of Christ and lived out in the reality of the Church.⁷

Traditionally, the three functions of priesthood in the Church are the *prophetic*, the *priestly*, and the *royal*. How do these constitute a viable concept of ministerial priesthood, coherent with the Bible, Catholic Tradition, and the teaching of Vatican Council II? Can one individual perform all the facets of these three functions—ministry of the Word in its prophetic force, worship in its priestly dimensions, and shepherding in its pastoral engagement? Have terms like “royal” and “priestly,” notions derived from the Letter to the Hebrews in reference to the unique priesthood of Jesus (10:14), outlived their meaningfulness? Moreover, how can charisms like prophecy be exercised within institutional structures? If these charisms were not restricted to ordained priests, might they not be more fully expressed by others? Has there been a tendency to focus all the power in one office, in a way that is patriarchal and unbiblical? And are there roots in the Old Testament for the way the Church understands priesthood and for the three priestly functions?

PRIESTHOOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Old Testament Roots

In the Old Testament, the entire nation of Israel is described as a priestly people (Ex. 19:6). Yet alongside this priestly people there existed a consecrated priesthood, set apart and dedicated to sacred tasks such as offering sacrifice on behalf of all the people. These priests and Levites became the ones to take charge of the holy

objects in the Temple (Ezra 8:28), and they alone are permitted to enter the most holy places (2 Chron. 23:6, 35:5). In this sense, two groups constituted Old Testament priesthood: the priestly people, and those with a more specialized priesthood. This second type of priesthood is primarily cultic and derives from a state of holiness; its functions include prophecy and governance over the people.⁸

Unlike Saint John the Baptist, whose father was a priest descended from the priestly tribe of Levi and whose mother descended from the priestly tribe of Aaron, Jesus was born into the tribe of Judah and not into hereditary priesthood.⁹ Let us examine how the unique priesthood of Jesus came to be understood in the New Testament.

The Letter to the Hebrews

Priesthood in the New Testament moves beyond “the liturgical ‘commemoration of sin’” (Heb. 10:3), which is “replaced by the memorial” of Jesus (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:25), “since it makes present what is definitive and makes full satisfaction for sin.”¹⁰ The Letter to the Hebrews links the priesthood of Jesus Christ to the priesthood of Melchizedek (cf. Heb. 5:6–10, 6:20, 7:2, 17), who is at once priest, prophet, and king. A priest without ancestry or caste entitling him to the priesthood, like the Son of God, he is a priest forever (cf. Heb. 7:3). This offering of Melchizedek foreshadows the sacrifice of Christ, who is Himself the one Sacrifice, the one Mediator (cf. Heb. 9:15).

The high priesthood of Jesus is not one of self-exaltation, but is by God’s appointment (cf. Heb. 5:5). Although He is God’s Son, in the days of His flesh Jesus had to learn obedience through what He suffered, had to pray and shed tears, and thus become able to sympathize with human weakness (cf. Heb. 5:7–8). Tempted in every respect, “yet without sinning” (Heb. 4:15), Jesus “made purification for sins” and is now seated “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3), “designated by God a high priest” (Heb. 5:10).

Thus the heavenly and eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ transcends the Levitical priesthood and the order of Aaron, being

instead of the same order as Melchizedek. Jesus is eternal, suggesting His divine preexistence, yet He is also human, suggesting His Incarnation.¹¹ Jesus became human so that, taken from men like every high priest, He could “act on behalf of men in relation to God” (Heb. 5:1) and be able “to make expiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17). As high priest, He mediates a new covenant (Heb. 9:15), an eternal redemption ensured by the eternal Spirit as the fruit of His sacrifice (Heb. 9:14). Thus, “the priesthood of Christ had its beginning at the Incarnation but attained its full reality only at the moment in which he entered into heaven. . . . The heavenly Christ exercises his priesthood by interceding for mankind. . . . If the essential task of the priest is not only to offer sacrifice but to intercede on behalf of mankind, the fundamental intention of love appears more vividly in the priesthood.”¹² The mediation of the human priest links the spatial and temporal situation of the people of God with God Himself—an access achieved through orientation to and in the act of Christ, not through the human celebrant.¹³ The mediation of Christ the High Priest is linked with the sacrifice of the Shepherd by “the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant” (Heb. 13:20). The Letter to the Hebrews does not apply the title “priest” to the leaders, or heads, of the community of which it speaks (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24), yet they are associated with the task of preaching and with the Eucharistic meal (Heb. 13:10), and are linked especially with the sacrifice of Christ by their martyrdom (cf. Heb. 13:17).

