

ARTICLES

The Identity of the Ministerial Priest According to John Paul II

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Who am I? What is asked of me? What is my identity? These are the questions¹ asked by John Paul II in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, when he ordained seventy nine deacons to the priesthood in 1980.² No doubt, the answers to these questions will help us understand the being of the ministerial priest. They will surely clarify the concept of "priestly identity" which was blurred "by the whirlwind of changes in modern life, both in the field of ideas and above all in the practical, active, and social field."³ But the answers to these queries are not found in sociology

¹The same questions were asked by Pope Paul VI in his address to the priests of Rome and the Lenten preachers on February 17, 1972. In fact, the homily of John Paul II in Rio de Janeiro during the Ordination Mass (July 2, 1980) follows closely the above-mentioned address of Pope Paul VI. Cf. "Priests Identity Found in Christ: Pope Paul VI to the Lenten Preachers and Clergy of Rome," February 17, 1972, *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1972), pp. 218-228).

²John Paul II, "Homily of Ordination of Priests," Rio de Janeiro, July 2, 1980, *Osservatore Romano*, Weekly English Edition (July 14, 1980), pp. 9; 18-19. From here on *Osservatore Romano* will be cited simply as *OR*.

³John Paul II is of the opinion that the appearance of the term "priestly identity" in the documents of the Synod of Bishops of 1971 reflects the opinions and assertions of the assemblies and publications of the post-conciliar epoch. It also reflects the personalistic tendencies of the late sixties and early seventies. Cf. Karol Wojtyła, "La sainteté sacerdotale come carte d'identité," *Seminarium*, 30 (1978), p. 168.

⁴Pope Paul VI, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-219. See also The Synod of Bishops, 1971, *On the Ministerial Priesthood*. In particular, the introductory part gives a "description of the situation" which challenges the very identity of the ministerial priests.

or in psychology. John Paul II believes that the answers are found in faith, in Christ Jesus himself.

It is certainly not in the sciences of human behavior, not in socio-religious statistics, that we shall seek our answer, but in Christ, in the Faith. We will humbly question the Divine Master and ask him who we are, what he wishes us to be, what is, in his eyes, our true identity.'

Faith reveals that the ministerial priest has three fundamental features: he is *called*, he is *consecrated*, and he is *sent*.

L *The Call of Jesus*

The call to be a ministerial priest is a mystery which each and every priest has to accept and to live within the depths of his being. As a gift and a grace, it all depends on the initiative of the divine caller, and its total reality eludes human comprehension. This mysterious call permeates, up to a certain point, the very being of the one called. It is his life. Thus to be called means to receive life and to give it.^o

Specifically, it means to receive life from Christ and to give that life because of Christ. Sometimes it would even demand to give one's life, in imitation of Christ, in order that others may have life. The life of which Christ is concerned about comes from his Father, who is our Father too (Jn 7:1; Mt 6:9). His Father is "the fountain of life" (Ps 35:10), who "in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his

^oJohn Paul II, "Homily at Ordination of Priests," Rio de Janeiro, July 2, 1980, *OR* (July 14, 1980), p. 9. Again, regarding this, part of the Address of Pope Paul VI to the Roman Clergy and the Lenten Preachers reads: "The tendency of our brothers, when they have found themselves in this difficult situation of doubt concerning themselves and the authority of the Church, a tendency per se hypothetically legitimate, but soon transformed into temptation and deviation because of the impossibility of finding a satisfying answer—the tendency has been to seek the definition of the priest's identity in the wrong place, or outside the household of the faith, in the writings of Sociology especially, or of psychology, or in the comparison with Christian Churches separated from Catholic roots, or finally in a humanism which has the axiom: the priest is above all a man, a whole man, like all others . . ." See Pope Paul VI, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

^oJohn Paul H, "Message for XfX World Day of Prayer for Vocations," May 2, 1982, *OR* (April 26, 1982), p. 9. In his address to seminarians and religious in Mexico, Pope John Paul H said: "The good news for him who is called to the service of the People of God, in addition to being a call to change and improve one's own existence is also a call to a life already transformed in Christ, who must be proclaimed and spread." See John Paul H, "Address to Seminarians and Religious," Mexico, January 30, 1979, *OR* (February 19, 1979), p. 4.

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wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe and chose to raise up people to share in his divine life."

Christ is the fullest manifestation of this life which comes from the Father (Jn 1:4). This life, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is constantly being offered to man in the sacraments. All the sacraments **are** for giving life, but among the sacraments, Holy Orders excel because through it, one can intimately share the one priesthood of Christ **who**, out of love for sinful man, offered himself on the cross and continues to offer himself in the Eucharist for the life and salvation of the world, as well as for the increase of the People of God. Thus, "every priestly vocation must **be** understood, accepted and lived as an intimate sharing in this mystery of love, life and fruitfulness."⁸

The call to the ministerial priesthood is one of the calls which actually "corresponds to a limitless measure of love and sacrifice in the total dedication of self to God and the Church." Fundamentally, it is God himself who calls (Jn 15:1). However, it is always Christ directly who permits us to perceive the call to cooperate with him personally in his work of salvation. Sometimes it is also by means of his Church that one can discern this divine calling." This points to a very important aspect of the priestly vocation which is the divine initiative.

John Paul II says that "at the root of every priestly vocation there is not a personal human initiative (with its unavoidable human limitations but instead a mysterious initiative) of God." This is based on several biblical texts. The Letter to the Hebrews states that "Christ did

²Vatican II, *LG*, n. 2.

⁸John Paul II, "Message for the XIX World Day of Prayer for Vocations," May 2, 1982, p. 9.

