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Priesthood a greater love

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LIFE AND MINISTRY OF PRIESTS ¹

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PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

When the fathers of the Second Vatican Council prepared the decree on the ministry and life of priests — after the intense debates on the ministry of bishops and the important declarations on the place of the laity and of religious in the Church — they intended primarily to direct a word of encouragement to priests who bear the daily burden of the work in the Lord's vineyard. Certainly to do this they could not be satisfied with merely a pious exhortation. Since the bishops explained the meaning and theological foundation of their own ministry, the message they directed to priests should have been noteworthy for its deep theology. Only then would they have offered a convincing recognition of their work and an encouragement for their fatigue.

This message was necessary not just on account of a certain proportion between the "estates" in the Church. When the fathers defined the specific meaning of the ministry of bishops in its relationship with the ministry of the successor of Peter, they could count on a broad consensus of public opinion in the Church and in the world, especially in ecumenical circles. By contrast, the Catholic concept of the priesthood had lost its obvious validity, even within the conscience of the Church. Certainly, the crisis of the priesthood, which became obvious shortly after the Council, would then become the crisis of priestly existence and of vocations to the priesthood, was barely developed; it was just beginning. It resulted from a change in the meaning of life: the sacred was less understood while the functional was elevated to become the exclusively dominant category. However the crisis had theological roots which at the time as a consequence

of the changing social context, developed an unanticipated vitality. The interpretation of the Old Testament seemed definitely to confirm a non-sacral vision of the ministries of the Church. One could find no continuity between the sacred offices of the Old Testament and the new ministries of the nascent Church; still less could one find a connection with the pagan ideas of the priesthood.

1 Translated from the original Italian by Msgr. Richard Malone.

2 Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith.

The desacralization of the ministries of the Church seemed to represent the newness of Christianity. The ministers of the Christian communities were not called priests (*sacerdotes* or *hiereis*), but presbyters, i.e. ancients. Evidently, a modern exegesis of Protestant origin was at work in this way of considering the old Testament which did not change anything in the evidence that seemed to merit such an interpretation. It became a burning question if Luther was not right after all, instead of Trent.

Two conceptions of the priesthood were in confrontation: a social functional vision which defined the nature of the priesthood as a service to the community in the fulfillment of a function at the service of the social body of the Church. The ontological-sacramental vision which, while not denying the service character of the priesthood, saw it anchored in the existence of the ministry, an existence that was determined by a gift, called a sacrament and granted to him by the Lord through the Church. A shift of terminology accompanied the functional vision. One avoided using the words "priest" or "priestly" on account of the sacral meaning; in its place one used the neutral-functional term "minister" which at the moment had almost no importance in Catholic theology.

To this change in understanding the nature of priestly ministry there corresponds, to some extent, even a different emphasis on the definition of the tasks of the priest. One opposed the primacy of the word, until then, a typically Protestant concept to the fundamental orientation of the priest to the Eucharist. Certainly, in no way can one sustain that a concept of the priesthood, that starts with the primacy of the word, is absolutely anti-sacrament. The decree of Vatican II on the ministry of priests proves the contrary. Here we face the question: in what way do the alternatives just described exclude each other or in what way can they mutually cross-pollinate each other and so be mutually enriching. The basic question that Vatican II faced was, how far can you broaden the classical tridentine image of the priest and develop it by taking into account the demands of the Reform, of critical exegesis and of the different context of modern life without losing the essential. Vice versa, how much can the Protestant idea of "ministry" absorb the living tradition of the Catholic Church, of the East and West. There is no major difference between Catholicism and Orthodoxy over the priesthood.

THE NATURE OF PRIESTLY MINISTRY

The Second Vatican Council did not confront the problems that were then emerging; after the long discussions on the collegiality of bishops on ecumenism, on religious freedom, on questions of the contemporary world, the time and the energy were no longer available. For that reason the Synods of 1971 and 1990 took up the theme of the priesthood and developed the declarations of the Council; the same theme was taken up more concretely in the *Letters* of

our Holy Father to priests for Holy Thursday and in the *Directory of the Congregation of the Clergy*. But even if the decree of the Council did not refer explicitly to current controversies, it, nevertheless, gave fundamental direction for later development.