The Letters of Saint Paul

Just as Jesus never called Himself “priest,” so Saint Paul does not identify Jesus with the title, though he surely understands Jesus as a priestly figure through His sacrificial death on the Cross. Christ Himself is the Paschal Lamb who has been sacrificed (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7) and who has rescued us from our sins by this sacrifice (cf. Gal. 1:4). As in the Letter to the Hebrews, Saint Paul emphasizes throughout

his writings the uniqueness of the priesthood of Christ, from which Paul's own ministry flows as a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1) and as an ambassador of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20) in "priestly service of the gospel" through his sanctification by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:15–16). Paul wants to be poured out like a libation on the sacrificial offering of faith (Phil. 2:17), thereby administering reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:8). He concludes his Letter to the Romans by saying, "I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (15:15–16). In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul identifies the priestly offering of a bloody sacrifice with the offering of his own self in the self-offering of Jesus Christ, saying, "Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all" (2:17). Thus, Saint Paul dares to see his own mission as priestly, in a way that is "co-extensive with the scope and breadth of the new priesthood instituted by Christ."¹⁴

Jesus as Priest, Prophet, and King

The three functions of priesthood—priest, prophet, and king—though distinct in the Old Testament, are joined in the New Testament in Christ. When Jesus describes His mission at the beginning of His ministry, He proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk. 4:18–19). Added to this prophetic mission is a supreme authority, so that the Son of man even has the power to forgive sins (cf. Mk. 2:10). These priestly functions take shape in the images of shepherd and sheep.¹⁵ Jesus is the Lamb without spot or blemish, offered for the sins of the world (cf. 1 Pet. 1:19). At the same time, He is the Shepherd, or Pastor, who sacrifices His life for His sheep (cf. Jn. 6:53). The

authority of Jesus means He serves all, and it is in this way that He shepherds, refusing any royal understanding of priesthood when others apply it to Him (cf. Jn. 18:36). Instead, Jesus insists on a priesthood in which the one who offers the sacrifice is himself the victim. In this, the unique kingship of the Son of man, which is not of this world (Jn. 18:36), embodies an authority that includes cultic sacrifice and prophetic teaching. Now the prophecy of Psalm 110 is realized as the Son of man is seated at the right hand of the Power (Mt. 26:4); now worship “in spirit and truth” is realized in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus that His disciples would eat His body and drink His blood (cf. Jn. 4:23–24, 6:53), sealing a new covenant in His blood for the remission of sins.

Thus, while Jesus refrains from using the title “priest” in its Old Testament sense, He embodies its three functions in another priesthood, which is of the order of Melchizedek.¹⁶ Saint Paul dares to appropriate these functions, as is evident in Acts of the Apostles when the presbyter-bishops of Ephesus are commissioned by the Holy Spirit to feed and guard the flock of Christ (20:26). The priestly people of the New Testament are “a holy nation,” called to “a royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9–10), a kingdom of priests (cf. Rev. 5:10); yet certain individuals are set apart for particular priestly ministry to all the rest of the baptized. The Twelve were singled out from among all the other disciples by their commission to baptize (Mt. 28:19), to celebrate the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:24–5), to forgive sins (Lk. 24:47), and to exercise authority over the rest of the community (Mt. 18:17–18).