⁹John Paul H, "Message for ME World Day of Prayer for Vocations," April 24, 1983, *OR* (April 5, 1983), p. 5

"The Apostles were directly called by Christ. St. Mark says: "He called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him" (Mk 3:13). Nowadays, it is the responsibility of the Church to confirm officially the divine call by ordination. John Paul II writes: "The call was at first an inner one, mysterious, caused by various reasons; but then, after the long necessary preparation in the seminary, under the direction of prudent and responsible superiors, it became official, guaranteed, when the Church called us and consecrated us by means of the bishop." See John Paul H, "Address to Priests of Milan," April 21, 1979, *OR* (April 30, 1979), p. 11.

"John Paul II, "Homily in the Cathedral of Nagasaki," February 25, 1981, *OR* (March 9, 1981), p. 17.

not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, 'You are my son'" (Heb 5:5). This is true not only of Christ but also of all priests. Again, the same letter points out: "One does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God" (Heb 5:4). This reality is, of course, expressed by Christ himself when he said "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit . . ." (Jn 15:16).

But divine initiative without a human response is fruitless. The divine call expects a free and deliberate response from man. God does not force anybody to be intimately united with him in his work of salvation. His call is in the form of an invitation. Thus the response should be mature, responsible, and free.

But the divine call — like the one addressed to Mary by the Archangel of the Annunciation — respectfully awaits free and deliberate consent: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). The personal call, therefore, must be illuminated lest the Lord's voice passed unnoticed. It must be encouraged and protected, lest the free response be hindered by interior hesitation or stifled by the difficulty of the world."

Moreover, according to John Paul II, based on Mk 3:13-14,¹⁸ the call given by Jesus has three significant aspects: he called the first priests *individually and by name* (prophetic call), he called them *for mission and service*, and he made them his own *companions* to share his life of unity with the Father."

¹²John Paul II, "Address to Seminarians," Brazil, July 4, 1980, OR, (July 28, 1980), p. 3. John Paul II also told the *vocacionados* (those who feel called to the priesthood or religious life): "The response depends on the generosity of the heart of the one called, because he who calls always leaves freedom of choice: 'If you would . See John Paul II, "Address to Priests and Vocacionados," Brazil, July 5, 1980, OR (July 28, 1980), p. 6.

"The text reads: "He then went up to the mountain and summoned the men he himself had decided on, who came and joined him. He named twelve as his companions who he would send to preach the good news."

"John Paul II, "Address to Priests in Philadelphia," October, 4, 1979, OR (October 29, 1979), p. 1.

a. Prophetic call

The Gospel according to Mark (Mk 3:13-14) situates the priestly call of the Twelve in the tradition of the prophetic call. This prophetic call involves fear, then disturbance or confusion followed by assurance. Fear is a constitutive element of vocation. Man fears because of the awesome responsibility the vocation entails. He fears because he feels unworthy, not only to be God's spokesman, but also to witness to him." On the other hand, the call is irresistible because the person called has been charmed or lured, so to speak, by God. Thus he is disturbed. At the same time he also feels confused because the world and what it has to offer is also alluring. But he has to make a decision. If man's response is "yes" to God's call, God assures. To the prophet Jeremiah he said: "Have no fear . . . because I am with you to deliver you . . .""This requires confidence in God on the part of the one called.

The "yes" made in response to God's call is to be without any reservation. It is a total "yes", a "yes" that is to be given once and for all. It is patterned after the "yes" spoken by Jesus "who was not alternately 'yes' and 'no' (and) was never anything but yes?" It is only on the basis of this total "yes" that the priest can wholeheartedly witness to God among men.

John Paul II points out that based on the prophetic call — the intimate relationship between Christ and his prophet, the priest — certain characteristics of the priesthood emerge.

First of all, priesthood is forever (*Tu es sacerdos in aeternum*). A gift (and priesthood is a gift) once given is not supposed to be returned. Secondly, it is no wonder that the Church continues to offer a celibate service after the example of Christ who was celibate, and who totally gave himself to men by dying on the cross. If God's call had penetrated the very depths of the priest's being, then, he cannot but offer himself totally at the disposal of Christ. And celibacy is the fitting concrete response, the concrete expression of the "yes" of the priest to Christ. Thirdly, since Christ called *men* individually and personally, the *men*, "he himself had decided on," it is the conviction of the Church that only

¹⁵CE Jeremiah 1:5-8.

¹⁶Loc. cit.

¹⁷1 Cor 1:18-19.

human beings belonging to the male gender are to become priests. John Paul II writes:

The fact that there is a personal individual call to the . priesthood given by the Lord to the 'men he himself had decided on' is in accord with the prophetic tradition. It should help us to understand that the Church's traditional decision to call *men* to the priesthood, and not to call *women*, is not a statement about human rights, nor an exclusion of women from holiness and mission in the Church. Rather this decision expresses the conviction of the Church about this particular dimension of the gift of priesthood by which God has chosen to shepherd his flock.'

b. A call for mission and service

The role of the Good Shepherd typifies the pastoral mission of priests. Like Christ the Good Shepherd, the priest is called and chosen and is sent with the mission *of preaching the Gospel*, and in order to give God's people a *shepherd's care*.

To proclaim the Word of God "which resounds ultimately and definitively in Jesus Christ . . . the word of God's love for all men . . .,"¹⁸ is the primary task of the priest. St. Paul wrote to the Romans:

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Faith in the heart leads to justification, confession on the lips to salvation. But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they hear unless there is someone to preach. Scripture says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who announce good news!" . . . Faith, then, comes through hearing, and what is heard is the word of Christ.²⁰

The proclamation of the Gospel is incumbent upon the priest who, through his proclamation, attempts to elicit the response of faith from his hearers. Hopefully, this response would set up the encounter between God and man, and between men themselves, to form the basic

¹⁸John Paul II, "Homily to Priests in Philadelphia," October 4, 1979, *OR*, (October 29, 1979), p. 2.