What are the solutions for the problems just outlined? To put it briefly: one cannot reduce a Council to one or other alternative. In the introductory definition of the decree on the priesthood, it is stated that priests by their ordination are promoted to the service of Christ the prophet, priest and king and share in his ministry by which the Church on earth is unceasingly built up as the People of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit (1). In n.2, the Council teaches the power of offering sacrifice and of forgiving sins. But this particular task of the priest is then inserted in an explicit way in an historical and dynamic vision of the Church, in which "all share in the mission" of the whole body, but "not all have the same function" (cf. Romans 12:4). Summing up what has been said, we can determine that in chapter one of the decree the ontological aspect of priestly existence is strongly emphasized, and, at the same time, the power to offer sacrifice is also emphasized. We find this described again, at the beginning of chapter 3: "Priests, while being taken from among men and appointed for men in the things that appertain to God that they may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins, live with the rest of men as with brothers." We can find the newness in comparison with Trent in so far as the vital unity is emphasized and the common life of the whole Church, at the heart of which the classical vision is located.

How much more can we be surprised to read at the beginning of chapter 2, which speaks of the concrete problems of priests:

"Priests as collaborators with the bishops have as their first duty that of announcing to all the Gospel of God (4)." Here with great emphasis the primacy of the word or the ministry of preaching is taught. The question arises: what is the relation between the two affirmations, i.e. "they are established to offer sacrifices and gifts" and "the first duty (*primum officium*) is that of announcing the Gospel (*evangelium evangelizandi*)"?

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

To find a response we must first ask: What does evangelization really mean? What happens? What is the Gospel? Above all: to establish the primacy of preaching, the Council certainly could have appealed to the Gospels. For example, I think of the brief but meaningful episode recounted in the Gospel of Mark: the Lord, sought out by all on account of his miraculous power, retires to the desert to pray (Mark 1: 35-39). Sought out by Peter and those who were with him, the Lord says to them: "let us go to the other towns and preach to them for I came for this" (Mark 1:38). It is the announcement of the kingdom of God which Jesus indicates as the true goal of his coming. This should be the determining priority for all his ministers: they come to announce the kingdom of God, that is, to make the living, powerful and present God the priority of their lives. Already from this brief passage two complementary perspectives emerge for a correct understanding of this priority: such an announcement proceeds on an equal footing with Jesus' personal recollection in personal prayer. Such prayer is the source of the preaching. It is also joined with the "expelling the demons" (Mark 1: 39); it means: preaching is not just speaking, but that it is at the same time efficacious action. It does not take place in a beautiful and healthy world, but in a world dominated by demons; for this reason Jesus' announcement of the kingdom means he implants freedom in the midst of this world.

We should however move forward and keep in mind not just the brief passage, but the whole Gospel in order to understand well the priority of Jesus. He announces the kingdom of God; he does this above all with parables and under the form of signs in which the kingdom, as a

present power, draws near to men. Words and signs are inseparable. Wherever the signs are interpreted only as wonders, without grasping their content as revelation, Jesus interrupts his activity. Nor does he consider his preaching merely an intellectual activity, or even material for discussion. His word demands a decision, creates a reality. In this way it is an incarnate word; the reciprocity of word and signs manifests a "sacramental" structure.

We have to take another step forward. Jesus does not communicate content that is independent of his person as does a master or a storyteller. He is more than a rabbi. With the process of his preaching one realized that, in the parables He is speaking of himself, that the "kingdom" and his person are to be taken together, that the kingdom comes in his person. The decision demanded by Him is a decision on our relation with him, a decision Peter had to make saying "You are the Christ" (Mark 8: 29). Finally, Jesus' Paschal Mystery, his destiny of death and resurrection appeared as the content of his preaching of the kingdom of God; it comes to the fore particularly in the parable of the murderous vine tenders (Mark 12:1-11). The parable and the reality are interwoven in a new way: the parable arouses the ire of the adversaries, who do what was told about them. They kill the son. This means: the parables would be empty without the living person of the Incarnate Son who came (Mark 1:38), who was sent by the Father (Mark 12:6). We would be empty without the confirmation of the word of the cross and of the resurrection. Now we understand that the preaching of Jesus should be called "sacramental" in a deeper meaning than what we saw before: his word bears in itself the reality of the Incarnation and theme of the Cross and the resurrection. And in this deep way, word and action are combined. It indicates the reciprocity of preaching and Eucharist for the Church, but also of preaching and witness that is lived and suffered.

