Catholic UPDATE

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Sacrament of HOLY ORDERS

TOM VOGEL

PRIESTHOOD in Transition

by Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., Th.D.

"Is it harder to be a priest today than it used to be?" A parishioner who was wondering why there are fewer priests these days asked me this question recently. I don't know if being a priest is *harder* than it used to be, but I do know that it is certainly *different*.

I will not try to explain why there are fewer priests today—although this issue concerns me greatly. I was ordained in 1966 and for most of the past 30-some years I worked to "make priests"—mainly by teaching in seminaries. In this *Update*, I will simply give my personal reflections on how our understanding of the Catholic priesthood is in transition.

Sacramental 'family'

To understand what is happening to the Sacrament of Holy Orders today I suggest that we first look at the changes we Catholics have experienced in the other sacraments—especially the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Reconciliation.

All seven sacraments are part of one sacramental reality or system. In any system, when one element changes we can expect changes in others. Think of your family: When a baby is born into a family, older children can become jealous and feel displaced. When an elderly parent can no longer live alone and moves in with you, more things change than simply bedrooms and bathroom schedules. Or think of your body as a system. A brisk walk not only exercises your feet and your legs, but also helps you feel good all over. When one part of your body is injured (a hand, an eye, a tooth), your whole body is affected.

The Body of Christ, the Church, is a system of sacramental relationships. If we change one sacrament, the other sacraments will also be affected.

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Baptism renewed

A Catholic can hardly be unaware of the changes that have taken place in the Sacrament of Baptism during the past 30 years. We see catechumens being dismissed after the homily. Infants are being baptized during Sunday Eucharist. Baptismal pools are replacing holy water fonts. These external ritual and architectural changes are an indication of a deeper, internal change—a change in our understanding of the role and meaning of Baptism.

Since Vatican II, we have come to a new appreciation of the power and the effects of Baptism. No one can be baptized and not have a role to play in the Church. Baptism and discipleship go together. Jesus says, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit..." (Mt 28:19).

The disciples of Christ—today as in biblical times—are entrusted with carrying on the mission and ministry of Christ. As the community came to see Christ as the priest of the New Covenant, it also came to understand that every baptized Christian shares in that ministry also. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the "whole community of believers is, as such, priestly" (#1546).

We call this priesthood which is shared by all the baptized "the common priesthood of all the faithful" (*Catechism,* #1547); the priesthood resulting from the Sacrament of Holy Orders is called the "ministerial priesthood."

The fact that we are all priests is not a new idea—it is as old as the Scriptures: "...Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 2:5). But if our common priesthood is not new, the importance given to it certainly is.

This new emphasis given to Baptism and the common priesthood of all the faithful has caused a flowering of ministries in the Church. In parishes around the world we now see Christians serving as readers, Communion ministers, spiritual directors, catechists, liturgists, ministers to the sick, directors of religious education, parish managers.

Now that nonordained Christians are exercising these ministries once reserved for the ordained, many Catholics are asking what the difference is between the common priesthood of all the faithful (the priesthood of Baptism) and the ministerial priesthood (the priesthood of Holy Orders). If we are all priests why do we need an ordained priesthood? Vatican II did not answer this very important (and difficult) question.

Vatican II said that the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood of the ordained are "essentially different" from one another (*Constitution on the Church*, #10), but the Council left the explanation of this essential difference to theologians. The meaning of this "essential difference" is currently under much discussion.

Eucharist and community

We are all aware of the changes that have taken place in the Mass since Vatican II. These changes have affected the role of the ordained priest.

When I was a child, it was very clear to me who was a priest and who was not. Priests were ordained. They were the ones who did all the important things: They said Mass, heard confessions and administered the sacraments. They knew all the answers; they could talk out loud in Church. It was obvious to me that I was destined to become a priest—I thought I knew all the answers and I always found it difficult not to talk in Church!

Today it seems that no one knows all the answers and everyone talks in Church. Together we all pray the Mass, sing the hymns and respond to the prayers. Today no one would consider the Mass to be the private affair of the priest, the one with special powers to consecrate. But if we all celebrate the Eucharist, what is it that the ordained priest does that others cannot?

On those days when no priest is available to celebrate the Eucharist many Catholics have experienced a Communion service. An unordained minister distributes Communion with hosts consecrated previously. Seeing the difference between Eucharist and a Communion service we begin to see that Mass is much more than simply the words of consecration.

If consecration alone were the issue, we would really need only one priest (perhaps the pope himself) who could daily, or weekly, say the words of consecration over an appropriate quantity of hosts, and the Eucharist could then be shipped to Catholics worldwide!