¹⁸John Paul II, "Address to Priests in Bologna," April 18, 1982, *OR* (May 10, 1982), p. 4.

²⁰Rom 10:9-17.

community of the Church where everyone can grow towards the fullness of life in Christ."

"To give a shepherd's care expresses perfectly the character of Jesus as the "man-for-others." It also expresses adequately the ministry of priests as servants. Priests are called to serve and not to be served, like Christ, who served and "gave his life as a ransom for the many" (Mt 20:25-28). The death of Christ on the cross is the fullest expression of his role as the Good Shepherd. In the same way, the priest, when he celebrates the Eucharist where the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is renewed, imitates Christ in his service.²²

c. A call for companionship

The invitation to follow Christ involves the invitation to have an intimate relationship with him. This is demonstrated by the very nature of the priestly ministry, which is in fact the proclamation of Christ himself and to be of service to others to bring them to Christ. It follows, therefore, that it is necessary for the ministerial priest to know Jesus personally and to be intimately united with him through prayer. John Paul II writes:

The call to priestly service includes an invitation to special intimacy with Christ. The lived experience of priests in every generation has led them to discover in their own lives and ministry the absolute centrality of their personal union with Jesus, of being his companions. No one can effectively bring the good news of Jesus to others unless he himself has first been his constant companion through personal prayer, unless he has learned from Jesus the mystery to be proclaimed."

²¹"Priestly ministry is missionary in its very core: it means being sent out for others like Christ sent from his father for the sake of the Gospel, sent to evangelize. In the words of Pope Paul VI, 'evangelization means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity ... and making it new' (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 18). At the foundation and center of its dynamism, evangelization contains a clear proclamation that salvation is in Jesus Christ the Son of God. It is his name, his teaching, his life, his promises, his kingdom and his mystery that we proclaim to the world." See John Paul II, "Homily to Priests in Philadelphia," October 4, 1974, *OR* (October 29, 1979), p. 2.

²²The topic "mission and service" of the ministerial priests will be amplified in the discussion on one of the fundamental features of the priest as somebody "sent." At this point, we will only draw the main lines.

"John Paul II, "Homily to Priests in Philadelphia," October 4, 1979, *OR* (October 29, 1979), p. 2.

The union between Christ and his priests is modeled on the union between him and his father: "That they may **be** one, Father, even as we are one" (Jn 17:11). Concretely, this also calls for unity among priests themselves, all of whom he called to be his companions. However, the unity among priests is not an end in itself. It is *for the sake of the Gospel* that they should unite themselves. This union is necessary in order to proclaim the Gospel effectively, by word and by example."

2. Consecration and Conforinity to Christ

The priest is consecrated the moment he is ordained and at the same time he is also configured to Christ. These are the effects of the priestly character which the priest receives through the imposition of hands. John Paul II writes:

In our priestly life, we have the need constantly to revive this grace which has been given to us through the imposition of hands (cf. 2 Tim 1:6), as one revives the flames of the embers. The remembrance of priestly grace, which remains in us forever by virtue of its nature, allows us to renew ourselves in this grace of configuration to Christ and consecration in the Holy Spirit.²⁵

a. The priestly character

The Council of Trent teaches that the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Orders imprint a character on the soul of the recipient. Since this character is a spiritual, indelible mark, these

¹⁴John Paul II writes: "Indeed how will the world come to believe that the Father has sent Jesus unless people can see in *visible ways* that those who believe in Jesus have heard his commandment to 'love one another'? And how will believers receive a witness that such love is a concrete possibility unless they find it in the example of the unity of their priestly ministers, of those whom Jesus himself forms into one priesthood as his own companions?' See John Paul II, "Address to Priests in Philadelphia," October 4, 1979, *OR* (October 29, 1979), p. 2.

²⁵John Paul II, "Address to Priests, Seminarians, and Religious of El Salvador," March 6, 1983, *OR* (April 11, 1983), p. 8.

sacraments cannot be repeated." This teaching of Trent is a truth integral to the faith.²¹

The Council of Trent did not define the nature of the spiritual and indelible mark. However, it induces us to recognize in the sacramental character an ontological reality. The mark, being spiritual, is impressed on the soul. It causes and accomplishes a genuine change in the personal self, an ontological transformation²⁸ which gives rise to the ability to exercise a ministry. The mark is also indelible. As such, it cannot be

²⁶Cf. The Council of Trent, Session 7, *Decree concerning the Sacraments in General*, canon 7, H. Denzinger-A. Schtinnmetzer, *Enchiridion Syrnboldorum* (32nd edition; Freiburg, 1963), Schroeder, p. 52. The debate on the value of the priestly character revolves around this teaching of the Council of Trent. The main protagonists are R.J. Bunnik, P. Schoonenberg, and E. Schillebeeckx. All three agree that the priesthood is just a "function". The priestly character simply enables the priest to exercise a function. No change is effected as to the nature or structure of the person. Therefore, the priestly character has to be "demystified." Consequently the priesthood is just like any profession. For details of the positions of the above-mentioned theologians, see Alfredo Marranzini, "Il carattere sacramentale del sacerdozio ministeriale," *Prete per gli uomini di oggi*, opera collettiva da Gino Concetti (Roma: Editrice A.V.E., 1975), pp. 343-396; "Problematica del carattere sacerdotale dopo il concilio Vaticano II," *Aspetti della Teologia del Sacerdozio dopo il Concilio* (Roma: Citta Nuova Editrice, 1974), pp. 25-64.

