

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF PRIESTHOOD

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FEW REALITIES are more agonizing for an individual than an identity crisis, the dramatic moment when a person admits to himself that he is a function of the roles he plays, that there is no deliberately-formed self which integrates the actions of his life. Such an identity crisis, I feel, is common today among priests in the United States. As waves of change sweep over the postconciliar Church, many priests are deeply disturbed. What, they ask, is the role of the priest today? For that matter, what is a priest? The Church, it seems, is only beginning to turn theological attention to this very important question. At a moment in the Church's history when a theology of priesthood is a felt need for many members of the presbyterate,¹ the sacrament manuals are so many Mother Hubbard cupboards. This paper will gather together much of what is being said about the nature of priesthood, discuss it, and suggest a few paths which might lead to some theological clarity.

INTRODUCTION

We begin by describing the troubled context in which the discussion must take place. There is, first, the new awareness of the dignity of laymen as baptized and confirmed members of the priestly people: "The laity derive the right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ their Head. Incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself."² To the priest, however, himself interested in and accustomed to working within the secular, it is puzzling and disturbing

¹ Cf. Andrew Greeley, *The Hesitant Pilgrim* (New York, 1966) chap. 16, "Spiritual Problems of the Priesthood."

² Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, no. 3; tr. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., and Joseph Gallagher (New York, 1966) p. 492. This translation will hereafter be referred to as *Documents*.

to see theologians interpret the task of the laity almost "at the expense" of the apostolate of the presbyterate. "So long as priests continue to believe that they must concern themselves with the temporal order . . . the Church will not accomplish her work."³

Secondly, the public debate about celibacy forces the cleric to a deep personal questioning about a way of life which in the past was simply accepted with a certain hardy asceticism. When he reads that no small responsibility for the jaundiced view of sex common in the Church for the last millennium falls on the shoulders of the celibate clergy, the priest reluctantly assents to the damning evidence. He is left then with a nagging uneasiness which has profound personal resonance: Is celibacy a true Christian expression of priesthood? In other words, what is a priest?

Thirdly, there is the sociological fact, described by Marc Oraison, that the clergy no longer form a social force, a "class" of elite, educated leaders. In general, the modern priest no longer has any recognized competence over and above his competence as the minister of the sacraments and preacher of the word. Oraison claims that the situation is so acute that each priest must have a *métier*, a money-earning job, if he is, by lived experience, to have verification of his own proper worth.⁴ Perhaps Oraison's position is a parochial reaction to the French ecclesiastical scene, but it would be foolhardy of the American Church to discount totally his radical suggestion. One hundred fifty years ago, when the American Church was almost entirely immigrant, the priest did belong to a class, he did enjoy a "position," a kind of *métier*-substitute. To be a priest was *ipso facto* to feel effectiveness, to have an "identity." Today the flock is, in many cases, far more sophisticated, professional, and independent than the harried cleric who must live from their charity. Surely it is possible to ask, with Oraison, whether the priest today ought not have, as other men, a *métier*, which would allow him to live not from alms but from a personally-earned income.

³ Jacques Leclercq, *Christians in the World* (tr. K. Pond; New York, 1961) p. 63. See also George Murray, S.J., "The Hyphenated Priest," *Review for Religious* 25 (1966) 693-702. Fr. Murray finds the tendency to relegate the priest to the altar alone a peculiarly European trait and feels that the American experience of priestly life is, in a pragmatic sense, its own validation and dictates an American theological treatment.

⁴ Cf. Marc Oraison, "Un homme sans métier," *Christus* 12 (1965) 462-75.

But how does one answer such a question definitively without some understanding of what priesthood is within the mystery of the Church?

Fourthly, there is the problem of the "hyphenated priest." It would be difficult to exaggerate the urgency of this question, and yet, in the current theological atmosphere, radically opposed answers are blowing in the wind. There are those who perform a "sacerdotal reduction." They begin positivistically with the question, what can a priest do that a layman cannot? Answer: confect Eucharist, give absolution. To be a priest, then, is to be one capable of the words of consecration and absolution. Let the priest, they conclude, retire from the secular, the domain of the layman, and take his proper place by the altar. There are some who assert, however, that the priest, commissioned by the bishop to a secular task, gives an official witness to the Church's incarnational interest in that task. This official witness is not possible to the layman, because he is not a member of the hierarchical order as is the priest. All agree that the Church must manifest the Incarnation as fully as possible. How can she better accomplish this task than by committing members of her official family to secular tasks?⁶ But neither of these positions, nor any other theological foray into the problem of the hyphenated priest, has afforded much mental comfort to the numerous individuals wrestling with this dilemma: scientific research is a good—it needs no validation from priestly character, nor from pure intention for that matter. To build Christ's world through scientific research is an end in itself, a life-task demanding undivided commitment of time and person. The priesthood too is a good. In a sophisticated, daily more-educated American Church, a degree of professionalism in sermon, counseling, and administration is essential. This end in itself is also life-consuming, demanding total commitment of time and person. What happens then to the man who becomes a priest-scientist? Does he not condemn himself from the start to less effective work in each of his fields, a man truly on the fence, incapable of genuine professionalism? Lurking beneath this discussion too is the question, just what is a priest?

