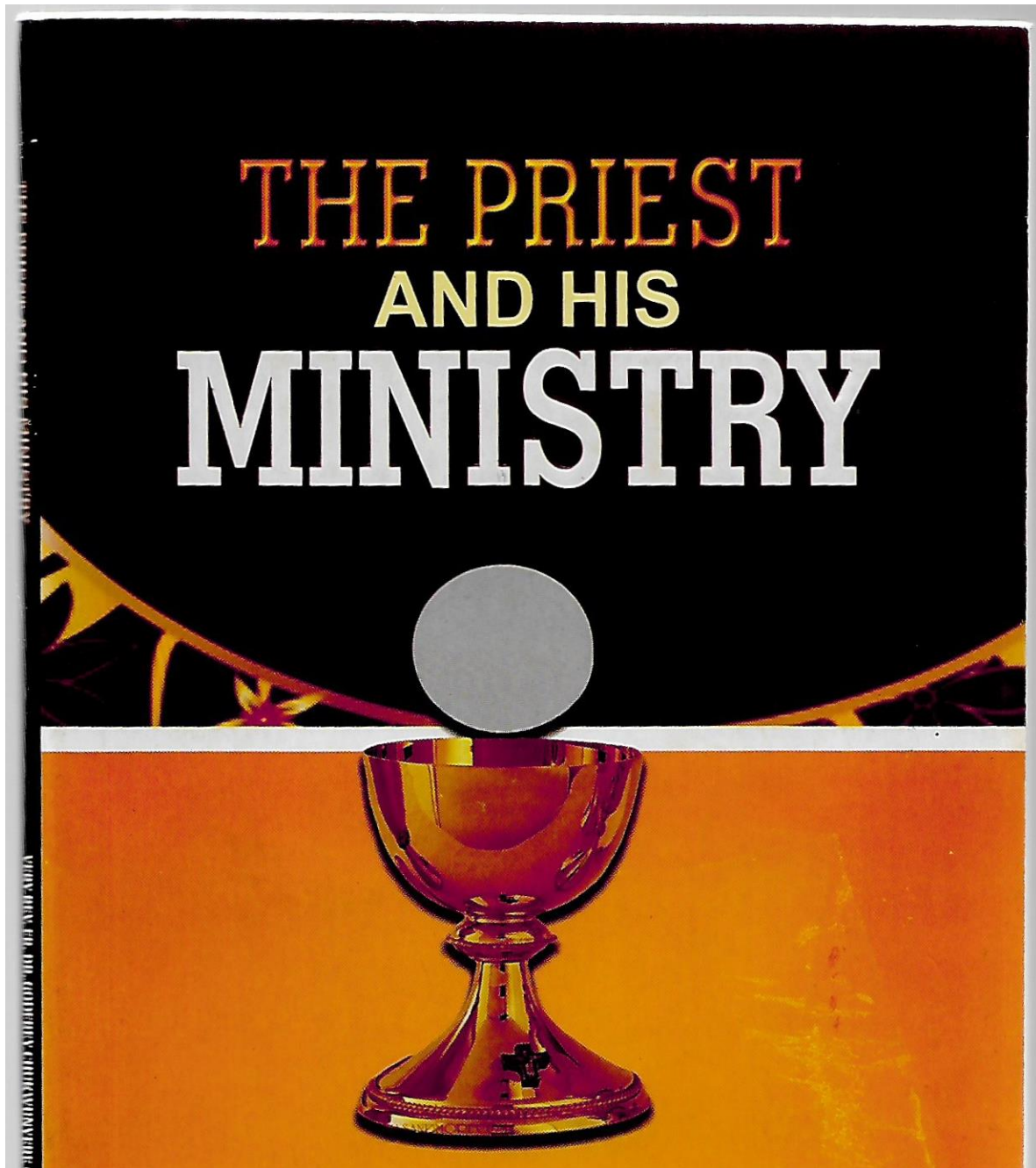


THE PRIEST AND HIS MINISTRY



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CHAPTER TEN

PRIESTLY MINISTRY: A MINISTRY OF HEALING.