"Jean Galot believes that the Council of Trent intended to affirm that the existence of sacramental character is a truth of faith. He writes: "That the Council intended to affirm that the existence of the sacramental character is a truth integral to faith is beyond doubt. The conciliar debates disclose this intention. More particularly, they show that the Fathers meant to go beyond the hesitation of theologians who would go only as far as to admit to a doctrinal probability. The denial would go only as far as to admit to a doctrinal probability. The denial of the character was condemned as heretical.

"The definition of the existence of the sacramental character was not supported by scriptural proof-texts because the validity of arguments derived from scripture was disputed among the Fathers. Consensus was achieved in terms of fidelity to what had already been declared by the magisterium of the Church, especially in the decretal *Maiores* of Innocent II, and in the Council of Florence. In its own choice of words, the Council reproduced without added precision what had been asserted in the Decree for the Armenians." See Jean Galot, *The Theology of the Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), p. 197.

²⁸Based on this, the theories of R.J. Bunnik, P. Schoonenberg, and E. Schillebeeckx, have no validity. As a spiritual mark, we are dealing with its interior effects which bring about ontological transformation. It is not something which is extrinsic to the priest as if it were simply a function, a delegation, a mere aptitude, or a juridical appointment.

erased, at least for the duration of the earthly life of the person impressed with the character."

The Second Vatican Council follows closely the teaching of the Council of Trent regarding the character. *Lumen Gentium* points out that, through Baptism, the faithful are incorporated into the Church, and by reason of the baptismal character, their role is to exercise Christian religious worship. In Confirmation, they solidify their membership in the Church and are endowed with special strength by the Holy Spirit in order to witness courageously to their faith, and spread it by word and deed."

Like the Council of Trent, Vatican II refrains from defining the nature of the character. However, in so far as the priestly character is concerned, it adds a little precision by saying that through Sacred Orders, in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, priests "are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the Priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the Head."

The Synod of Bishops of the ministerial priesthood in 1971 reiterates the teaching of Vatican II on the priestly character. It declares that by the laying of hands there is communicated a gift of the Holy Spirit which cannot be lost (cf. 2 Tim 1:6). This reality configures the ordained minister to Christ the Priest, consecrates him (cf. *PO*, 2) and makes him sharer in Christ's mission . . .³²

The Synod also aligns itself with the tradition of the Church and mentions that the participation in the priesthood of Christ lasts even if

²⁹The Council of Trent has no explicit declaration on the permanence of the character in the next life. Logically, the character should last in the next life because it is a spiritual mark. Regarding the priestly character, Jean Galot is of the opinion that the priesthood is conferred forever although its exercise is limited in this life. But the mark lives on in this world as well as in the next. Cf. Jean Galot, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

³⁰Cf. Vatican II, *LO*, n. 11.

³¹Vatican II, *PO*, n. 2. See also Alfredo Marranzini, "Problematica del carattere sacerdotale dopo 11 Concilio Vaticano II," *Aspetti della Teologia del Sacerdote dopo il Concilio* (Roma: Otte Nuova Editrice, 1974), pp. 37

³²The Synod of Bishops, *On the Ministerial Priesthood*, 1971, (The Vatican Polyglot Press, 1971), Part I, n. 5.

the priest is not allowed to exercise his ministry."

The teachings of Vatican II and the Synod of Bishops on the priestly character reverberate in the magisterium of John Paul II. In his talks, sermons, and addresses to priests, religious and seminarians, he always underlines the fact that priests are marked with a special character, are consecrated and configured to Christ." In line with the conciliar texts and subsequent pontifical and synodal documents, he also stresses the mystical identification of the priest with Christ to the effect that the priest acts "in the person of Christ." ⁸⁵

b. The mystical³⁶ significance of the priestly character

Through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, man opens himself to God. God gains access to the very depth of the human self and orients the person to the life that he has to attain through Christ. Sanctifying grace enables man to participate in the divine life which God offers through Christ. The sacramental character conferred by Baptism and Confirmation orients man to the project of *Christian life*.

⁸⁴See also *Ibid.*, Part I, n. 5.

³⁴To cite a few, see John Paul II, "Address to Priests, Religious, and Seminarians of El Salvador," March 6, 1983, OR (April 11, 1983), pp. 8-9; "Homily at Ordination in St. Peter's Basilica," June 24, 1979, OR, (July 30, 1979); "Homily at Ordination of Priests in Nagasaki," February 25, 1981, OR (March 9, 1981); "Address to Priests and Religious in Assisi," February 12, 1982, OR, (March 29, 1982); "Address to Priests and Religious in Buenos Aires," June 11, 1982, OR (June 29, 1982), p. 3. "Address to Bishops, and Seminarians in Quito," January 29, 1985 OR, (February 25, 1985), pp. 3-4.

³⁵Again to cite a few, see "Address to the Clergy and Male Religious in Palermo," November 20, 1982, OR, (December 6, 1982), pp. 9, 12. Letter of John Paul II on the Eucharist *Dominicae cenae*, 1980, OR (March 24, 1980), pp. 5-10; "Address to Bishops, Priests, and Seminarians in Quito," January 29, 1985, OR (February 25, 1985), pp. 3-4; "Address to Seminarians of the Pontifical Roman Seminary," March 3, 1984, OR (n. 15), p. 9; "Homily at Ordination of Priests in Brazil," July 2, 1980, OR (July 14, 1980), pp. 9, 18-19.