The Second Vatican Council

In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and in its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Vatican II clearly reaffirms this theology of priesthood, delineating *one* priesthood with its prophetic, priestly, and royal functions, grounded in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. This includes both the priesthood of all the faithful, consecrated through Baptism, and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of those

consecrated through Holy Orders (LG 10). In *Lumen Gentium*, the Council goes on to make the point that, while those ordained to the hierarchical or ministerial priesthood “are consecrated to preach the gospel, shepherd the faithful, and celebrate divine worship as true priests of the New Testament,” the sacred power of the priesthood reaches its apex in the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice, in the person of Christ and in the name of the people. Moreover, the Council asserts that the two forms of priesthood differ not only in degree but also in essence (LG 10, 28).

In its Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, promulgated on December 7, 1965, by Pope Paul VI, the Council reiterated this teaching and went on to describe priests of the New Testament as those who, “by their vocation and ordination, are in a certain sense set apart in the bosom of the people of God . . . to be totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord has chosen them” (PO 1, 3, 18). This “work” is described in many ways, including as the “work of sanctification”; indeed, this work is not only sanctification of themselves but of the whole Christian community (PO 2, 5–12). Priests in communion with their bishops and with each other work together for all the faithful (PO 7–9). The priestly life is one in pursuit of a perfect likeness to Christ—a holiness reached through nourishing themselves and the people of God with Word and Sacrament (PO 3, 12–13). Therefore, priestly life has special spiritual requirements so that pastoral charity can be animated by humble obedience to God’s will, enabled by the right relationship to the things of this world through evangelical poverty and celibate continence (PO 15–17). In order to fully embrace holiness in their vocation, priests are encouraged to draw spiritual nourishment at “the double table of the Sacred Scripture and the Eucharist” and to avail themselves of all the means of spiritual growth—sacramental Penance, spiritual direction and reading, daily examination of conscience, mental prayer and retreats, as well as devotion to the Blessed Mother (PO 18). We will reflect further on these means to priestly sanctity, so often repeated in the Church’s teaching on priesthood, in the final chapter of this book.

PRIESTHOOD AND THE CHURCH

Priestly Office

As He had given the Twelve the power to cast out devils (Mk. 3:15), so Jesus commissioned them to preach the Gospel (Mt. 28: 18–20; Mk. 16: 16–18) and linked this commission with the mission to baptize. He empowered them to forgive sins (Lk. 24:47) in the same breath in which He imparted the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk. 24:27; Jn. 20:20–22). As Jesuit Father Jean Galot summarizes: “From all these indications in the gospels we conclude that Jesus meant to impart to the Twelve the total extent of his own pastoral power. He gave them the power to rule the Church, the authority to carry out the mission of evangelization, the power to administer baptism, the power to celebrate the Eucharist and forgive sins. In today’s language, Jesus transmitted to the Twelve his own priesthood, which includes leadership, the proclamation of the Word, and the performance of liturgical or sacramental actions.”¹⁷

Gradually, roles in the life of the early Church came to be more clearly delineated, particularly as the twelve apostles began to pass on their charism to successors. Summoning the assembly to solve problems that arose, and after fasting and prayer, they imposed hands upon those chosen for ministry (Acts 6:1–6). This is clearly a “setting apart,” a consecration of those chosen through the inspiration of the prophets and teachers. The efficacious response of the Holy Spirit to these gestures is surely a prelude and perfect model of ordination—so that, in this sense, “Pentecost should be looked upon as the prototype of all priestly ordinations.”¹⁸

Among the roles taking shape in the Church, the title of apostle broadened in its significance. James came to be called apostle because of his authority in Jerusalem, which also caused him to be named among the “pillars” of the Church (Gal. 2:9). Saint Luke calls Saul and Barnabas “apostles” after telling how they received the imposition of hands at Antioch (Acts 14:4, 14; 13:1–3). In his letters, Saint Paul uses “apostle” particularly in reference to those who had witnessed an appearance of the risen Lord—the Twelve, James, and then all the apostles, among whom he includes himself

(1 Cor. 15:7). Thus the title is claimed as well by the elder brothers (or presbyters) of the Jerusalem community, since they too had witnessed Jesus' Resurrection.