Other questions too contribute to the troubled context of this prob-

⁶ Cf. Walter J. Ong, S.J., *American Catholic Crossroads* (New York, 1959), an eloquent presentation of the hyphenated priest as witness.

lem. What is authority in the Church and what place does the priest play in authority-mediation? What is the proper priestly formation—how does a seminary course strike the ideal balance between pastoral and scientific theology? What is the poverty of a priest? Is there any truth in a concept of priestly collegiality analogous to that of the bishops—is the priest given the “world” as his responsibility when he receives orders? It is clear that these questions too can receive no definitive answer unless some light is cast on the prior theological question: Within the mystery of the Church, how is priesthood to be understood?

So much for the context of the problem. Perhaps at this point the following summary statement of the position to be defended will be helpful. It is contended that any positivistic approach to the meaning of priesthood, beginning with a question such as “What does a priest *de facto* do that is different from the layman?” runs the risk of issuing in a partial understanding. Catholic priesthood, it will be shown, is a mystery resident in the mystery of the Church as the universal sacrament of unity.⁶ Only within a theology of sign, a theology which explicitly considers the Church as the sacrament of the risen Body of the Lord, is there hope for a full understanding of the mystery of priesthood, which is to be understood ultimately as the sacrament of the universal Headship of Christ drawing all men to the unity of His Body.

THE STRUCTURE OF SALVATION: SACRAMENT

The story of salvation is the story of God’s communication with men, a communication which has respected man’s condition as a person-in-body. Men reach out to one another in word and gesture; for any felt human reality must find expression in the body, the visible, if human communication is to take place. There is a sense in which the person is a prisoner of his body, because the person is his body. It is *he* who speaks and gestures.

Fundamental to Christian optimism about the ultimate glorified destiny of the universe, nature, and man’s body, is the striking realization that God has respected this human situation in His communication of Himself. Christians see in the visible universe about them a revela-

⁶ Five different times in the Constitutions on the Church (nos. 1, 9, and 48) and on the Liturgy (nos. 5 and 26) the Church is explicitly referred to as “sacrament.”

tion of God the Creator; at the heart of this universe are men, men who seek to communicate with one another in word and gesture, men whose words and gestures reveal to Christians the love and wisdom of their Creator. Christians rejoice in the realization that when God chooses to reveal Himself supernaturally, He respects the filter of the body, gathering His chosen people in and through events which take place within their time and their space. Most incredible fact of all, most incredible indication of the goodness of the universe and of man—when the Father chose to redeem man once and for all, He chose a moment and a place in man's world and sent His only-begotten Son into this universe to bring grace and mercy in human word and gesture. This *is* sacrament, "the divine bestowal of salvation in an outwardly perceptible form which makes the bestowal manifest; a bestowal of salvation in historical visibility."⁷

Christ Himself, then, is *the* sacrament. The actions of Jesus of Nazareth, as the actions of a divine person, were salvific. But they appeared to men as the actions of any other man. The power of the Son of God appeared in the visible form of Jesus, divine power hidden in a human condition. To meet Jesus of Nazareth may have seemed to many of His contemporaries to meet an altogether ordinary carpenter; in reality, it was to be in contact with the definitive reality of God's saving mercy. Jesus was salvation itself present in this world for men. He was at the same time the sign of salvation present in this world for men. It is important to grasp clearly that when we speak of Jesus of Nazareth as sign of salvation, we do not intend in any way to separate the saving reality from the visible Jesus of Nazareth. The words and gestures of Jesus were themselves the saving reality of God's victorious mercy and grace; the words and gestures of Jesus were grace for men. The visible life of Jesus was not some imitative dramatic game about salvation; nor was His life some sort of apparition running parallel to God's will to save men. His life on earth was at one and the same time grace and sign of grace; it was salvation itself in visibility for men.

God, then, definitively manifested His salvation; He saved us sacramentally; His saving reality met us in visible form and only in visible form. He so respected our bodily condition that His victorious mercy

⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (tr. Paul Barrett, O.P.; New York, 1963) p. 15.

and grace came to us in our own world of space and time. In Jesus, God truly "pitched His tent among us" (Jn 1:14).

But what of the present? Jesus is now invisible. Through His death and resurrection He has become the Christ, the anointed of the Father, seated at His right hand, the first fruits of redemption, the Head of the universe—but, invisible to man. How is man, person-in-body, to contact his Salvation, now invisible? How are men today to know that the risen Lord is their salvation? Since the reality of salvation approaches men sacramentally, i.e., in historical visibility, the body of the risen Lord which is salvation must somehow still be present in the world of men. Since Christ is salvation and since He is visible only in His Body, His Body must be visible in this world if salvation is to be a present possibility for men. This visible "Body of the Lord" in space and time is the Church, the sign and reality of salvation, the sacrament of Christ, the presence of God's victorious mercy in man's spatial, temporal condition.

In a theology of the Church as sacrament there are two central truths to be understood: (1) the Church *is* Christ *present and active*; (2) the Church *is* Christ *visible* in the world. Just as the body of Jesus of Nazareth was the sign of the saving presence and activity of the Son of God, so in these last days the Church, the visible extension of the invisible body of the risen Lord, is the visible sign of the presence and activity of the Lord, the Head of the universe.