³⁶The word "mystical" has to do with the presence of a mystery. "Mystery" is derived from the Greek word *mysterion*, which means "secret". In the New Testament it refers to "to the mystery of God's love for us revealed in Christ - and is a secret, or a mystery, not because it is kept secret - on the contrary, it is something to be proclaimed and made known, but since it is a matter of the revealing of God's love for us, it is the revelation of something that remains hidden in its revealing, inexhaustible and inaccessible in the very event of its being made known and accessible to us in the life, death and resurrection of Christ" See Gordon S. Wakefield, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1982), p. 272. When we say the "mystical significance" of the priestly character, we mean the mysterious possession by God of man's life as part of his plan of salvation.

It dictates the direction in which the life of grace is to grow. Thus, the project of the Christian life unfolds to man. However,

the project God sketches out for the existence of a person does not remain confined solely to the person's will. It imprints itself onto the personal self, first through baptismal character, then through that of Confirmation, so it may be realized from within."

The marks imprinted by Baptism and Confirmation are deepened by the priestly character received in the sacrament of Orders. The priestly character etches upon the self the *project of a priestly life*. The orientation to commit oneself to the mission of the priest is engraved upon the being of the baptized person. Such being the case, it is a mistake to see the mission of the priest as something which is external to his being. The mission of the priest is stamped, so to speak, on his very person and is therefore inseparable from his personal being. Precisely, because of this radical orientation, the priestly character is seen as both *ontological* and *dynamic*.

It is ontological because the priestly character affects personal being not more superficially than baptism — namely, only for the function to be exercised — but more thoroughly by bringing itself to bear upon the person's deepest feelings. It seeks to surrender to God, not only deeds, but the very source from which springs the doing of deeds, the human being itself with all its capacities and possibilities."

The priestly character, therefore, forms a new being; a new creation emerges." Moreover, the new being that is fashioned by the priestly character is meant to be the instrument of the mission that has

"Jean Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), p. 201.

p. 202.

³⁹John Paul II writes: "To be a new creation is the vocation of all the baptised ... But if we can apply this attribute of this new order of creation to the priesthood of the faithful, how much more compelling is their application to the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, which is directed towards the sanctification of Gbd's people." See John Paul II, "Homily at Ordination Heaton Park," Manchester, May 31, 1982, *OR* (June 7, 1982), p. 8.

Jean Galot also points out: 'Through the mark it imprints, ordination fashions a new being. Already in the Gospel we notice a sign of the intention to let a new being emerge in the priest. Jesus bestows a new name on Simon. He calls him Cephas (that is, Peter) to denote the mission assigned to him. Since the Hebrew mind equates the name with the reality named, to impose a new name on the person means somehow to bring a new personality.' See Jean Galot, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

to be fulfilled. Thus, by its very nature it is dynamic ⁴⁰ In other words, the essential orientation of the priestly character is towards *action*, towards the exercise of mission. Consequently, the "doing" of the priest should stem from his "being." Concretely, this means that priestly actions, attitudes and behavior, are to flow from his priestly being. John Paul II told the priests and religious of Palermo thus:

What you are by a free gift in the order of grace, be that in the stature of your personality, in your way of thinking and loving. Have always and clearly the courage of the truth of your priesthood. Let no shadow obscure the light that is within you. Let no detour distance you from the structure of your sacred character."

All this manifests what God intends to make of his priests through the sacramental character. He wants to possess the **person**, the whole of him, and not only his exterior activity. To be capable of doing the work of God, the priest must belong to God totally so that, "grasped by God in his ⁴²whole being, he can radiate and communicate God by everything he is."

c. The priestly character as a mark of consecration

The consecration of the priest wrought by the priestly character draws its meaning from the consecration of Christ. Christ was "consecrated" and was "sent" into the world for the salvation of men. These are the components of the Incarnation which are inseparable. The Incarnation represents God's turning to mankind and, at the same time, it also manifests what he has done to save it. The priest is also consecrated, that is to say, he is set apart for the Gospel," (Rom 1:1) so that he no

The dynamism of the priestly character is derived from the potentiality of the priest as a new being. The priest, by virtue of the same priestly character is enabled to exercise a mission. The mark that effects and brings about an authentic change in the personal self "may be interpreted as equivalent to 'being in a position' ... if we allow for an ontological transformation that engenders the capacity to exercise an activity." See Jean Galot, *op. cit.*, p. 198. In other words, the action to mission is grounded on the potentiality of the priest to do mission as an integral part of his priestly being because of the priestly character.

"John Paul II, "Address to the Clergy and Male Religious in Palermo," November 20, 1982, *OR*, (December 6, 1982), P. 9.

⁴²Jean Galot, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

longer belongs to the world. He now belongs exclusively to the Lord. Nonetheless, he is still in the world, and therefore his consecration *does not mean his separation* from the world. Although genuine consecration "entails a measure of separation, yet is bespeaks a real involvement in the world?" Thus he is also "sent" into the world.

These two apparently contradictory characteristics of the priest are recognized by Vatican II. It is true that, on the one hand, the priest has been set aside, bent on subscribing to the values inherent in his priesthood, which values are different from those of the world. On the other hand, the priest, like Christ, must be sympathetic to men and participate in their affairs. But the contradiction is only apparent; the priest is consecrated precisely in order to dedicate himself to his task in the world and not to keep him aloof. It is this type of separation which the Acts of the Apostles is referring to in the command of the Holy Spirit: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul, for the work to which I have called them." (Acts 13:2). Vatican II teaches:

The priests of the New Testament are, it is true, by their vocation to ordination, set apart in some way in the midst of the People of God, but this is not in order that they should be separated from that people or from any man, but that they should be completely consecrated to the task for which God chooses them. They should not be servants of Christ unless they were witnesses and dispensers of a life other than that of the earth. On the other hand they would be powerless to serve men if they remained aloof from their life and circumstances."