Saint Paul also names other individuals who held special roles within the Christian community (see 2 Cor. 8:23; Rom. 16:7). The apostles clearly had assistants in the Jerusalem ministry who presided over the Eucharistic "service at tables"—perhaps these were called presbyters (*presbyteroi*), the elders, brothers, or coworkers of the apostles, named at the Council of Jerusalem. Father Galot also suggests that these presbyters may correspond to the seventy-two sent out by Jesus, just as the bishops (*episcopoi*), overseers appointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1–4), may correspond more to the Twelve and to the other apostles, who would have been the ones to choose the men upon whom they laid hands, as Saint Paul mentions (2 Tim. 1:6; Tit 1:5; Acts 14:23).¹⁹ If such a distinction was not drawn this clearly initially, the eventual differentiation of ministries surely followed this course. The seven chosen to serve at table for the daily service (Acts 6:1–2), usually presumed to be deacons, may actually refer to those ordained to preside over "breaking bread in their homes," which they shared "with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). The particular needs of the "widows" (Acts 6:1) may accordingly refer to the extension of this daily service to women who lived a consecrated life, set apart for prayer.²⁰

In any event, the apostles knew that they had been empowered to impart to others an office they had received from Christ, including the Eucharistic service at tables, requiring prayer and the imposition of hands to "ordain" men for this task. The need for persons to shepherd the flock of Christ in an ongoing way follows the intention of Jesus, for no one knows the time of the end but the Father (Mk. 13:32), and the end of the world will only come after the Gospel has been proclaimed, through trials and persecutions, to all the nations of the earth over a historical extent of time. The necessary gradation of "sacred powers" is rightly called hierarchical, for as Saint Clement, Bishop of Rome, wrote before

the end of the first century, the shepherd must watch over the sheep.²¹ His predecessor, Saint Peter, describes this shepherd's role, applying it not only to apostles and bishops but to the presbyters as well: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ. . . . Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:1–3). Their mission is that of the "chief Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:4), Christ, who is "the shepherd and guardian [lit. 'bishop'] of your souls."²²

In this sense, there is always a fundamental distinction between the dignity of the priestly office and the person who carries out its official duties. I can recall the amazement of a young priest who, passing through the church on his way to the sacristy before celebrating Mass, discovered that this congregation followed the practice of rising until the priest had passed by. He expressed his amazement at their respect to the well-seasoned pastor of the church, who simply replied, "Remember son, they didn't rise for you. They rose for the priesthood." The reason for the dignity of the priestly office is the person of Christ, in whom the whole person of the priest is to be consumed—used up in service, in self-renunciation, and even in humiliation. This "depersonalizing" of the priestly office heightens its intimacy:

The [priestly] office itself is an ecclesiastical-societal form of the presence of Christ, and precisely (as ministry) of the humiliated Christ among those who are his, *a memoria passionis Domini*, "memorial of the Passion of the Lord." . . . The dignity lies in the fact that Christ creates such a transparency in the priest that he, as the one who is totally servant, can let the Lord, who stands above him, become transparent. The more he serves, accordingly, the better does the transparency succeed. . . . In practice, of course, the grace of office has an astonishingly reconciliatory effect in the priest who is humble: that which appears impossible from a human perspective comes as it were automatically, and the power of the promises of Christ shows itself directly to be effective.²³