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We gather to celebrate the silver jubilee anniversary of Fr. Oleri's priestly ordination. Often occasions as this offer opportunity for reflection over the identity and ministry of Priests in the church and in the world. Few years ago, an issue came up at a gathering concerning the work of priests. One person said: "they are our teachers who tell us what to do and what we shouldn't do". Another was asking: "Must there be priests for us to go to heaven? I can read the Bible and discern the will of God for me" The third other retorted: "But I don't always agree with everything they say neither do I understand all those their philosophy, theology stuff; they dabble into what they do not experience like marriage questions and some cannot even perform miracles as pastors do." Enough! The Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, speaks of the many contradictions and potentialities marking our societies and cultures.¹ It is this "phenomenon of secularization" – the tendency to live life in a horizontal projection, setting aside or neutralizing the dimension of transcendence² which has beset the church in recent times – that motivated a review of the 1994 Directory on the Ministry and the Identity of Priests (the a new edition was published last year). This occasion therefore offers us an opportunity to reflect on that Magisterial Document and see what it tells us about the priestly ministry. Perhaps this will address the issues raised by those three discussants

regarding the relevance of the priest in present day society.

This Document arose out of concern for “the comprehension of the ordained ministry”³ today. The Holy Father, Benedict XVI stated that “the theme of priestly identity is of crucial to the exercise of the ministerial priesthood, today and in the future”.⁴ The first edition (1994 edition), an outcome of the 1990 Synod of Bishops, addressed the role of the priest in the face of the new calls for evangelization mission in the church today. The Directory communicates the conclusion of the Synod Fathers which demanded for “priests who are deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ⁵ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life.”⁶ The 2013 edition of the Directory is termed an update of the former as informed by the need to incorporate into the understanding of the Priesthood as underlined in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the 1994 Directory and above all, the many magisterial documents of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the rich benefits and discoveries from the Year of Priests (2009-2010) and the reflections of theologians and other experts. Retrieving the perennial teaching of the church, this new Directory insists that “the identity of the priest as a man of God is not outmoded and never will be,” the essence of the Document lies in the deepening of “the meaning of being a priest” and “heighten his exclusive relationship with Jesus Christ...”⁷ In the treatment proper, the Directory touched the identity of the priest within which emphasis is laid on the sacramental character of this identity. Based on this character, his ministry is said to derive/draw from the ministry of Christ which he had

entrusted to the church through the apostles. This paper follows this order in addressing the questions raised at the beginning of this write-up.

Following the Letter to the Hebrews, the priest is one chosen from among men ...appointed to act on their behalf in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins (Heb 5:1,8:3). His ministry is one of service for the sanctification of the world and for the salvation of souls while his entire life is a sacrifice. For clarification purposes, the priestly ministry of healing by far surpasses the popular healing ministry in that it refers to the service inherent to the nature of the priestly calling. The document "I Chose You" says: "The priestly ministry of the priest is none other than the ministry or office of "sanctification."⁸ This understanding will guide us in the rest part of this write-up.

The word "Priest" derives from the Greek *presbyteros* or the latin *sacerdos* and the Greek *hiereus* both of which is associated with ritual responsibilities related to worship and sacrifice; though presbyter (from *presbyteros*) suggests a broader range of pastoral responsibilities.⁹ Presbyter (elder), used to designate officials in the early church, is used today as an alternative name for priest. Priesthood itself, according to McBrien, refers either to the identity and role of Jesus and of the entire community of the baptized and also the role of the most common of the ordained minister within the church. The paper focuses on the ministerial priesthood, that is, the ordained minister/priest.

Christianity has inherited its basic notions of priesthood from its Jewish foundations. In the post-exilic time, that the priests' basic function centered around sacrifice and

offering. In pre-exilic time, the tribe of Levi (the priestly tribe) was particularly responsible for oracular pronouncements, for teaching and handing on of the Torah and sacrifice and prayer¹⁰. Later official Christian (church) teachings recognize these as the threefold office of the priest – the kingly, the priestly and prophetic ministries.¹¹

In comparison to the priestly function of the Old Law, his sacrifice is once for all of all that the old had prefigured (cf. Heb 7:26, 10:14). According to Ratzinger, "In its very novelty, the message of Christ and His works together fulfill everything that went before and form a visible centre which brings God's action and us together..."¹². He is The Priest, the eternal High Priest, the mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5); one who intercedes eternally on our behalf before God the Father and one who offered himself as the holy, blameless, and unstained' (Heb 7:26) on the unique sacrifice of the cross.¹³ He remains the eternal high priest and unique mediator. His high priestly sacrifice remains efficacious through all ages since this sacrifice is "re-enacted" and made present" in every age through the sacrifices of the church. So also is His priesthood "made present" through the ministerial priesthood in the church "without diminishing the uniqueness of Christ's priesthood".¹⁴