Official Church documents of the last twenty years have explicated these two fundamental aspects of the reality of the Church as sacrament of Christ. *Mystici corporis* is practically a hymn to the presence and activity of Christ in His members. The divine Redeemer "holds the helm of the universal Christian community and directs its course."⁸ He also "governs His Mystical Body in a visible and normal way through His Vicar on earth."⁹ The Saviour "communicates strength and power to His Church";¹⁰ He "enlightens His whole Church";¹¹ He "so sustains the Church, and so in a certain sense lives in the Church, that she is, as it were, another Christ";¹² it is Christ "who through the Church baptizes, teaches, rules, looses, binds, offers, sacrifices."¹³

⁸ Pope Pius XII, Encyclical *Mystici corporis* (NCWC version; Washington, D.C., 1943) no. 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, no. 53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 54.

Mystici corporis also places emphasis on the visibility of the Church, demanding some sort of visible union with the Church as a criterion of full membership.¹⁴ Although the Church is not explicitly called "sacrament" in the Encyclical, the reality of Church as salvation itself in historical visibility is clear in a statement such as the following: ". . . our Saviour shares prerogatives peculiarly His own with the Church in such a way that she may portray in her whole life, both exterior and interior, a most faithful image of Christ."¹⁵ The following lengthy quotation is included fully because of its emphatic demand for visible embodiment of the presence of Christ:

Now since its Founder willed this social body of Christ to be visible, the cooperation of all its members must also be externally manifest through their profession of the same faith, and their sharing the same sacred rites, through participation in the same Sacrifice, and the practical observance of the same laws. Above all, it is absolutely necessary that the Supreme Head, that is, the Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth, be visible to the eyes of all, since it is he who gives effective direction to the work which all do in common in a mutually helpful way towards the attainment of the proposed end. As the Divine Redeemer sent the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, who in His name should govern the Church in an invisible way, so, in the same manner, He commissioned Peter and his successors to be His personal representatives on earth and to assume the visible government of the Christian community.¹⁶

Twenty years after *Mystici corporis*, the Fathers of Vatican II declared in *Lumen gentium* that central to the nature of the Church is the polarity of active presence of Christ and visible sign of this active presence. But now the theological foundations, some of which were only implicit in the Encyclical, burst upon the consciousness of the People of God. Whereas the three references to the resurrection of Christ in the Encyclical were of no explicit theological importance,¹⁷ the risen Lord, precisely as risen, is placed at the very center of present self-understanding of the Church. Explicitly conscious now of the empowered presence of Christ the Lord at the right hand of the Father, the Church rejoices in His presence and activity within her. "By the power of the risen Lord it [the Church] is given strength that it might . . . reveal to the world, faithfully though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light."¹⁸ "By the

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, nos. 14 and 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 54.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 69.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, nos. 36 (*bis*) and 106.

¹⁸ Constitution on the Church, no. 8.

greatness of His power He rules the things in heaven and on earth, and with His all-surpassing perfection and way of acting He fills the whole body with the riches of His glory."¹⁹ "He continually distributes in His body, that is, in the Church, gifts of ministries through which, by His own power, we serve each other unto salvation so that, carrying out the truth in love, we may through all things grow up into Him who is our Head."²⁰

Although *Mystici corporis* emphasized the visible embodiment of Christ in His members, the flavor of this emphasis savored slightly of the juridical. In *Lumen gentium*, on the other hand, the emphasis on the visible is deeply theological: the Church now declares explicitly that she is sacrament.²¹ And it is this conscious self-understanding as active presence of Christ in historical visibility which founds, in all the rest of the documents of Vatican II, the constant plea for adequate visible witness to the Church's holy reality. If the following quotations are read in the light of the Church understanding herself as the visible expression of the reality of the risen Lord in space and time, i.e., as the sacrament of Christ, they reveal their theological depth. These quotations are not mere exhortations or suggestions; they are expressions of the very nature of the Church as both sign and reality of the risen Lord. "Strengthened in Holy Communion by the body of Christ, they then manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which is suitably signified and wondrously brought about by this most august sacrament";²² ". . . she [the Church] exhorts her children to purification and renewal so that the sign of Christ may shine more brightly over the face of the Church."²³ "Let them [priests] remember that by their daily life and interests they are showing the face of a truly sacerdotal and pastoral ministry to the faithful and the infidel. . . ."²⁴ "Thus every layman, by virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, is at the same time a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church herself. . . ."²⁵ ". . . The religious state, whose purpose is to free its members from earthly cares, more fully manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below."²⁶ These

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 7. ²⁰ *Ibid.*; tr. *Documents*, p. 21. ²¹ Cf. n. 6 above.

²² Constitution on the Church, no. 11. ²³ *Ibid.*, no. 15. ²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 33; tr. *Documents*, pp. 59-60. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 44.

quotations could be multiplied impressively by a simple excerpting of the documents of Vatican II. The very obvious concern these documents show for what contemporaries might call the Church's "image" is the natural expression of the Council Fathers' realization of the sacramental nature of the Church, of her being the visible extension in space and time of the mystery of the risen Christ.