Presiding at the Eucharist

Regarding the role of presiding at the Eucharist, Cardinal Avery Dulles observes that while the New Testament does not supply all the details about exactly who in the early Christian community presided at the liturgy, the most priestly activity in the Church, Catholic Tradition has held that the apostles designated bishops, presbyters, or priests to perform this function: “Perhaps in the very early stages, when the permanent structures of the church were still in the process of formation, persons without priestly ordination may have had the capacity to preside at the Eucharist, but if so these practices are not normative for the church of later ages.”²⁴ Cardinal Hans Urs Von Balthasar also describes the clear and irrevocable “boundary line that is drawn in the postapostolic Church between the hierarchical office and the realm of the charisms,” which “lies at the point where that which has the force of positive law in the natural society is drawn by her Founder into the supernatural society of the Church in order to be the vessel for his supernatural intentions.”²⁵ Clearly, this development took place rapidly in the early Church as the apostles passed on the apostolic commission and ministry to their successors. Saint Paul does not explicitly mention himself as presiding at the Eucharist, but his ministry of the mysteries of the covenant surely must have included celebration of the Eucharist. Paul solemnly recalls the words of Christ at the Last Supper, and it is his version of these words that more than any other account emphasizes Christ’s command: “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:24–25).²⁶

By the end of the first century, the first letter of Saint Clement, Bishop of Rome (a writing contemporary with the last written tradition of the New Testament) already speaks of how the bishops minister to the flock of Christ and piously offer the sacrifices proper to the episcopate.²⁷ The letter also relates how God “commanded that sacrifices and liturgies be offered, not in a random and irregular fashion, but at fixed times and hours. He has determined, moreover, by His supreme will the places and persons whom He desires for these celebrations. . . . Special ministrations

are allotted to the high priest; and for the priests a special role has been assigned; and upon the Levites their proper services have been imposed. The lay person is bound by the rules laid down for the laity.”²⁸ Sulpician Father Raymond Brown sees the threefold symbolism of the Levitical priesthood as being assimilated into the notion of priest in the New Testament, though he recognizes that the Christian pattern of bishop, presbyter, and deacon developed more slowly than Father Galot has suggested, noting that only a century after Saint Clement do we find the term “priest” being applied in a special way to the minister of the Eucharist.²⁹ In the second century, Saint Ignatius of Antioch insists in his letter to the people of Philadelphia that a Eucharist is not valid unless celebrated by a bishop or someone he appoints: “One is the Flesh of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and one the cup to unite us with his Blood, and one altar, just as there is one bishop assisted by the presbytery and deacons, my fellow servants.”³⁰ By the third century, in his treatise “The Apostolic Tradition,” Hippolytus of Rome sees bishops as high priests of worship with a clear primacy over other ministers, such as the presbyters who advise him.³¹

Jesuit Father Christian Cochini asserts that, with respect to “the specific problem of the priestly functions, study of the vocabulary used by the writings of the New Testament shows how the terminology used for the main ranks in the Christian hierarchy is directly borrowed from the Jewish tradition”; thus the words *apostle*, *bishop*, *priest*, and *deacon* “have exact equivalents in Hebrew,” referring “to Jewish institutions well known by the first Christians.”³² By the third and fourth centuries, presbyters had taken on a greater leadership role in preaching and celebrating the liturgy; it can be taken for granted that by this time the name “priest” designated ordained ministers of the Eucharist, which is the dominant meaning of priesthood in the Church today. As Father Raymond Brown asserts:

Personally, I . . . challenge the notion that a post-NT development [of a cultic priesthood] is a distortion. We Catholics should think of the ordained priesthood as part of our God-given heritage from Israel, which brought into Christian life the wealth and mystery of the whole area of OT cult. We have managed to preserve, alongside the uniqueness of the sacrifice and priesthood of Christ, the Levitical consciousness of the sacred character of a special priestly service that brings contact with the cultic symbols of God's presence. From this development has come the expectation that a priest be a person of signal holiness and even be expected to live a different style of life.³³

Thus, Father Raymond Brown also defends the integral connection of the mediating function of the priesthood of the Old Covenant with the priesthood of Jesus Christ. This connection shows that there is *not* a gap between the third-century patristic image of priesthood and that of the apostolic age, but rather a homogeneous development influenced by the Levitical hierarchical pattern.³⁴ This point is taken up by Vatican Council II in its insistence that, "for the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in his Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body" (LG 18). These ministers and their successors, "endowed with sacred power," would serve as "shepherds of His Church even to the consummation of the world" (LG 18, 19). *Lumen Gentium* continues, "In order that the episcopate itself might be one and undivided, He [Jesus] placed Blessed Peter over the other apostles and instituted in him a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and communion. . . . And for this reason the apostles, appointed as rulers in this society, took care to appoint successors" (LG 18, 20). The Council goes on to point out that priests are coworkers with the bishops, sharing in their own measure in the office of the apostles (PO 2).