The apostles continued the mission of their master. "... Jesus gave His power to the Apostles in such a way that He made their ministry, as it were, a continuation of His own mission. "He who receives you receives me", He Himself says to the Twelve (Mt 10:40; cf Lk 10:16; Jn 13:10). ... The continuity between the mission of Jesus

and that of the apostles is once again illustrated with great clarity in the Fourth Gospel: 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you' (20:21; cf 13:20; 17:18).¹⁵ In like manner, through the ordained ministry, the presence of Christ as Head of the Church, Shepherd of His flock and High Priest, is made visible in the midst of the community of believers.¹⁶

The church is essentially missionary, continuing and completing the mission of Christ, who describes himself as "...the one whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world" (John 10:36).¹⁷ The church draws from this the teaching that the priest acts in the person and place of Christ (*in persona Christi capitis*).¹⁸ Pius XII taught that:

It is the same high priest, Christ Jesus, whose sacred person his minister truly represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest and possess the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself (virtute ac persona ipsius Christi).¹⁹

Sacramental ordination becomes the "specific ontological bond" that unites Christ the High Priest and the priest.²⁰

The priest, clearly understood, is a human being who not only possesses the full biological and emotional traits common to all men, is equally exposed to the same frailties other men face in daily life. Beyond this, he is called by God,²¹ and "set apart" (cf Acts 13:2; Romans 1:1), configured to Christ and consecrated

to God by God through the ministry of the bishop²² to exercise the tripartite office of Christ, the priest, the king, and the prophet. He is endowed with a "spiritual power" which is a sharing in that authority with which Jesus guides the church through his Spirit.²³ In the exercise of these functions, the priest exercises not his own authority, but the authority of Christ who has called him apart from others; he act, not in his own capacity, but in *persona Christ*. He is empowered to teach, govern and act in Christ's name.²⁴ In the worshipping assembly, he signifies Christ whom he represents (he is the icon of Christ). He acts in the place of the person of Christ, the high priest of new covenant.

St Thomas Aquinas summarized that Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the Old Law was a figure of Christ, and the priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ.²⁵ The sacramental effect of ordination is identified with the priest's (the ordained) configuration to Christ. This, as we said earlier, empowers the receiver to teach, govern and act in Christ's name. He becomes the *vicarius Christi*, a vicar of Christ (in the place of the person of Christ). He is ordered to Christ since it is Christ who acts in the sacraments, as in the forgiveness of sins and in the consecration of the eucharist.²⁶

Whereas many understand the word ministry from the abstract Latin root, *ministerium* which connotes the idea of office, which was replaced in Latin Christianity by "*officium*" (an obvious shift from the servile work), and associate it with service and see it is a call to serve the reign of God, ministry, in contrast to the egalitarian understanding which recognizes many ministries in the church,²⁷ becomes the sum of those public activities and

gifts which the priest, by virtue of his ordination, exercises on behalf of a Christian community for the sake and good of the kingdom:

As Jesus called, formed and sent forth the Twelve, He commissioned them to carry on His mission at the Last Supper "Do this in memory of me", so He has called, formed and sent the priest forth today. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest shares in the priesthood of Jesus Christ in a special public way. His challenge is to represent Jesus Christ in personal life and public ministry".²⁸

This sacramental dimension of the priest is highlighted in the new edition of the Directory for the Ministry and the Life of the Priest where the priest is first and foremost the representation of Christ by which Christ remains present in the world, such that through him, Christ continues to bestow life and grace in the world. By this note, the priest not only acts *in persona Christi*, all his actions in the name of Christ whom he represents are properly the action of Christ such that through him, the salvation that comes from God becomes more clearly understood (Mauro Gabriel Placenza, "Presentation" of the Directory for the Ministry and the Life of the Priest). Benedict XVI made it *point blanc* that priests are participators in Christ's saving mission.²⁹

In explanation, Ratzinger says:

If church usage calls ordination to the ministry of priesthood a "sacrament", the following is meant: This man is in no way performing functions for which he is highly qualified by his own natural ability nor is he doing the things that please him

most and that are most profitable. On the contrary, the one who receives the sacrament is sent to give what he cannot give of his own strength; he is sent to act in the person of another, to be his living instrument....³⁰

The Synod Fathers exclaimed: "The life and ministry of the priest are a continuation of the life and action of the same Christ".³¹ The priests, assuming this role (by the grace of ordination), are called to carry out for the faithful so that the faithful of Christ may, through their ministry, adhere to the mediation and lordship of Christ.³²

The Old Testament, in a prefigurative manner, points to the choice of Israel as the starting point, while the NT shows the universal import of God's salvific plan. The whole Bible is filled with the plan, steps and accomplishments of God to heal and to save. At Christ's coming, the earth is opened up for the redemptive acts of God which reached its peak in the paschal sacrifice. Along the streets of Palestine, he brought God's mercy, love, liberation to many. The mission of the apostles was to continue this move, to bring God's love, light and mercy to the rest part of the globe, beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8).