Today when Catholics talk about the role of the priest at Mass they are referring to more than the consecration: They are usually discussing the way he preaches and presides. Eucharist is a complex ritual action at which we gather, first, to hear the word of God proclaimed in Scriptures, prayers and homily. The priest's role is vital in all these actions.

The Sacrament of Holy Orders enables the priest to speak in the name of the whole community. Just as your hand can write a signature and it binds your whole body, or your mouth can give "your word" which binds your whole person, the priest can speak in the name of the whole Body. He is ordained to say prayers to which we can all respond "Amen." Because of Holy Orders the priest "possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself" (*Catechism,* #1548).

Each time we gather for the Eucharist, we hear the words "Do this in memory of me." By these words Jesus commands us not only to bless and share the bread as he did, but to "live as he lived." His mission is now our mission.

Consequently, the Second Vatican Council, in *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (#4), and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1564) teach that the first task of the priest is "to preach the gospel." Preaching the gospel has assumed an importance in the life and self-identity of a priest that it did not have in the years before Vatican II.

Reconciliation is key

When I was ordained, the identity of the priest was closely associated with Confession. The priest was the one who had the power to say with the voice of Christ, "I absolve you from your sins." During those first years as an ordained priest I spent more time in the course of a week hearing confessions than I did saying Mass. Each Saturday long lines of penitents approached the confessional. Today, in most parishes, those lines have disappeared.

No one who listens attentively to the

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prayers of the Eucharist can fail to miss the numerous references to the forgiveness of sins. Is it mere coincidence that the long lines for Saturday Confession have decreased at the same time that the lines for holy Communion have increased? The Eucharist, which Vatican II reminds us is the source and summit of the Church's activity, is the primary sacrament of reconciliation (see *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #10).

The forgiveness of sins is seen today in the context of the mission of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. On nearly every page of the Gospels we see Jesus healing, forgiving and reconciling. After his resurrection he appears to the disciples and gives them his Spirit—the Spirit of pardon and peace—and says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you..." (Jn 20:21).

Reconciliation—striving for communion with God and one another—is the primary ministry of the Church; it is not merely something the priest does for a few minutes on Saturday afternoon.

No one needs to be reminded of the crucial role reconciliation plays in contemporary society. The prevalence of racism, sexism, nationalism and consumerism indicates the need for reconciliation in our world, in our country, in our local community—even in our parish.

If we are to be a sacrament—a visible sign—of reconciliation, we must actively pursue those works of justice and mercy that will make this reconciliation possible. The parish must see the priest himself as a reconciling person. Otherwise, parishioners will not see him as an icon of the forgiving Christ in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

New Testament job description

It should not be surprising if the changes we have experienced in the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Reconciliation have brought about major changes in our understanding of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Today, the question "What is a priest?" is not an easy question to answer.

Usually with questions such as this we can turn to the New Testament and ask, what does Jesus say about priesthood? What did the early Christian communities expect of their priests? Scripture does not provide an easy answer in this regard. For while there are many different ministries mentioned in the New Testament—teachers, prophets, healers, preachers, evangelists, shepherds—there is no mention of priests in the modern sense.

When the first Christians (who were Jews for the most part) thought of priests and sacrifice, they thought of their Levitical priests and the Temple sacrifices in Jerusalem (see Mk 1:44; Mt 8:4) and pagan priests from surrounding regions. In the Christian community we find no individual set apart as mediator between the community and God. Christians did not need a priest in this sense. Jesus himself fulfilled this role: "For there is....one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus" (1 Tm 2:5). There was no longer any need for a priest "to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he [Christ] did that once for all when he offered himself" (Hb 7:27).

By the same token we do not find any reference to lay ministry in the New Testament. Jesus did select some disciples and make them apostles, giving them a special mission in relation to the rest of the community. What these apostles did or what made them different from the other disciples is not clear in the New Testament. But we know that this apostolic ministry continues in the Church today. "Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church....It includes three degrees: episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate" (*Catechism*, #1536).

Originally "episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate" referred to secular offices in Greek society. *Episcopos* means "overseer" or "leader"; *presbyter* means "elder" or "adviser"; and *diaconos* means "minister" (as in civil government today we might speak of the minister of finance or the minister of education). We cannot find any distinct job description for these three offices in early Christian writings; it seems that their function varied from place to place. Early Christians used the terms somewhat interchangeably.