Ontological Transformation, Configuration, and Communion

The Second Vatican Council goes on to insist that priests are conformed to Christ the Priest in such a way that they can act in the person of Christ the Head (PO 2). How is this conformation to be understood? Jesus in no way associates Himself with the inherited Jewish priesthood; rather, He is called holy because the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary at His conception (Lk. 1:35). His “holiness is ontological in nature: it is connected with the formation of his human nature, and even more so with the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus alludes to his holiness when he describes himself as someone ‘the Father [has] consecrated and sent into the world’ (Jn. 10:36). His consecration coincides with his being sent into the world. This does not mean that it is merely functional: it is a state that exists prior to the activity in which Jesus engages for the sake of salvation. . . . This consecration transcends ritual formalism; it bespeaks a personal commitment.”³⁵

Like Christ the Priest, the consecration of those who are consecrated in Him is more than functional. Developing through the teaching of Pope Innocent III and the Council of Florence and culminating in the seventeenth-century teaching of the Council of Trent,³⁶ three sacraments, including the sacraments of Initiation and Holy Orders, were singled out as imprinting an indelible character on their recipient. This means that these sacraments can only be received once, for they involve an “ontological” change of the person in his very being in relationship to Christ and all the members of His Body. Just as one who has been baptized has died with Christ forever, the one who is ordained priest is forever changed in his very being. Beyond any mere functional delegation for service to the Church, he is configured to Christ in a way calling for a permanent and lasting commitment, through a share in Christ’s own eternal priesthood.³⁷ The Council of Trent did not actually determine the precise nature of this sacramental character, but instead restricted itself to affirming it as a spiritual and indelible mark, real and thus ontological. Accordingly, it goes beyond

what is merely extrinsic and, surely, beyond a merely juridical empowerment to perform a function.³⁸

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II insists upon this “special ontological bond which unites the priest to Christ, High Priest and Good Shepherd.” He points out that this claim was reasserted in the theology of the priesthood found in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.³⁹ In his book *Gift and Mystery*, Pope John Paul further observes: “Just as in the Mass the Holy Spirit brings about the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, so also in the sacrament of holy orders he effects the priestly episcopal consecration.”⁴⁰ The Eucharist is the “food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal” (Jn. 6:27). This perhaps refers to the seal of the Holy Spirit received at Christ’s baptism, when the Father certified His beloved Son to do the His work (cf. Jn. 10:33–38), as a consecration for Christ’s ministry in the world. This seal, imprinted on the Son by the Father, is in turn imprinted upon those who share His ministry as shepherd.⁴¹ Father Jean Galot explains: “It is well to note that conformity lends to consecration all its reality. Should consecration merely entail surrender to God, without effecting any transformation in the man so surrendered, it would remain extrinsic to the man himself. On the contrary, consecration attains to its full value by effecting the ontological transformation that fashions the person after the divine model.”⁴²

Benedictine Father Mark O’Keefe aptly describes the force of this understanding of the ontological transformation of the ordained priest: “The priest then is not a ‘substitute’ or a stand-in for Christ like a proxy at a meeting. Or a substitute teacher in a grade school. The priest makes Christ the Shepherd present in a way similar to the way that the Eucharistic Bread is not just a ‘sign’ that Christ is present but rather the sacrament of the Eucharist makes Him present in a special way.”⁴³ As Benedictine Archbishop Daniel Buechlein concludes, “The ordinand *is* priest in the person

of Christ the High Priest. We are not substitutes. The ministerial priest *does not merely do* priestly things. We are ontologically ‘men of the sacred,’ as our Holy Father [John Paul II] says.”⁴⁴