Starting with the Paschal vision, as we find it in the Gospel of John, we should move forward. "Jesus is the Christ," is what Peter said. Jesus Christ is the Logos, John now adds. He is the eternal Word of the Father, who is with God and who is God (John 1:1). In him the Word became flesh and came to dwell among us (John 1:14). In Christian preaching we do not just deal with words, but with the word, with the Word. "For this reason, if we speak of the ministry of the Word, the intra-Trinitarian relationship is also understood." Rightly then we notice the fundamental difference between the preaching of Jesus and the lessons of the rabbis consisted in this: that the "I" of Jesus, that is Himself, is at the center of his message. At the same time we should not forget that Jesus considered characteristic of his preaching the fact that he did not speak "in his own name" (John 5:43; cf John 7:16): his "I," open to the "Thou" of his Father, is not closed in on itself, but bears the whole dynamic of Trinitarian relations. This means for the Christian preacher, that he does not speak of himself, but he becomes the voice of Christ, to make way for the Logos and lead to communion with the living God by means of communion with the man Jesus.

We can return to the decree of Vatican II on priestly ministry. Speaking of the various kinds of preaching, the document makes a constant point: the priest should never teach his own wisdom, but what is important is always the Word of God which urges to truth and holiness (4). Being formed in accord with the word of St. Paul, the ministry of the word demands of the priest that he die spiritually to self: "It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Here I am reminded of an episode connected with the beginnings of *Opus Dei*. A young woman had the chance to be present at the conferences of Josemaria Escriva, founder of Opus Dei. She was very curious to hear the famous speaker. After participating in Mass with him — she said this later — she did not want to listen to an earthly speaker, but only to recognize the word and the will of God. The ministry of the word demands of the priest a participation in the *kenosis* of Christ, his living and dying in Christ. The fact that he does not speak of himself, but bears the message of another, does not mean in any way a personal indifference, but the opposite: to lose oneself in Christ entails truly finding oneself and being in communion with the Word of God in person. The Paschal structure of "no longer I" and yet of my true "I" shows how in the end the ministry of the Word, above and beyond all

the functional, penetrates one's being and supposes the priesthood as a sacrament.

DEVELOPMENT IN THE TRADITION (AUGUSTINE)

Because we have reached the central issue, I want to develop it with two sets of images taken from the works of St. Augustine; we are dealing with images taken from the meditation of the Biblical word, which has also influenced the dogmatic tradition of the Catholic Church. Above all, we find the designation of the priest as the servant of God or of Christ (*servus Dei* or *servus Christi*). Behind this expression of the servant of Christ, taken from the ecclesiastical language of the time, is the Christological hymn of the letter to the Philippians (2:5-11): Christ, the Son equal to God, took the condition of a servant, became a servant for us. Here we shall pass over the profound theology of freedom and of service, that Augustine advances under this heading. What is important for our discussion is the fact that the concept of "servant" is a relational concept. One is a servant in relation to another. If the priest is defined as the servant of Jesus Christ, this means that his existence is essentially defined as relational: being ordered to the service of the Lord constitutes the essence of his ministry, which then reaches into his own existence. He is the servant of Christ in order to be the servant of men, beginning with him, through him and with him. His being in relation with Christ is not opposed to his being ordered to the service of the community (of the Church), but it is the basis which alone gives it its depth. To be in relation with Christ means to be inserted into his existence as servant and to be with him at the service of his "body" that is the Church. The priest because he belongs to Christ, belongs in a radical way to men. He would not be able to be dedicated to them with a deep and absolute dedication if it weren't in this way. This means that the ontological conception of the priesthood, reaching into the being of the interested person, is not opposed to the seriousness of the functional activity of the social aspect of the priesthood, but rather creates a radicalness in serving which would be unthinkable in a purely profane activity.