However, involvement with the world does not mean an entanglement in temporal affairs. Priests are called to a spiritual service in the midst of the world. John Paul II told the ordinandi in Rio de Janeiro that

even when he carries out actions which, by their very nature, are of the temporal order, the priest is always God's minister. In him, everything, even what is secular, must become priestly as in Jesus, who was always a priest, and always acted as a priest, in all the expressions of his life."

⁴³/bid, P. 205.

"Vatican H, PO, n. 3.

"John Paul II, "Homily at Ordination of Priests," Bradt July 20, 1980, OR (February 12, 1979), p. 4 ff.

d. The priestly character as a mark of conformity to Christ

Through the priestly character the priest is not only possessed by God; his person is also *conformed* to that of Christ. He bears the likeness of Christ. In effect, the priest is enabled to represent" not only the Church but, most importantly, Christ himself. In fact, he *acts in persona Christi*,⁴⁷ This is especially true whenever he celebrates the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and it is in the Eucharistic Sacrifice that the ministerial priest is strongly linked with Christ.

Accordingly, *Sacrosanctum concilium* teaches that prayers "are addressed to God by the priest who, in the person of Christ, presides over the assembly, . . ." And *Lumen Gentium* points out that because of his sacred power, besides ruling and molding the priestly people, "acting in the person of Christ he effects the eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people."⁴⁹ Further on, the same Constitution states that priests, by reason of the sacrament of Orders, and after the image of Christ, the High Priest, are consecrated in order to preach the Gospel, and are endowed with a pastoral mission (as shepherd). They are also to celebrate the divine worship in accordance with their own level of ministry, thereby sharing in the office of Christ as Mediator.

⁴⁶That the priest, in the Liturgy, speaks on behalf of the assembly and even in the name of the whole Church is an affirmation grounded on tradition. St. Thomas Aquinas says: "The priest, during Mass, precisely in the prayers, speaks in *persona ecclesiae*, on the unity of which he takes his stand." See *Summa Theol.* Ma, q. 82, a 7, ad 3um. However, this statement does not mean that the priest is chosen by the community and derives his function from the community. John Paul II says that the sacramental priesthood "constitutes a special *ministerium*, that is to say 'service', in relation to the community of believers. It does not however take its origin from that community, as though it were the community that 'called' or 'delegated'. The sacramental priesthood is truly a gift from this community and comes from Christ himself . . ." See John Paul II, "Letter to Bishops and Priests on the Occasion of Holy Thursday," 1979, n. 4, *OR* (April 17), p. 7.

⁴⁷About the origin and development of the usage of this theological formula, see Bernard-Dominique Marliangeas, "Cies pour une theologie du ministere. In *Persona Christi*. In *Persona Ecclesiae*," *Thiologie Historique*, 51, (Paris, Editions Beauchesne, 1978). See also G Rambaldi, "Alter Christus, in personam Christi gerere. Note sulk di tali e simili espressioni nel magistero da Pio XI al Vatican II e loro riferimento all= carattere," *Teologia del Sacerdotio*, Vo. 6, (Burgos, 1973), pp. 211-264; Renzo Gerardi, "Alter Christi's: la Chiesa, it Cristiana, it Sacerdote," *Lateranum*, 47, (1981), pp. 11-123; Joseph Lecuyer, L'identit   su prete au 2e Concile du Vatican," *Seminarium*, 30, (January-March 1978), pp. 29f.

⁴⁸Vatican II, *SC*, n. 33.

⁴⁹Vatican II, *LG*, n. 10

However, the Constitution emphasizes that it is above all in the eucharistic celebration that they exercise in a paramount degree their sacred function. In the eucharistic celebration, while acting in the person of Christ and announcing his mysteries, they serve to link the sacrifice of Christ with that of the faithful and, simultaneously, make the sacrifice of Christ to the Father present once again.^o

The decree *Presbyterorum ordinis* states that it is because priests are marked with a special character and therefore are configured to Christ that they can act *in persona Christi capitis*."

Of the titles used to describe the priest, John Paul II shows preference for *in persona Christi*. He argues that in the phrase there is more identification, sameness and intimacy with Christ.⁵²

The priest offers the Holy Sacrifice in *persona Christi*; this means more than offering "in the name of" or "in the place of" Christ. *In persona means in* specific sacramental identification with the "eternal High Priest" who is the Author and principal subject of this Sacrifice of his, a Sacrifice in which, in truth, nobody can take his place . . . Awareness of this reality throws a certain light on the character and significance of the priest celebrant who, by confecting the Holy Sacrifice and acting *in persona Christi*, is sacramentally (and ineffably) brought into that most profound sacredness, and made part of it, spiritually linking with it in turn all those participating in the Eucharistic assembly.⁵³

The conformity of the priest to Christ should extend to the level of his deeds for the "imprint that is . . . etched on his personal being (is) meant to shape all one's actions which for this very reason carry in themselves a likeness to the Lord's own deeds."⁵⁴*The Holy Father feels strongly about this aspect of the priest's configuration to Christ. He stresses emphatically that the priest must be always God's minister

"AU., n. 28.

²¹Vatican II, *PO*, a. 2. See also n. 12.

⁶²Cf. John Paul II, "Address to the Seminarians of the Pontifical Roman Seminary," Rome, March 3, 1984, *OR* (April 9, 1984), p. 9.

⁶³John Paul II, *Dominicae cenae*, February 24, 1980, *OR* (March 24, 1980, Weekly English Edition), P. 7.

"Jean Galot, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

wherever he is and whatever he does. He must be priestly like Jesus, "who was always a priest, and always acted as a priest, in all the expressions of his life."⁵⁵ He believes that the phrase *sacerdos alter Christus* (the priest is another Christ) is a marvelous, surprising and consoling reality and not merely a metaphor or a figure of speech.