This “configuration” of the ordained priest to Christ was summed up by Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk in his own contribution to the 1990 synod on priesthood, as follows: “The priest is a member of the Christian faithful who has been permanently configured by Christ through holy orders to serve the Church, in collaboration with the local bishop, as representative and agent of Christ, the head of the Church, and therefore as representative and agent of the Church community before God and the world.”⁴⁵ This priestly configuration with Christ lasts throughout the earthly life of the priest, and there is every reason to conclude that, as with Baptism and Confirmation, the permanence of this consecration continues into eternal life.⁴⁶

The introductory chapter of *Lumen Gentium* points out that the mission of the Church involves communion with Christ, the Head of the Body, the Church, and sees the ministerial priesthood as the connection of the whole Church with the headship of Christ. *Lumen Gentium* 28 states that priests exercise “the office of Christ, the Shepherd and Head,” and thereby make the actual work of Christ the Head tangible by sharing in His everlasting priesthood. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* elaborates on this notion of the headship of Christ and shows how priests are thus “configured to Christ the priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head” (PO 12). Therefore, priests are called to be “men of communion” through sacramental identification with the eternal High Priest, which inserts the priest, and through him the whole communion of the Church, into the communion of love and life that is the Trinity:

The priest, “as a visible continuation and sacramental sign of Christ in his own position before the Church and the world, as the enduring and ever-new source of salvation,” finds himself inserted into the trinitarian dynamics with a particular

responsibility. His identity springs from the *Ministerium Verbi et Sacramentorum*, which is in essential relation to the mystery of the salvific love of the Father [cf. Jn. 17:6–9, 24; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1], to the priestly being of Christ, who personally chooses and calls his ministers to be with him [cf. Mk. 3:15], and to the gift of the Spirit [Jn. 20:21], who communicates to the priest the necessary power for giving life to a multitude of sons of God, united in the one ecclesial body and orientated towards the Kingdom of the Father. (PDV 12, 16)

Chosen from among Men

The mission given to Christ by His Father requires in turn a multitude of shepherds—shepherds on a pastoral mission bearing the mark of the mission of Jesus. We must conclude that Jesus, while still on earth, shared His mission with His apostles and envisioned even greater numbers of shepherds who would share that mission in the future.⁴⁷ Yet there seems to be a “scandal of particularity” in the divine election of these shepherds—in choosing some, God appears to be excluding others. In our own time, this scandal of particularity has arisen over the question of why only men can be ordained.⁴⁸ Let us look at the way in which election takes place.

The selection of the Twelve is handed down in such a way as to emphasize how it was the fruit of prayer (Mk. 3:13; Lk. 6:12). Jesus highlights His own role in this choice from among others for this special call to discipleship: “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn. 15:16). The solidarity of Jesus with His chosen ones is identified as their standing by Him faithfully in His trials, and He disposes of the kingdom in their favor, as the Father has disposed of it in favor of the Son (Lk. 22:28–30). While this election to sit on thrones with the power to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Lk. 6:13, 22:28–30) is from among a large number of disciples, seventy-two others are appointed and sent “ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come” (Lk. 10:1). Jesus clearly wills to share His mission to proclaim the Gospel and even to give authority over the powers of

evil to the seventy-two disciples as well as to the Twelve.⁴⁹

Despite redefinitions of some priestly functions that may have indeed taken priests off their pedestal and moved them into more collaborative roles,⁵⁰ the communion of the priest with the whole Church has an undeniably hierarchical dimension. However much he is a man like everyone else,⁵¹ there is an inescapable aloneness of the priest,⁵² which endures even through whatever secularization of the priesthood and which would remain even if celibacy were not a mandatory discipline in the Western Church.