Thus, just as the Son of God was visibly present to space and time in His earthly body, so the risen Christ is present in space and time in His Body the Church. As Schillebeeckx says, "Christ makes his presence among us actively visible and tangible too, not directly through his own bodiliness, but by extending among us on earth in visible form the function of his bodily reality which is in heaven."²⁷ We said of Jesus that He was at one and the same time reality and sign, salvation and sign of salvation. In a similar way the Church is Christ's salvation and at the same time sign of this salvation. The Church is sign of Christ's salvation since, as the Council Fathers say, the pilgrim Church "has the appearance of this world which is passing."²⁸ But the Church is the reality of Christ's salvation because it is the presence on earth of the "function of his bodily reality which is in heaven."²⁹ No one has put more succinctly than Karl Rahner the relationship between sign of grace and reality of grace: "The sign is therefore a cause of what it signifies by being the way in which what is signified effects itself."³⁰ Again Rahner: "Provided the sign is an effect of God the dispenser of grace, it is true to say: This grace is conferred here and now because embodied, and by taking concrete form, in the sacramental manifestation."³¹ The Church, precisely because it *is* the visible embodiment of the salvific grace of the risen Lord, is salvific grace for men. Because it is Christ's salvation in visible form, the Church is *the* cause of grace for men. Consequently, there is no grace caused in the world of space and time that is not in some way related to the Church, the visible embodiment in space and time of the reality of grace.

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p. 41. ²⁸ Constitution on the Church, no. 48.

²⁹ Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

³⁰ Karl Rahner, S.J., *The Church and the Sacraments* (tr. W. J. O'Hara; Freiburg, 1963) p. 38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

THE CONTENT OF SALVATION: SAVING UNITY

The structure of salvation is sacramental, saving grace present in sign, in historical visibility. But a question central to this paper remains: What is the content of salvation? What does it mean to be saved? What does Christ present in His Church do? The answer: He draws men to the historical visibility of His Church, to visible communion with Himself and each other.

The Fathers of Vatican II locate their understanding of the Church within the sweep of salvation history, the activity of God forming a people within space and time. "It has pleased God, however, to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness."³² The story of God forming a people began with Israel: "He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. With it He set up a covenant. Step by step He taught this people by manifesting in its history both Himself and the decree of His will, and by making it holy unto Himself."³³ The documents continue: "This communication is developed and consummated in the work of Jesus Christ. For the very Word made flesh willed to share in the human fellowship. . . . In His preaching He clearly taught the sons of God to treat one another as brothers. In His prayers He pleaded that all His disciples might be 'one.' . . . As the first-born of many brethren and through the gift of His Spirit, He founded after His death and resurrection a new brotherly community composed of all those who receive Him in faith and love. This He did through His Body, which is the Church."³⁴ "That messianic people has for its Head Christ, 'who was delivered up for our sins, and rose again for our justification' (Rom 4:25), and who now, having won a name which is above all names, reigns in glory in heaven."³⁵

Such is the Council's view of the "content" of the Church itself—the eschatological community of saved men, bound in life and activity to each other in Christ their Head. The salvific activity of the risen Lord

³² Constitution on the Church, no. 9; tr. *Documents*, p. 25.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 32; tr. mainly from *Documents*, pp. 230-31.

³⁵ Constitution on the Church, no. 9; tr. *Documents*, p. 25.

embodies itself precisely as visible community of faith and love, the Church being a visible "celebration of the unity of Christ among us."³⁶ The Church, then, for those who live within her, is a sacrament of ever-increasing community: "For He has bought it for Himself with His blood, has filled it with His Spirit, and provided it with those means which befit it as a visible and social unity. God gathered together as one all those who in faith look upon Jesus as the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and established them as the Church, that for each and all she may be *the visible sacrament of this saving unity.*"³⁷ The italicized phrase in this quotation is an accurate summary of everything thus far said about the Church, because this one brief statement outlines the structure of salvation in the Church (sacrament) and the content (saving unity).

But it must not be thought that the Church is sacrament of unity only for those who are members of her visible community. Christ wills the salvation of all men. Are all men too saved by the sacrament of unity, the Church? We must answer affirmatively because, as was pointed out earlier, the Church *is* the saving activity of Christ in historical visibility. That is to say, there is no saving activity of Christ in our space and our time that is not somehow related to the visible community in Christ. The Church, urged on by the active presence of her Head, who is "the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the center of the human race, the joy of every heart, and the answer to all its yearnings,"³⁸ restlessly seeks to gather together the scattered children of God until there is one shepherd and one sheepfold.³⁹

As we would expect from our study of the sacramental structure of salvation, the Church's primary vehicle for drawing men is her very nature as visible community of love and faith. Since her nature is to be the saving presence of the risen Lord drawing all men to Himself, and since this activity of Christ embodies itself in a visible communion of men in love and faith, it is through this community *precisely as visible*

³⁶ Paul VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (NCWC version; Washington, D.C., 1964) no. 118.

³⁷ Constitution on the Church, no. 9; tr. *Documents*, p. 26 (italics added).

³⁸ Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 45; tr. *Documents*, p. 247.

³⁹ Cf. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 2.

community that she draws men to Christ. Just as Jesus of Nazareth, the reality of the definitive presence of grace, drew His followers to community with Himself, so the Church, the continuation of the definitive source of grace for men, draws men to herself by bodying forth in her own unity of love and faith the Lord's desire for community. Because the Church is conscious of the salvific reality of her community life in Christ, because she is conscious of Christ's desire within her for all men, she sends her members all over the world in missions, apostolates, and ministries of one sort or another. All apostolic work, however, flows from her consciousness of what she is. Because the Church *is* the community of the saved, because she *is* grace for men, because she *is* the visible expression of Christ's love for all men, she issues in world-wide preaching and teaching. And today the Church realizes as seldom before that all of her apostolic work, her missions, her preaching, her works of charity, will succeed in drawing men to the Church only if mankind sees in present historical visibility a Church which is unmistakably community of love and faith. Without visible communion in love and faith the message of the Church is disembodied.