The concept of "servant" is connected with the image of the "indelible character" that belongs to the heritage of faith of the Church. In the language of late antiquity, the word *character* designed the brand that was impressed on a person's property, an object, an animal or even a person, in a way that could never be canceled. The property is identified in an irrevocable way and the legal principle *clamat ad Dominum* (calls for its owner) comes into play. One could say: "character" means ownership impressed upon the essence. In this way the image of the character expresses again the relative being which refers to another, of which we have just spoken. We deal with a kind of belonging that cannot be tampered with; the initiative comes from the owner: from Christ. The nature of the sacrament is manifested: I cannot declare myself to belong to the Lord. He should above all take me as his own; only then can I enter into the state of being assumed, in order to accept on my part and try to live it. In this way then the word "character" describes the ontological character of the service of Christ which we find in the priesthood, and at the same time, clarifies what we mean by its sacramentality. Only then can we understand why St. Augustine described the character functionally (and at the same time ontologically) as the *jus dandi*, i.e. the necessary condition for the valid administration of the sacraments. Belonging to the Lord who became a servant is to belong to those who are his own. This means that now the servant can, under the sacred sign, give what he can never give by his own power: in fact, he can give the Holy Spirit, absolve from sins, make present both the sacrifice of Christ in his body and blood; all rights reserved to God, that no man can procure of himself, nor can they be delegated to him by any community. If the character is the expression of the communion in service, it also manifests that always ultimately it is the Lord himself who acts and that He acts in the visible Church through men. The character guarantees the "validity" of the sacrament even in the case of an unworthy minister, being at the same time a judgment on him and a stimulus to live the sacrament.

A further word about a second set of images, with which St. Augustine tried to explain to himself and to the faithful, the nature of priestly service. It came to him from his meditation on the person of John the Baptist in whom he found prefigured the ministry of the priest. He observed that in the New Testament, John is designated with an expression taken from Isaiah as the voice, while, in the Gospel of John, Christ is called the Word. The relation between the voice (*Vox*) and the Word (*Verbum*) helps to clarify the relation between Christ and the priest. The word exists in the heart before it can be expressed outwardly by means of the voice. Then by means of the voice it can be perceived by the other and is made present to his heart, without depriving the one who speaks of his word. The external sound, i.e. the voice, which bears the word from one to the other (or others) passes. The word remains. It is the priest's task to be the voice for the Word: "He must increase and I must decrease." The only meaning of the voice is to transmit the Word, and then disappear. This example explains the greatness as well as the humility of the priestly ministry: like John the Baptist the priest is only the precursor, servant of the Word and minister of the word. The listener is not taken up with him but with the Other. But the priest is the voice, "vox," in his entire existence; it is his mission to become the voice for the word and it is in this radical reference to the other that he participates in the greatness of the mission of John the Baptist, even in the mission of the Logos himself. It is in this line that Augustine designates the priest as the friend of the Spouse (John 3:29), who does not appropriate to himself the spouse, but like the friend shares in the joy of the wedding: The Lord has made a friend of his servant (John 15:15), and he now belongs to the home and remains at home — from servant he has become a free man (Galatians 4:7; 4:21-5:1).

CHRISTOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY:

THE ECCLESIAL CHARACTER OF THE PRIESTHOOD

We have spoken of the Christological character of the priesthood, which is always a Trinitarian character, because the Son, of his nature, proceeds from the Father and returns to Him. He communicates himself in the Holy Spirit who is love and therefore the gift in person. But then the Conciliar decree emphasizes in a subsequent passage the ecclesial character of the ministry which can never be separated from its Trinitarian-Christological foundation. The Incarnation of the Word means that God did not simply wish to come, by means of the Spirit, directly into the human spirit but sought him out by means of the material world wishing to touch him as social and historical being. God wishes to come to men through other men. God has come to men in this way so that they could find one another by means of him and beginning with him. For this reason the Incarnation implies the communion and historicity of the faith. To take the path of the body means that the reality of time and of human society become factors in the relations of men with God, which in turn are based on the antecedent relation of God with men. Christology and ecclesiology are inseparable: the action of God creates the "People of God," and the "People of God" become through Christ the "Body of Christ," according to the profound interpretation that Paul in the letter to the Galatians, gives of the promise made to Abraham. This promise — so Paul reads in the Old Testament — applies to the seed of Abraham, i.e. not to many, but to only one. The action of God brings together the many to make them not just "one thing" but "One," in physical communion with Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16:28).