To such a degree, he says, does Jesus identify himself with his priest in the exercise of the priestly powers that, in a way, the personality of the priest disappears before his, "since it is he who acts through us."⁵⁶

Quoting Escrivoi de Balaguer, he addressed the ordinandi in Rio de Janeiro thus:

"With the sacrament of Ordination," someone said appropriately, "the priest becomes definitely suitable to lend Jesus our Lord his voice, his hands and his whole being. It is Jesus who, in the Holy Mass, changes the substance of the bread and wine into that of his body and his blood." And we can continue. It is Jesus himself who, in the sacrament of Penance, speaks the authoritative and fatherly word: "Your sins are forgiven" (Mt 9:2; Lk 5:20; 7:48; Jn 20:23). It is he who speaks when the priest, exercising his ministry in the name and in the spirit of the Church, announces the word of God. It is again Jesus Christ himself who takes care of the sick, children and sinners, when the love and pastoral solicitude of the sacred ministers encompasses them."

3. The Mission of the Ministerial Priest

The sin of man provoked, so to speak, the Three Divine Persons to initiate in the world the saving acts meant to redeem man himself from the slavery of sin. Planned by the Father, out of love for man, God's saving action was executed by the Son in union with the Holy Spirit.

God the Son was "sent" by the Father. By becoming man in all ways, except sin, he mediated between God and man; and through his *words* and *deeds*, especially by his suffering, death and resurrection, he

⁵⁵John Penni, "Homily at Ordination of Priests," Brazil, July 2, 1980, OR (July 14, 1980), p. 18.

"Loc.. dt.

"John Paul II, 'Homily at Ordination,' Rio de Janeiro, July 2, 1980, OR (July 14, 1980), p. 18.

fulfilled the mission for which he was sent by the Father. The Son took man out of the kingdom of darkness and brought him into the kingdom of light.

However, this work of salvation has to continue. It has to be proclaimed and spread to the ends of the earth "so that what was accomplished for the salvation of all men may, in the course of time, achieve its universal effect."⁶⁸ Consequently, before he ascended to his Father, Jesus established the Church and sent the Holy Spirit to hasten her growth and to vivify her continuously. Jesus also appointed as his coworkers men, "twelve of them to be with him and to be sent out preaching" (Mk 3:13; Mt 10:1-14).

These men who came to be known as "apostles", because they were also sent by Jesus, became the pillars of the Church. They were given the mission to proclaim the Word of God and make disciples, initiating them through Baptism, and to observe all that Jesus told them (cf. Mt. 28:19 ff.). The Apostles in turn also appointed men to assist them, "to go to the whole world (and) preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:16).

Eventually, the Church emerged as the sign and the ordinary source of salvation in the world. The mission which Christ received from the Father lives on in the Church." Daily, this mission is continuously carried out by priests who, in union with their bishops, the successors of the Apostles, and the Pope, the successor of Peter, are charged with the task to proclaim the Word of God and shepherd the Lord's flock.

Ultimately, the mission of the ministerial priest has as its source the mission of Christ. However, this mission immediately flows from the consecration of the priest and his conformity to Christ which, as we have indicated, are wrought by the priestly character which is conferred in the Church through the sacrament of Orders. Indeed, "in the priestly character, consecration and conformity are not for their own sakes but for the sake of the mission to be carried out.'" Like Christ, the

⁶⁸Vatican H, *Ad gentes divinitus*, n. 7. (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984). Edited by Austin Flannery.

⁶⁹Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 2. See also Karol Wojtyla, *Sources of renewal*, London: William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd. and Fount Paperbacks, 1980, pp. 206-207.

⁸⁰Jean Galot, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

ministerial priest is "consecrated" and "sent" into the world; and since he has been configured to Christ, he takes as his own Christ's very own mission which is none other than to **proclaim the Word of God** and to **minister to God's flock**. John Paul II told the American priests in Philadelphia:

. . . Recall how, in the call of the Twelve Jesus summoned them to be his companions precisely in order to "send them out to preach the good news." Priesthood is a mission and service; it is being "sent out" from Jesus to "give his flock a shepherd's care."⁶¹

a. The proclamation of the Word of God

The decree *Presbyterorum ordinis* considers the proclamation of the Word of God the first task of the priest. On this task, which is carried out in union with the bishop, depends the formation of the People of God. And rightly so, since it is through the proclamation of the Word of God that faith is aroused in the unbelievers. The believers also draw nourishment from the same word. Once faith is aroused, a community of the faithful will appear and grow.⁶²

Thus, the mission of the priest to proclaim the Word of God is a serious one. As a matter of fact, John Paul II sees it as the essential mission of the priest. The priest is the proclaimer of the Word of God which echoes in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh." Following *Presbyterorum ordinis*, he also teaches that it is the primary task of the priest and the very reason for which they were called, as well as the very reason for which they were ordained." Therefore, it goes without

2. "John Paul II, "Homily in Philadelphia," October 4, 1979, *OR* (October 29, 1979), p. 2.

"Vatican II, *PO* n. 4.

John Paul H, "Address to Priests in Bologna," April 18, 1982, *OR* (May 10, 1982), p. 4.

⁶⁴John Paul II, "Address to a Group of Priests from the US," December 11, 1980, *OR* (December 16, 1980), p. 3. Part of the address reads: "And now you are going back to your people, to all those communities in which you exercise your pastoral ministry. You are going back, please God, to proclaim with ever greater understanding and zeal the Good News of salvation which was revealed by a merciful and loving Father, and which the Church, in fidelity to Christ, communicates from one generation to the next.