The Council Fathers manifest a great concern that this unity of the Church be visible, because they understand the truth that the Church will attract men to her Head only if she is as true as possible to herself, i.e., a visible unity in Christ. The bishops explain the visible and social structure of the Church precisely as witness to unity.⁴⁰ They see the group apostolates of the laity in the same light: "Hence the group apostolate of Christian believers happily corresponds to a human and Christian need and at the same time signifies the communion and unity of the Church in Christ."⁴¹ The Council Fathers even recommend that those laymen working as individuals in the apostolate "can still usefully gather into small discussion groups. . . . In this way an indication of the community of the Church can always be apparent to others as a true witness of love."⁴² All the documents of Vatican II are rife with consciousness of this need for embodied unity.

Before we take up explicitly the mystery of priesthood within the Church, a brief summary of what has been said to this point might be

⁴⁰ Cf. Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 44.

⁴¹ Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, no. 18; tr. *Documents*, p. 508.

⁴² *Ibid.*, no. 17; tr. *Documents*, p. 508.

helpful. The Church is the sacrament of saving unity. The Church is sign and reality of the risen Lord, the Saviour of men, the Head of the universe. Among those who are His visible members Christ actively works in word and sacrament for an ever-deeper communion of love and faith. But through those who are His visible members, through the community of love and faith which is the sign and reality of His salvation, Christ the Head actively works to draw all mankind to visible community with Himself. *In nuce*: Christ actively draws all men to saving community; the Church is the sacrament, the sign and reality of this salvific community-forming activity of Christ.

THE STRUCTURE OF PRIESTHOOD: SACRAMENT

The risen Lord is Himself the redeemed community. He is the saving Head of His own members, the children of God. Every saving grace in the Christian is Christ's own grace, and thus the unity of life which Christians share is the risen Lord's own life. Christ is His members, for they are members of Christ only insofar as they participate in His own saving worship of the Father. But Christ is Head, as well as members, for it is He who today draws His members into union with Him and with each other; it is He who actively distributes His gifts among all His members. Christ *is* the new covenant itself, the definitive love commitment between God and men. He is salvation itself, reconciliation itself, mercy itself. Only by being a member of the risen Lord does a man covenant with God. The whole Christ is both Head and members.

The Council Fathers describe this "corporate Christ" in these words:

The Head of this Body is Christ. He is the image of the invisible God and in Him all things came into being. He is before all creatures and in Him all things hold together. He is the Head of the Body which is the Church. He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the first place. By the greatness of His power He rules the things in heaven and things on earth, and with His all-surpassing perfection and way of acting He fills the whole body with the riches of His glory.⁴⁸

The risen Lord is Head and members; but salvation comes to men in sacrament, in historical visibility. Therefore we would expect the Head-members relationship to be expressed in the Church, because, as

⁴⁸ Constitution on the Church, no. 7; tr. partly from *Documents*, p. 21.

we have said so often, the Church *is* the visible extension of the risen Lord. If the risen Christ is both Head and members, the sacrament of the risen Christ should be visibly both Head and members. And this is precisely the sacramental significance of hierarchy and faithful in the Church. The hierarchy is the sacrament of Christ the Head; the faithful are the sacrament of Christ the already redeemed community.

As the sacramental Christ, the Church too is mystically both Head and members. When the twofold function of Christ becomes visible in the sign of the Christian community, it produces the distinction between hierarchy and faithful—a distinction of offices and of those who hold them. Even though the hierarchy, on the one hand, are themselves part of the believing Church, and the faithful, on the other hand, share in the lordship of Christ and to some extent give it visibility, the sacramental functions of hierarchy and faithful differ within the Church and show the distinction.⁴⁴

Vatican II states that those who participate in the hierarchy through the sacrament of orders are representatives of the active presence of Christ the Head. In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy the celebrant of Mass is said to be one “who presides over the assembly in the person of Christ.”⁴⁵ The Constitution contains these remarkable words about the bishop: “The bishop is to be considered as the high priest of his flock, from whom the life in Christ of his faithful is in some way derived and dependent.”⁴⁶ Other documents of Vatican II are no less explicit: “In the bishops, therefore, for whom priests are assistants, our Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme High Priest, is present in the midst of those who believe. For sitting at the right hand of God the Father, He is not absent from the gathering of His high priests, but above all through their excellent service He is preaching the word of God to all nations, and constantly administering the sacraments of faith to those who believe. . . . Bishops sustain the roles of Christ Himself as Teacher, Shepherd, and High Priest, and . . . they act in His person.”⁴⁷ “. . . The sacerdotal office of priests is conferred by that special sacrament through which priests, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are marked

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 33; tr. *Documents*, p. 149.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 41.

⁴⁷ Constitution on the Church, no. 21; tr. mainly from *Documents*, pp. 40–42.

with a special character and are so configured to Christ the Priest that they can act in the person of Christ the Head."⁴⁸

THE CONTENT OF PRIESTHOOD: SAVING UNITY⁴⁹

We have seen earlier that the "content" of the Church is community of love and faith. Christ the Head saves by forming community, by drawing men into unity with Himself and with each other. We have seen also that bishops and priests are representatives of the saving presence of Christ the Head. Thus the clergy, as representatives of Christ the Head, are formers of community. This is the content of their work; this is what they "do." The clergy form the People of God into a community of love and faith. They are, then, as sacraments of Christ the Head, principles of growth and unity, of community formation. This forming of community is not to be understood simply as activity within the community of believers. The hierarchy as sign of Christ the Head within the sacrament of the Church is also sign to nonbelievers. The hierarchy is the historical embodiment of Christ the Head drawing all men into the community of His saving mercy.