The Council from the close connections between Christology and ecclesiology, can derive the impact on secular history of the Christ-event which priests are called to serve. Our final goal to which we tend is to achieve happiness. But happiness does not just consist of being together, but only the infinity of love makes possible our being together. Happiness only exists in being open to the divine, that is to divinization. In this way the Council says with Augustine, the end

of history is that mankind should become love: mankind will become adoration, living worship, the city of God, *civitas Dei*. In this way we realize the deep desire of all creation "that God be all in all."³ Only in this perspective can we understand what worship and the sacraments are.

The vision which directs to the last things, the end of history, leads us to the very concrete: because things are just as they are, Christian faith is never purely interior and spiritual, nor a subjective, personal and private relationship with Christ and His word, but is completely concrete and ecclesial. For this reason the Council, maybe in a way that was somewhat forced, emphasizes the bond priests have with their bishop: they represent him and act in his name and with his mission. Christian obedience which reverses Adam's disobedience, is made concrete in ecclesial obedience, which for the priest is the obedience he owes his bishop. Certainly, the Council could have insisted more on the fact that first comes the obedience of all to the Word of God and to the presentation of the living tradition of the Church. This common bond is also the common freedom; it protects from arbitrariness and guarantees the authentically Christological character of ecclesial obedience. Ecclesial obedience is not positivist; it is not directed simply to a formal authority, but to him, who obedient himself, personifies the obedient Christ.

3 I Corinthians 15:28; *Presbyterorum Ordinis (Decree on Priestly Life and Mission)* 2,42-55; Augustine, *The City of God* X, 6.

Obedience is clearly independent of the virtue and holiness of him who is charged with an office, because it refers to the objectivity of the faith given by the Lord, which overcomes every subjectivity. In this way, in the obedience to the bishop there is always a going beyond the local church, it is a Catholic obedience: one obeys the bishop because he represents in this place the entire universal Church. It is an obedience, extending beyond the historical moment to the totality of the history of the faith. It is founded on all that has taken place in the *communio sanctorum*, and is open to the future, in which God will be all in all and we will become one people. From this point of view the pressing need of obedience is serious and urgent for him who represents authority. This does not mean that obedience is only conditional: it is very concrete. I do not obey Jesus whom others and I have invented from the Scriptures: in such a case I would obey my favorite ideas and in the image of Jesus I have created, I would adore myself. No. To obey Christ means to obey His Body, to obey Him in His body. From the letter to the Philippians, the obedience of Jesus as the overcoming of Adam's disobedience is at the heart of the history of salvation. In priestly life, the obedience should be incarnate as obedience to the authority of the Church, concretely, to the bishop. This is the only way to avoid realistically the idolatry of oneself. Only in this way will Adam be overcome in us and give way to a new humanity. In a time in which emancipation is considered the essence of redemption and freedom seems to be the right to do anything I want, the concept of obedience has been practically put under an anathema. It has been eliminated not only from our vocabulary but also from our thought. It is the concept of freedom that provokes the inability to belong together, the inability to love. It makes man a slave. For this reason obedience well understood has to be reestablished and once again has to be emphasized at the core of Christian and priestly spirituality.