The apostles and their successors continued this ministry of Jesus in the post-resurrection church. Miraculous powers which signaled the dawning of the messianic age was associated with their teaching (Acts 2:43). The curing at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:1-10) remains one of the earliest miracles that convinced

many in Jerusalem about the efficacy of the mission of the apostles.

In the priestly ministry, the kingdom is served by virile men who, in response to the call of Jesus through the church, accept in freedom to give themselves totally to the task of catering and caring for the wellbeing of the flock of Christ, the new people of God. The priest is thus invited to participate in that ministry which properly belongs to Christ but which the eternal high priest has entrusted to the church. In his pastoral care of the flock, he becomes a minister who brings hope to the troubled, fulfilling in this way, the work which Christ inaugurated in Palestine. This work consists in raising the downtrodden, soothing the broken hearted, restoring life to lifeless organs (sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and making the lame leap like calf, etc). He re-reads that text of Isaiah with which Jesus inaugurated his public ministry. Standing before the crowd, he read:

Spiritus Domine super me: propter quod unxit me, evangelizare pauperibus misit me, sanare contritos corde, praedicare captivis remissionem, caecis visum, dimittere confractos in remissionem, praedicare annum domini acceptum et diem retributionis (the Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners; to announce a year of favour from the Lord and a day of vindication").³³

Like "The Priest", he is to touch hearts, restore joy and raise hope in many. As Christ was simply different (cf. Mk 1:22; Lk 4:36, 37) and won the admiration of many and drew to himself such large crowds (Lk 5:15; 6:17-19; Mtt4:23-25; 9:35), the priest is called to become an "alter Christus", making present the messianic age. Christ came that the world might have life to the full (John 10:10). As Christ touched and brought back wholeness and healing many who were heavy laden and overburdened, so does the priest, configured to the person of Christ, in attending to the flock entrusted to his care, reawaken in them the same consciousness of the presence of the Messiah. That Messiah is the healer (Ex 15: 26).

The person who becomes a priest is grafted into His mission ... from an intimate union with Christ there automatically arises also a participation in His love for human beings, in His love to save them and to bring them help. He who knows Christ from within wishes to communicate to others the joy of the redemption which has opened up for him in the Lord: pastoral labour flows from this communion of love³⁴

By his sacramental ordination, the priest is called to continue this healing, the liberating and saving mission of the redeemer in our time. In exercising this power in his sacerdotal work, the priest becomes, like Christ, light and salt (Matt 5:13), teacher and healer. This mission has a scope that covers all these aspects of the human condition - the spiritual, the physical and the psychological (represented by the poor, the sick, the

sinner, the oppressed, the captive and even the physically challenged and the tormented).

Over the years, the church has not only continued with this mission to save, a mission so dear to the heart of the Trinity and inaugurated by Christ.³⁵ Through the sacraments, particularly reconciliation and anointing of the sick in the church and in the name of the church, he becomes a "minister of the essential salvific acts", who "transmits the truth necessary for salvation and feeds the people of God leading it towards holiness"³⁶, a minister of healing.

The essence of his sharing in the priestly mission/ministry of Christ consists in bringing healing to sons and daughters of God. This is a task Christ entrusted to the apostles and their successors. The church is able to fulfill all these roles, particularly through the ministry of those elevated to the status of *alter christus* through the grace of ordination. The priest accomplishes this particularly in the two sacraments of healing, reconciliation and anointing of the sick. By penance (reconciliation), the priest reconciles sinners with God and the church, and by the anointing of the sick, he relieves those who are ill.³⁷ Penance, for instance, offer a new possibility (renewal) to convert and to recover the grace of justification (CCC, 1446).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, reflecting the thought of the Council Fathers, chose the parable of the merciful father (prodigal son) as illustration for the sacrament of reconciliation. It states in categorical terms that sin afflicts the sinner as a physical wound to the body (CCC, 1422). It estranges the sinner from the