But as often happened in the history of the Church, time and pastoral experience have drawn uniformity from original diversity. By the third or fourth century the variety of ministries mentioned in the New Testament was assumed into the ministry of leadership. The *episcopos*, or bishop, became the primary minister.

The bishop exercised his ministry with the help of a council of elders (presbyters) who were his co-workers. Their principal function was to advise the bishop. They shared his responsibility for the local Church and sometimes stood in for him when he was absent. The bishop also had the help of deacons who were responsible for specific ministries, for example, assistance to widows and orphans, care of the sick, finances, education and administration. This threefold ministry continues today.

As the Christian community grew and became distinct from Judaism, it defended and explained its rituals in contemporary terms of the day. Christians gathered for the "Breaking of the Bread" and saw this sacred meal to be the sacrament of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Those who presided at this sacrifice—bishops and especially presbyters—came to be called "priests." Their function began to be seen as similar to the Jewish Levitical priesthood.

By the end of the third century the community leader was seen as a sacred person, one set apart to offer sacrifice on behalf of the faithful. The Orders of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons became Sacred Orders.

From then until the time of Vatican II, Holy Orders was identified almost exclusively with the second of these three degrees: the presbyterate.

Apart or among?

I believe that this idea of being sacred or set apart is at the very heart of today's discussions on the role of a priest. When I was ordained in 1966, a priest was defined as someone set apart from other Catholics. Priests wear special clothing (clerical black); we live in a special house (a rectory); we have a special life-style (celibacy).

Today most Catholics I encounter are not especially concerned about these things. They want their priest to be one of them, someone living in the midst of their world—not someone set apart. They expect the priest to know their joys and their sorrows, their trials and their pain. The priest is expected to know how difficult it is to raise children, what it is to fear losing a job or face an addiction.

Speaking personally, I have found that parishioners want me to know how hard they work for their money. They expect me to preach about these things so that I can bring the gospel to their everyday experience. They want a priest who can pray with their voice, the voice of the Church. Vatican II, in its decree on the life of priests, tells me that "priests have been placed in the midst of the laity so that they may lead them all to the unity of charity..." (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, #9).

I find that it is not always easy to be both set apart *and* in the midst.

UPDATE

Question Box

1. **How has your understanding of priesthood changed? Why?**
2. **What qualities do you look for in a priest?**
3. **In what ways do you support your parish priest?**

In this world *and* the next

It might help to look at these distinctions from an even broader perspective. What Catholics expect of a priest is related to what they expect of religion in general. When I was a child, religion seemed more concerned with the next life than with this one. This life was mainly a proving ground or training camp for the next life. Life on earth was an exile. True life and religion were focused on heaven, not earth.

Yet this life is where we first encounter God. Today our bishops are writing pastoral letters on the economy and world peace and a multitude of social issues. As Vatican II put it, "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (*Church in the Modern World*, #1).

Parishioners expect me, as a priest, to be engaged in this world. As parishioners see me up close it becomes more evident to them that sometimes my words come from Christ and other times they come from my own ignorance, prejudice and even sometimes from my sinfulness. Reconciliation between people of different social and economic classes, races, religions, political parties is a difficult if not impossible task. Yet I am instructed by the Second Vatican Council that the priest has the task of "bringing about agreement among divergent outlooks in such a way that nobody may feel a stranger in the Christian community" (*Priests*, #9).

Ministry becomes the place in which the priest encounters the Holy Spirit. I am a better preacher when I know the congregation's hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. Living in the midst of the parish—visiting homes, attending wedding receptions, helping build a house—these are not distractions from prayer but are the source of my prayer. The parish is the sacrament, the window, through which the priest views God.

The tension between being set apart and living in the midst is perhaps a reflection of the tension between the Sacraments of Holy Orders and Baptism. As the Church passes from century to century, each age discovers a way to synthesize this tension.

St. Augustine spoke of it in this way during the fourth century: "The day I became a bishop, a burden was laid on my shoulders....Indeed, it terrifies me to think that I could take more pleasure in the honor attached to my office, which is where its danger lies, than in your salvation, which ought to be its fruit. This is why being set above you fills me with alarm, whereas being with you gives me comfort. Danger lies in the first; salvation in the second" (Sermon 340 [see Liturgy of the Hours, September 19]).

In these difficult times we might do well to learn from St. Augustine. He spoke of the dangers inherent in being set above others and the salvation that comes from our common Baptism. Today, we do well to understand the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the ordained priesthood within the context of the priesthood which we all share in virtue of our Baptism. ■

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