SPIRITUAL APPLICATIONS

Where Christology is well understood in a Trinitarian and pneumatological way which is also

ecclesial, the passage to spirituality, to a faith that is lived, takes place automatically. The Conciliar decree — we have seen that the dogmatic foundation was already established in the Constitution on the Church — is dedicated in a special way to this aspect with many concrete indications. I would like to set out only one thought. In n. 14 the decree speaks of the difficult problem of the interior unity of his life that the priest has to deal with when he is faced with a great number of different tasks; it is a problem which, with the continuing decline in the number of priests, threatens to become ever more the real crisis of priestly existence. A pastor today, who is in charge of three or four parishes, and always on the move from one place to the other, a situation that the missionaries know well, is becoming more the norm for the countries of ancient Christianity. The priest, who must try to guarantee the celebration of the sacraments in the communities, is tormented by administrative duties, is challenged by the complexity of every kind of question, and is aware of the difficulties of persons that he does not even have the time to contact. Torn between the variety of activities, the priest becomes drained and finds fewer opportunities for the recollection, which would give him the new energy and inspiration. Externally stretched and interiorly drained, he loses the joy of his vocation, which in the end he feels to be an unbearable burden. There is nothing left but flight. The Council offered three suggestions to master the situation. The foundation is an intimate communion with Christ whose food was to do the will of the Father (John 4:34). It is important that the ontological union with Christ abide in the conscience and in action: all that I do, I am doing in communion with Him. By doing it, I am with Him. All my activities, no matter how varied and often externally divergent constitute only one vocation: to be together with Christ acting as an instrument in communion with Him.

From this comes the second suggestion: priestly asceticism should not be placed alongside pastoral activity, as if it were an added burden, a further task that goes to encumber my day. It is in the action that I learn to overcome myself, to give and receive my life: in the delusion and failure I learn to forsake myself, to accept sorrow and to be detached from myself. In the joy of the success I learn gratitude. In the celebration of the sacraments, I am interiorly benefited. In fact, I do not perform an external work but I speak with Christ, and through Christ with the Trinity, and I pray with other and for others. The asceticism of the ministry, the ministry itself as an asceticism in my life, is doubtless an important element which requires a continuous, conscious exercise and an interior conformity of being and action.

A third element is indispensable. Even if we try to live service as the asceticism and sacramental activity as a personal meeting with Christ, we need moments of rest, so that the interior direction can be truly realized. The Conciliar decree states that priests will not attain it unless they penetrate more deeply with their lives into the mystery of Christ. Saint Charles Borromeo drawing on his experience offers sound advice. The priest, if he wishes to live a priestly life, should use the proper means: pray, fast and avoid both bad company and dangerous liberties. "If the tiniest spark of divine love has been lit in you, then do not throw it away nor expose it to the icy wind... Keep your mind fixed on God is your task the care of souls? Do not neglect your own care and do not spend yourself on others so completely that you have nothing left for yourself You have to look after the souls you have been put in charge of, but not to the extent that you forget your own... When you administer the sacraments, meditate on what you are doing. If you celebrate Mass, meditate on what it is you are offering. If you recite the psalms in choir, meditate on whom you are speaking to and what you are saying to him. If you guide souls, meditate on whose blood has washed them...." The expression "meditate," occurring four times already, shows how essential it is for this great pastor of souls that there be a spiritual foundation for our action. We also know how generously St. Charles gave himself to his people. Worn out by his dedication to the pastoral ministry, St. Charles died at forty six. Such a person, who was truly consumed for Christ and drawing on Christ, for the people, teaches us that such a dedication is not possible without the discipline and the support of a true spirituality of faith. Here we have to learn something again. In the last ten years or so, the interior life, spirituality has been suspected as an escape into the

intimate and the private. But a ministry without a spirituality becomes empty activism. Not a few priests who began their mission with the greatest idealism, ended in failure because of the hesitation about spirituality. To take time for God, to be personally and interiorly before Him is a pastoral priority that is of equal or even greater importance than other priorities. This is not an added burden, but the breath of the soul without which we necessarily remain out of breath; we are deprived of our spiritual breath, of the breath of the Holy Spirit within us. Other activities are appropriate and necessary for our spiritual recovery, but the fundamental way of recovery from our activity and the way to love it again is the interior search for the face of God which always restores to us the joy of God. One of the humble and in his humility great pastors of our century, Fr. Didimo Mantiero (1912-1992) of Bassano del Grappa noted in his spiritual diary: "Converts are always the result of the prayer and sacrifice of unknown faithful. Christ gained souls not with the power of his marvelous word but with the power of his constant prayer. By day he preached and by night he prayed." Souls, that is living human beings, cannot be attracted to God only with persuasion or discussion. They want to be conquered by means of prayer, by God for God. Christian spirituality is the most important pastoral activity. In our pastoral planning this aspect should be taken into greater consideration. Finally, we should learn again that we have less need of discussion and greater need of prayer.