In their Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, the Council Fathers repeat over and over that the clergy is a source of unity, of community. "By sacred ordination and by the mission they receive from their bishops, priests are promoted to the service of Christ, the Teacher, the Priest, and the King. They share in His ministry of unceasingly building up the Church on earth into the People of God."⁵⁰ "To the degree of their authority and in the name of their bishop, priests exercise the office of Christ the Head and the Shepherd. Thus they gather God's family together as a brotherhood of unity, and lead it through Christ and in the Spirit to God the Father. For the exercise of this ministry, as for other priestly duties, spiritual power is conferred upon them for the upbuilding of the Church."⁵¹ "They [priests]

⁴⁸ Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, no. 2; tr. *Documents*, p. 535.

⁴⁹ The words "priest," "bishop," "clergy," and "hierarchy" are used interchangeably in this paper. This is not meant, of course, to obfuscate the very obvious distinction in degree of fulness of orders between bishop and priest. The point that is being made in this essay is that *both* bishop and priest are sacrament of Christ the Head in formation of community, a responsibility and dignity both enjoy as recipients of priestly orders.

⁵⁰ Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, no. 1; tr. *Documents*, p. 533.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, no. 6; tr. *Documents*, pp. 543-44.

have become living instruments of Christ the eternal Priest, so that through the ages they can accomplish His wonderful work of reuniting the whole society of men with heavenly power."⁵² But the same understanding of clergy is clear in other documents as well: "Their ultimate goal as bishops is that all men may walk 'in all goodness and justice and truth' (Eph 5:9)."⁵³ "The individual bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches."⁵⁴ "But the faithful must cling to their bishop, as the Church does to Christ, and Jesus Christ to the Father, so that all may be of one mind through unity and abound to the glory of God."⁵⁵

In a sense this paper could end at once; for the position has been presented. Priesthood is understood within the Church, the sacrament of unity, as the sacrament of Christ the Head in formation of community. This is the answer I would give to someone who asked me the question, what is a priest?

But there are several important consequences and clarifications which should be developed. To this task we turn our attention.⁵⁶

THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES AND CLARIFICATIONS

1) A man who receives sacred orders is made over. Just as surely as the word and gesture of the Church in baptism incorporates the recipient into the community of those who have died and risen with Christ, so the word and gesture of the Church in orders incorporates the recipient in the order of those who are representatives of Christ the Head in formation of community. Perhaps this can be put more clearly. We have said throughout this paper that saving grace comes to us only in historical visibility and that the visible embodiment *is* the present reality of the risen Saviour. Thus the grace of shepherd means—in a very real, in this case sacramental, sense—the presence of the Shepherd

⁵² *Ibid.*, no. 12; tr. *Documents*, p. 558.

⁵³ Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, no. 11; tr. *Documents*, p. 404.

⁵⁴ Constitution on the Church, no. 23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 27.

⁵⁶ I feel that the understanding of priesthood presented in this paper can be shown to be the primitive Church's understanding of orders. Consult *The Sacrament of Holy Orders* (Collegeville, Minn., 1962), especially the first six articles, for a careful and interesting study of orders in the primitive Church, a study which substantiates, at least historically, the contention that priesthood is not primarily cultic but is to be understood as the principle of the unity and growth of the community.

Himself. The priest is sacrament of Christ the Head not by some extrinsic denomination but by being the grace of the Head in visible embodiment.

The grace of Headship in formation of community is given in orders, and the man who allows this grace of the risen Lord to work its effect in him will be drawn to an ever-deeper holiness proper to one who acts as leader and former of community, a holiness proper to one who stands before the People of God as their shepherd, the visible embodiment of the risen Lord's desire for community of love and faith. Co-operation with the sanctifying grace of orders will result in a priest who is transformed by Christ into an ever more effective source of community precisely because growth in the grace of the Head means growth in the presence of the Head within His community.

2) The priest, then, is sacrament of Christ the Head in formation of community. It is in virtue of this sacramental reality that he is given power to confect Eucharist and to absolve. The priest is truly the servant of word and sacrament, but he exercises these functions because of what he is, i.e., embodiment of Christ drawing men to community, and because word and sacrament are the definitive community-forming expression of Christ in His people. It is clear, however, that just as the entire community is most visibly "Church" when it gathers about the Lord's table to hear His word and to be fed by His body, so the priest is most visibly sacrament of Christ the Head in formation of community when he celebrates Mass. This is true, however, not simply because he confects Eucharist during the celebration, but because throughout the Mass, as he presides over the assembled family of God, he most fully bodies forth the reality he is, i.e., the principle of the unity and growth of God's people. Priesthood, therefore, is not to be understood primarily in terms of Eucharist and confession. Rather, the priest's cultic powers are to be understood within the sacrament of the Church as powers given to a man who, in his service of word and sacrament, the most solemn visible expressions of the reality of the Church as community of saving worship, is to represent and act in the person of Christ the Head in formation of community, the Christ who is Head of both word and sacrament.