The danger of secularized understandings of priesthood lies in suspicion of what is spiritual. Cries that priestly formation has been too “monastic” and now must be secularized often relegate intense prayer and conversion to merely subsidiary roles, disregarding the supernatural power that is essential to any vocation, and surely to priestly vocation. This leads to a tendency to diminish certain essential elements of priestly life, such as the sacramental, ascetic, and contemplative, in favor of a more pastoral ministry that emphasizes preaching.⁵³ Indeed, the communion given to the Body of Christ is at once a supernatural gift and a continuing task over which the priest has a shepherding role. In order to fulfill this role, the priest is set apart for particular grace—which does not mean that he is better than anyone else but that, having been ordained, he is different. Just as it is impossible to ever fully understand why those three apostles were selected from the Twelve to witness their Lord transfigured, and later were again mysteriously selected to pray nearer to their agonizing Lord in the garden, so is the vocation to the priesthood mysterious. In the face of issues regarding priestly life—which may need to be considered more candidly and honestly—to look at priesthood in a purely naturalistic way is to fail to penetrate to its unchanging heart and to lose sight of its unchanging face, which is the very face of Christ.

The one baptized sacramentally is baptized into the death of Christ, so as to share in His Resurrection. Thus, that one becomes irreversibly a sharer in the common priesthood of the faithful. The indelible mark upon the one baptized and confirmed is eternally

the sign of how that one is sealed for Christ. The one ordained sacramentally shares in the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ in a way that is essentially different from the common priesthood of the faithful; the one ordained priest now acts *in persona Christi capitis*, acts in the very person of Christ, who is the Head of the Body of which all the faithful are members.⁵⁴ Even in this age of egalitarianism, it is important to recognize this headship of Christ, lived out by the priest as shepherd, by which the priest truly is leader of the community.⁵⁵ In his encyclical on liturgy, *Mediator Dei*, Pope Pius XII quotes Saint John Chrysostom, saying that the priest gives his hand and lends his tongue to Christ.⁵⁶ Nowhere is this seen more effectively than when the priest speaks, in the person of Christ, the words of Christ at the Last Supper in the celebration of the Eucharist: “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk. 22:19).

Communion and Trinity

Changed in the depths of his being so that he acts and speaks in the person of Christ, the priest shares in a particularly intimate relationship with Christ and through Christ with the beloved Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the gift of divine love in person. These are personal relationships that, far from being abstract, are *more* real than any relationship with another human person. Yet, like all relationships, the relationship between Christ and the priest must be developed and nourished through priestly ministry and life—a life lived in total self-giving, together with the self-gift of Christ, renewed constantly through the Eucharist and deepened in a loving communion of prayer. As the priest is a man of communion, that communion must first and foremost be grounded in the source of all communion, in our one God, who is a communion of three Persons. It is impossible to build community in the Church or anywhere else if one does not partake of the profound reality of that communion in God. The priest must be a man of prayer; only in prayerful communion with the Trinity will anything else about his priesthood

make sense, either on a supernatural or natural level. Only then can we rightly understand what is changing in the priesthood by gazing into its unchanging heart—the unchanging heart of the person of Christ, in whom the priest now lives and acts from the depth of his being.

It is so much easier to study priesthood, to think about it, rather than to live it; likewise, one can study or think about God without ever beginning to pray to Him. The type of man called to the priesthood is often the intellectually gifted, who uses those gifts well (perhaps too well). I propose this at the outset: *whatever crisis of soul can be diagnosed in priests and in the priesthood is usually a symptom of the failure to enter into the unchanging heart of Christ.* Acknowledging that the priest undergoes a transformation by his ordination, that in the depth of his being he is now in the person of Christ, acting and speaking through an ontologically changed relationship with Christ in his priesthood, takes nothing away from the common priesthood of all the faithful, who are also called by Baptism into communion with Christ as members of His Body.

There is no room for vainglory in priestly consecration. To be set apart in this way is to serve all the rest rather than to be served by them. The mystery of this vocation lays a tremendous responsibility upon the priest. Set apart as he is, his life will never again be his own as it had seemed to be before.