"*The proclamation of the Gospel is your primary task* as coworkers with your bishops . It is the mission to which you were called; it is the reason for which you were ordained."

saying, that priests should devote themselves to this task which involves hardships and the chances of being misunderstood and rejected, as John Paul II acknowledges. He says:

In order to proclaim the "message of salvation" (Act 13:26) with greater freedom which comes from not being "an interested party" in the tensions present in the community and in the world, the priest must exercise constant self-control and must also face the hardships of feeling misunderstood, or even contested or rejected. Generous dedication to his own task will not fail to obtain from God that "boldness" (cf. Act 4:29; 28:31) which allowed the first Apostles to face a still pagan world and transform it.

"Proclaim the Word": this is your specific mission . . . Here is the root of your daily incentive, here is the inexhaustible source of your most authentic joy. As ministers of the word ... you must know both the content of the message . . . as well as the mentality of the persons to whom it is destined. This means that you must foresee yourselves to be men of culture and, true theologians."

Moreover, the Word of God should be made available wherever possible. Its proclamation takes various forms, but no matter what form it takes, the priest must see to it that he proclaims nothing else but Christ and his saving works. In particular, in the Christian community, the administration of the sacraments should be accompanied by the proclamation of the word. The sacraments are sacraments of faith. Therefore, to deepen the faith of the Christian community, it is necessary that the proclamation of the word be accompanied by sacramental ministry.⁶⁶

Of great importance is the Liturgy of the Word in the sacrifice of the Mass. In the Mass what is proclaimed is the Word itself made flesh — the body of Christ which is broken and given to men, and which nourishes Christian life. Indeed the Word that the priest announces reaches its summit in the Eucharistic Sacrifice; it is the fulfillment of the mission of the priest.

⁶⁶John Paul II, "Address to Priests in Bologna," April 18, 1982, *OR* (May 10, 1982), p. 4.

⁶⁶Cf. Vatican II, *PO*, n. 4.

b. The pastoral ministry of priests

Needless to say, this aspect of the mission of the ministerial priest also derives from the conformity of the priest to Christ, and specifically as the Shepherd. Consequently, this mission is exercised by the priest in imitation of Christ the Pastor. He shares in the pastoral solicitude of the good Shepherd. The evangelist John describes the Good Shepherd in the following words:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeepers open; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.⁶⁷

Christ, the Good Shepherd, expressed his pastoral solicitude, not only by leading and feeding his flock, but also by seeking out those that were lost. Above all, he expressed it by laying down his life for his flock.

Jesus passed the prerogative to shepherd his flock to the priests. John Paul II asks: "How is it possible to be a priest without sharing the zeal of the Good Shepherd?"⁶⁸ In reality, by virtue of the priestly character, priests are endowed with a pastoral charism which manifests their likeness to Christ, the Good Shepherd. It follows that, like Christ, their pastoral interest is primarily the salvation of the flock entrusted to their care. The Holy Father writes:

... thanks to the priestly character, you share in the *pastoral charism*, which is a sign of a special relationship of *likeness to Christ, the Good Shepherd*. You are precisely marked with this quality in a very special way. Although care for the salvation of the others is and must be the task of every member of the great community of the People of God . . . nevertheless you priests are expected to have a care and commitment which are far greater and different from those of any lay person.^o

⁶¹Jn. 10:1-5.

^o John Paul II, "Address to Parisian Clergy," May 10, 1980, *OR* (June 9, 1980), p. 4.

¹³ John Paul II, "Letter to Priests on the Occasion of Holy Thursday," n. 5, 1979, *OR* (April 17, 1979), p. 7.

Concretely, this pastoral concern is expressed in the administration of the sacraments, and especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. All the other sacraments (including all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate) are directed towards the Eucharist and find their completion in it because the Eucharist contains Christ himself, the source of salvation." Finally, priests should exercise their pastoral mission in the spirit of *love* and *service*, not only because it is ascetically valuable and pastorally effective to do so, but because, "it is an ontological exigency; rooted in what a priest is,"⁷¹ a shepherd and a servant.

CONCLUSION

The teachings of John Paul II on the identity of the ministerial priest form part of the "enrichment of faith" which he envisions in his pastoral plan. Specifically, they represent the "objective enrichment of faith" concerning the ministerial priesthood. In other words, they are what faith tells us *objectively* about the ministerial priest; they are the *contents* of faith on the ministerial priesthood. Thus, basically, the teachings of John Paul II on the identity of the ministerial priest echo the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the other magisterial teachings of the Church.

The Holy Father's teachings on the matter also form part of the *continuity* of the Church's teachings on the ministerial priesthood. This continuity is of vital importance to John Paul II for, according to Donald W. Wuerl,

John Paul sees himself as part of the great continuum that receives, accepts, loves, lives by and passes on the faith. (. • .) Continuity is absolutely essential to authentic credible witness. And only in union with the Church can the individual find the continuity. His own witness as it shares in the testimony of the Church can lay claim to the continuity of the living witness of the Church as he or she is in communion and conformity with the Faith as the Church believes and receives it.⁷²

⁷⁰ Cf. Vatican II, *PO*, *a.* 5.

⁷¹ Jean Galot, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

⁷² 'Donald W. Wuerl, "On the Priesthood," *The Pastoral Vision of John Paul II*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982), p. 54. Edited by Joan Bland.

Consequently, the teachings of John Paul II on the identity of the ministerial priest is a re-affirmation of the belief of the Church regarding the ministerial priest as they are found especially in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. For him, to be renewed objectively in one's priesthood is to be deeply rooted in the faith of the Church on the matter. And because he is deeply rooted in the faith of the Church, the ministerial priest can grow in his identification with Christ and *continue* to be his living witness in the world. In effect, the teachings of the Holy Father is an outright repudiation of teachings on the subject which are not in *continuity* with the faith of the Church.