3) "The laity should, as all Christians, promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds, since they are repre-

sentatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church.”⁵⁷ “But the faithful must cling to their bishop, as the Church does to Christ, and Jesus Christ to the Father, so that all may be of one mind through unity.”⁵⁸ How are statements like these from Vatican II placed within the context of Church as sacrament and clergy as sacrament of the Head in formation of community? Perhaps no one has answered this question more directly than Otto Semmelroth:

For the layman who enters into relationship with the Church’s teaching-, pastoral-, and priestly-, offices, the symbolic character of the Church sounds a warning note. If it is true that to a certain degree his “horizontal” encounter with the priestly office of the Church signifies a “vertical” confrontation with the glorified Lord, he must be sure that this symbolic meeting is sincere, that is, his physical, external encounter with Christ’s representative must testify to his personal, interior devotion to God and to Christ.

Thus that part of the Church’s symbolic life which is directed to the Lord has this meaning: in the holder of ecclesiastical office Christ Himself comes really and effectively in grace to members of the community. This is the profound meaning of the fact that the Church was founded by Christ. Not only does this fact guarantee the actual life of the Church to the end of time, but it also guarantees that in the Church the man who makes his relationship to the priest acting in an official capacity a sincere sign of his dedication to God, encounters in him the grace of Christ.⁵⁹

This, then, is the meaning of the bond of religious community relationship to the Church as society: The God-encounter of the community-minded man is predetermined by the institution of the God-man into a certain social form. And in the encounter with God, man has the choice of saying “yes” to the form of expression proposed by Christ, in a more or less personal way, because he should acknowledge the sovereignty and initiative of the divine partner.⁶⁰

It is this Church, laity visibly encountering in the clergy the embodiment of the grace of the Head, and clergy visibly serving the laity in humility and love, which acts as sign of grace to the entire world, as sign of Christ, both Head and members. Visible and therefore present at one time in the Church is Christ the Head, forming a community of love and faith, and that redeemed community itself, united in love and faith around its Head.

4) A few words on the problem of the hyphenated priest. Fundamental to the discussion of this problem has been the conviction that the

⁵⁷ Constitution on the Church, no. 37.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 27.

⁵⁹ Otto Semmelroth, S.J., *Church and Sacrament* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1965) pp. 33-34.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

priest should, as much as possible, be engaged in "priestly" works. Everyone agrees with this general principle, but few agree about the meaning of "priestly." Those who feel that the hyphenated priest is an anomaly, a stopgap measure required by an immigrant Church, but an obstacle to progress in the contemporary American Church, associate "priestly" exclusively with the cultic. On the other hand, those who most successfully defend the phenomenon of the hyphenated priest point to an official, hierarchical witness of the Church's interest in the "nonpriestly" task.

If the position defended in this paper has any validity, it is clear that "priestly" cannot simply mean "cultic." The priest must not be understood as a sacrament-confector and word-preacher. This he is, to be sure, but only because he is, within the historical visibility of the Body of the risen Lord, a sacrament of Christ, Head of His community of love and faith. The priest is, before all else, Christ forming community in historical visibility.

It seems to follow, then, that any work which the Church feels is necessary for the building up of the Body of Christ can be an intrinsically priestly work. If, for example, the American Church feels that she must become "present" to the intellectuals of both secular and Catholic campuses, she *cannot not* send priests to join the intellectuals in their work; for the Church is present only when the whole Christ, Head and members, are visibly united in a community of love and faith. A priest without a community of believers is "church" only in principle. A community of believers without a priest is only incipiently "church." The Church cannot fully be herself without both laymen and priest pursuing together the incarnation of Christ in the common task. Nor is the Church *fully* committed to a particular area of work unless she is willing to become Church within that area by dedicating to it both priest and laymen.

This is true because community happens only where there is genuine sharing of experience, interests, and problems. We have finally grown exasperated with a sacramental celebration that ignores the need for humanly embodied participation. To the degree that there is genuine human participation in an adequately rendered sign, to that degree is there full reception of sacrament. The same principle holds with the presence of the Church in sign of community. The Church as sacra-

ment of Christian unity is present to the degree that there is a *genuine* community of Head and members to body forth the full Christ. It is possible for the Church to remove her priests from secular tasks altogether and make of them a kind of chaplain corps, supplying Eucharist, homily, and absolution to laymen busy bettering the world. But let her not, in such an eventuality, say that she is fully committed to any of these secular tasks. We cannot emphasize *ex opere operantis* in our theology of the seven sacraments, and then ignore it when we consider the presence of the sacrament of the Church in an area of the secular. The Church can be fully and most perfectly present in Head and members, only where there is an honest and fully human community of priests and laymen, sharing interest, task, failure, hope, faith, and, above all, love. We tolerate no magic in the sacraments; let us tolerate no magic in our discussion of community as base for the presence of Christ, Head and members, in the world of men.

Thus the Church today commits priests and laymen to the inner city, to live, work, pray, and suffer together with Christ's poor. The Church recognizes that the priest, the sacrament of Christ the Head, must actually experience as a human person the anguish and frustration of his lay brothers and sisters by actively participating with them in their efforts at improving their situation, if the Church is to live fully by genuine community in the inner city.