father's love and warmth. It speaks of the fascination of illusory freedom, the abandonment of the father's house, exposure to extreme misery, misuse of fortune, deep humiliation, and feeding on husks meant for pigs, depicting thus the condition of the sinner (CCC, 1439). The mercy of the father in embracing, feasting, clothing and adorning the repentant son, on the other hand, reflect what the priest does at the confessional in the name of Christ. The CCC acknowledges that sin is not only an offense against God, it is equally a rupture of communion with Him (CCC 1440), hence Odoemene would explain hell as the permanent denial of communion to a soul.³⁸ At the confessional, therefore, healing is achieved. The broken link is restored, and with it, the sinner is reconciled with the church and with the Father and joined in intimate friendship with God. For this reason, the Catechism calls it "spiritual resurrection" (CCC, 1468).

Anointing of the sick complements the sacrament of reconciliation. The Catechism regards this as the conferral of a special grace on the Christian experiencing the difficulties inherent in the condition of grave illness or old age (CCC 1527). Established by Christ and administered by a priest, this sacrament ensures that the mercy of God reaches everyone, even the dying. It brings comfort and strengthens the soul of the sick person. James recommends this sacrament: it saves, brings forgiveness of sin and guarantees resurrection on the last day (James 5:13-14).

These two sacraments are central to the priestly ministry in the church. Called to participate in the salvific actions of Christ, the priest remains an

instrument of healing. They heal souls, heal relationships and promote unity with God and with one another. His hand becomes Christ's hands inviting sinners to the mercy of the Father, bringing people to intimate union with God, and healing souls afflicted by the glamour of sin.

For good, solid 25 years, Fr Oleri has assumed this role. He has surrendered himself to the will and use of the redeemer. Whereas the church, present in the world as a sign and instrument of salvation (LG, 1), has for these number of years served in this universal mission which the church has inherited from her founder through the apostles. We rejoice with him and pray for him that he might not grow weary in his vocation. As we congratulate him, we wish him good health and God's favour. Ad multos annos.

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7. Directory, 2013, Introduction
8. "I Chose You" n.13
9. McBrien, *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, p.1049
10. Deut 33:8-11; Daniel Donovan, "Priest" in Komonchak et al., *The New Dictionary of Theology*, p.799

11. cf. P.O. nos 4-6
12. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "The Nature of the Priesthood", a speech given by Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on October 1, 1990.
13. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 1544
14. CCC, 1545
15. Ratzinger, "The Nature of the Priesthood"
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18. cf. LG, 10; 28; Austin Flannery, Documents of Vatican II Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2; 6; CCC, 1548)
19. Pius XII, Encyclical Letter, *Mediator Dei* (AAS 39 (1947) 548
20. PDV, 1
21. Heb 5:1, P.O.3
22. P.O 12; cf also P.O.n.5

23. I Chose You, n.23:3, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n.21
24. P.O.n.2
25. Summa Theol. 111, 22, 4c
26. Susan Wood, The Sacramentality of Episcopal Consecration in *Theological Studies*, vol 51, 1990
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28. The Nigerian Catholic Priest at the Threshold of the Third Millennium, www.loyolajesuit.org, 2014
29. Address to Participants at the Theological Conference organized by the Congregation for the Clergy, 12 March, 2010
30. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Nature of the Priesthood"
31. PDV, 18; Message of the Synod Fathers to the People of God, 28 October, 1990, 111: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29-30 Oct, 1990 in Directory (2013), n.3
32. cf Directory, 2013, n. 6
33. Luke 4:18-19; citing Isaiah 61:1-2; cf. *Biblia Vulgata* by Alberto Colunga and Laurentio

Turrado, septima edition-7th edition: Holy Bible – Catholic Edition

34. Ratzinger, The Nature of the Priesthood.

35. LG, 2

36. Directory, 2013; cf. PDV, n. 15

37. PO, 5

38. Odoemene, Unpublished Lecture Notes on God and the Human Community, CIWA, 2007

A Priest for the Sick, the Poor, the Isolated and the Down-Trodden.
Rev. Fr. Dr. Godfrey Odoemene, M.A., Ph.D., is a good living example of a Priest for the Sick, the Poor, the Isolated and the Down-Trodden. He is a good living example of a Priest for the Sick, the Poor, the Isolated and the Down-Trodden. He is a good living example of a Priest for the Sick, the Poor, the Isolated and the Down-Trodden. He is a good living example of a Priest for the Sick, the Poor, the Isolated and the Down-Trodden.