A LOOK AHEAD:

THE UNITY IN CHRIST OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

To conclude I want to return again to the problems I mentioned in the introduction: Starting with the New Testament, what does the priesthood in the Church mean? First, does it exist? Or is the Reformers' complaint correct that the Church betrayed the newness of the Christian event, and making nothing of Christ's turning point, made a priest out of the presbyter? Shouldn't she have remained strictly faithful to the function of the elder, without any sacralizing or sacramentalizing? For a correct answer to this question, it is not enough to do the terminological research on the concepts of presbyter and *hiereus (sacerdos)* that were at first separate and later on are united. One has to move to a greater depth, and here we have the whole issue of the relation between the Old and the New Testaments. Does the New Testament substantially represent a clean break with the past or a fulfillment in which all, even if transformed, is represented and, in being renewed, preserved? Is grace opposed to the law or does there exist an internal relationship between the two?

Historically, we have begun by noting that in the year 70 AD, the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed and with it the entire sector of sacrifice and of priesthood, which in a certain way was the heart of the "law," disappeared. Judaism sought to preserve what was lost applying now the prescriptions of the holiness of the Temple to Jewish life in general. It anchored the lost legacy of the Temple in its spirituality in the form of prayerful hope for the reestablishment of worship in Jerusalem. The synagogue, which was no more than a meeting place for prayer, for preaching and listening to the word, is a fragment that awaits something greater. But a strictly Protestant interpretation of Christian ministry and worship reduces Christianity to the image of the synagogue, a meeting, preaching and prayer. The historicist interpretation of the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice locks up the sacrifice and the worship in the past and excludes from the present both the sacrifice and the priesthood. In the meantime, in the Churches that came from the Reformation, one realizes that they lose an appreciation of the greatness and depth of the event of the New Testament. In fact, the Old Testament would not be fulfilled. In Christ's resurrection the temple is rebuilt by the power of God (John 2:19). The living Temple, Christ, is himself the new sacrifice which continues in the Body of Christ, the Church. Starting with the sacrifice, in reference to it, we have the

authentic priestly ministry of the new worship, in which all the figures find their fulfillment.

So we have to reject a conception, that in reference to worship and priesthood, supposes a clear break with the pre-Christian history of salvation, by denying any relationship between the priesthood of the Old and that of the New Testament. In such a case the New Testament would not be a fulfillment, but a contrast with the Old Testament. The inner unity of the history of salvation would be destroyed. By means of the sacrifice of Christ and of its acceptance in the resurrection, the whole cultic and priestly patrimony of the Old Testament was entrusted to the Church. It is the fullness of the Christian "yes" which must be brought forward to avoid a reduction of the Church to the synagogue. It is only in this way that we will understand the fullness and depth of the ministry of apostolic succession. In this way, we should say, without shame or excuse, but with great joy and decisiveness: yes, the priesthood of the Church is the continuation and revival of the priesthood of the Old Testament, which finds its true accomplishment in the radical and transforming newness. Such a vision is important for the relationship of Christianity with the other world religions. To the extent that Christianity is a new beginning, the greater and totally other reality which comes from God, nonetheless it cannot be leveled to a pure negation of human searching. The movement of a temporary nature that is expressed in these religions, no matter how distorted and deformed it may be, is not without value. Such a conception of the priesthood does not downplay the priesthood of the baptized. This is what Augustine pointed out in an elegant way when he called all the faithful the "servants of God" while calling the priests the "servants of the servants" and, from the point of view of their mission, called the faithful their masters. The priesthood of the New Testament is located in the following of Christ who washed the disciples' feet: its greatness exists only in its humility. Greatness and humble service are closely related from when Christ, the greatest, became the least, from when He who is the first took the last place. To be a priest means to enter into the community of those who make themselves small in order to share in the common glory of the redemption.