The same holds true if there is a desire to become Church in a department of a university. There can be full presence of Church only where there is genuine community of love and faith among laymen and priests. And there can be genuine community only where persons share as persons their interests, insights, fears, loves, and experiences. For both laymen and priest, mere physical togetherness in a college department is not enough. There must be Christian efforts by both, especially by the priest, the sacrament of Christ the Head, to form that department, faculty and student, into a Christian community within the larger university community. Both laymen and priests must make sincere efforts to share with each other, to share academic insight and love for their field, to share hopes and fears for the Church, to share celebration of the Eucharist, to share, in a word, personal love and faith. Community does not happen; it must be formed by conscious Christian effort to love and share. Only in a department where there is

this genuine effort to form community of love and faith among priests and laymen will the Church as sacrament of unity exist fully, because only in such a department is there visible personal community of Head and members to body forth that unity in Christ.

A word here about the priest as witness. When a priest is said to "witness" to the Church's interest in some work, it must not be thought that his value as witness is only a function of a juridical commission of the bishop assigning him to a particular work. A priest is witness because he is sacrament; he is witness because of what he ontologically is, i.e., the historical visibility of Christ the Head drawing men to community. And this ontological (sacramental) reality remains true of him whether he be a worker in the slums of Paris, a mathematician in the halls of Harvard, or a lone missionary tramping through the jungles of Peru. To send a priest to a particular secular task is not merely to "show" Church interest in the secular; it is, much more radically, to become Church in the secular, because the priest, as sacrament of Christ the Head, *is* the Church in principle.

The question, then, of the proper use by the Church of her clergy is not a question of priestly vs. nonpriestly works; it is a question of where she most needs to form Christian community fully. Priests may be taken from some works and sent into others, but this is not to be interpreted as the Church admitting that she has permitted her priests to involve themselves in nonpriestly work. For example, to remove a priest-teacher from a secular campus and send him to work in a deprived section of the inner city is not to move him from nonpriestly to priestly work. It is much rather to assert that in the present crisis-situation in race relations the Church has a greater need for Christian community within the inner city than she does on the secular campus.

What is needed in this question of the hyphenated priest is a strong dose of Christian balance. No one seems to find it particularly incongruous that the layman should at one and the same time pursue two Christian tasks. He is father of a Christian family; he holds a job. Each he pursues in total Christian commitment. Of each he asserts the intrinsic Christian value. His job, however, no matter how intrinsically valuable for building the kingdom of God, is a source of pay. He can in one breath assert that he is, in his job, building the kingdom of God in this world, and in the next breath ask for a raise in pay. No one objects

to this; no one finds the assertion of intrinsic value hypocritical in the light of the request for more pay. It seems simple enough that the job can be, from one Christian aspect, an end in itself, while from another Christian aspect it is a means. Furthermore, no one writes articles about the "problem of the hyphenated layman"; no one suggests that all married laymen become architects so that they might live at home and thus fulfil more perfectly their task of forming Christian families. The very real tensions that every layman experiences in his dual life are accepted as the essential lot of the pilgrim who is, at one and the same time, dead and risen with Christ.

The priest is in a situation which is more similar to the layman's than dissimilar. He too has the vocation of forming family, the family of God. He, too, frequently performs some specific job in the everyday life of society. teaching, counseling, administration, etc. And the priest too affirms the radical Christian value of each of his works and is justly annoyed if someone accuses him of working in the secular *only* as a vehicle. With his lay counterpart, the priest would assert his genuine interest in teaching, research, etc., and yet, just as his lay counterpart uses his job to provide the sustenance for his family, so the priest would admit to a genuine interest in community formation in his work itself or perhaps within his work situation itself. Why should the latter be considered the negation of the former?

And yet the hyphenated priest does remain an anomaly to many. As we have seen, some would have him drop all secular tasks. At the other extreme, there are those who would have the priest-scientist drop all pastoral concerns other than Mass and office. Balance seems essential here. We have already indicated the narrow concept of priesthood which supports the demand that the priest remain only a cultic figure. On the other hand, to demand of a person who is by grace of orders a sacrament of Christ in formation of community, that he deny all active apostolic works other than research itself, may be unrealistic. It is difficult to see how Christ drawing men to community would be visible in a priest who deliberately relegated his community-forming to private Mass and office. A priest-scientist should hide his apostolic bent only when any apostolic manifestation would itself jeopardize the work of Christ drawing men to Himself. If this is the motive of curbed apostolic activity, the curb is actually in the ultimate interests of community

formation. Often enough this is the case, especially in a mission country hostile to the Church, or on a secular campus. But to demand, out of a certain blind "incarnationalism," that a priest in a department of a Catholic university never suggest a department celebration of Eucharist or some other expression of Christian community, is extreme.

For the individual priest, the problem of balancing the tension between his dual tasks is often extremely vexing. (This, however, is not a problem indigenous to priesthood. How often does the layman lament "I should spend more time with the family"?) The resolution of the tension does not lie in simply dropping one of the priestly tasks, but in the individual's deliberate welcoming of the tension as necessary if genuine community is to be formed, a resolution dependent ultimately on the apostolic will of the individual⁶¹ to become a person open to possibilities of deliberately sharing Christian love and faith in a fully human way with his colleagues, as well as fully open and dedicated, with his colleagues, to the value of the particular secular task he performs—a resolution, therefore, to be the kind of person through whom and in whom Christ can form genuine community.

This paper has been an attempt toward a theology of priesthood. Specific answers have not been offered to all the problems which today trouble the presbyterate. Nevertheless, understanding priesthood as the sacrament of Christ the Head in formation of community may be of some help in situating properly the mystery of priesthood within the mystery of the Church, the sacrament of saving unity, and thus may lead eventually to some of the long-awaited answers.

⁶¹ Cf. Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, no. 14.