Presbyteral Identity Today

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The author investigates trinitarian theology and an ecclesiology of communion as a theological foundation for priestly identity. This perspective leads to a discussion of the term “priest-presbyter” as a more appropriate name for those ordained to the priesthood.

In the forty years following Vatican II, new questions regarding the presbyterate have arisen: the ordination of women, priestly spirituality and issues of life style, the necessity of continuing education, the expansion of lay ministry, the incorporation of former married presbyters from the Lutheran church and the Anglican communion into various dioceses, etc. Moreover, the matter of obligatory clerical celibacy continues to be an important issue for priest-presbyters and for the people of God, who are frequently left without sufficient numbers of pastors. Overwork, burnout, and deferred retirement are becoming the standard of the day for many presbyters. The highly publicized sexual scandals among priest-presbyters in recent years have also contributed to low morale and the dwindling number of recruits in North America and Europe. Since my days as a student during the council, much has changed regarding the presbyterate, some for the better and some for the worse. One thing has remained constant—continued reflection on the nature of the ordained presbyteral ministry. I propose to examine some of the principal theological resources available for rethinking the identity and the ministry of the priest-presbyter.

_The Priesthood of All Believers_

There is clear continuity in the conciliar and postconciliar documents that teach that the Church as a whole is priestly. The priestliness of the people of

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God derives from the underlying unity between Christ and the community of believers. Christ alone represents the office of priest (sacerdos) in its fullness and perfection, but he has willed to share this priesthood (sacerdotium) with others in history by communicating his priestly mission to his body, the Church. The Spirit, too, is involved in the priestly anointing of the members, imparting strength, insight, holiness, and mission. Baptism and confirmation constitute the basic sacramental action of being called and configured to Christ in the Spirit and within the Church (Austin). The frequent New Testament references to the priestly character of believers (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rom 12:1-2; Heb 13:15-16; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) are important for understanding the mystery character of the Church. Drawing on the teaching of Pius XI and Pius XII, Vatican II retrieved this often misunderstood and underappreciated doctrine of the early Church (Ryan).

When the documents turn to the ministerial or ordained presbyterate, it is never isolated from the body of believing Christians. As Vatican II taught at several points, the priestliness of the people of God comes primarily to expression in the Church as a whole (Lumen gentium [henceforth LG] 10, Apostolicam actuositatem [henceforth AA] 3, Presbyterorum ordinis [henceforth PO] 2) (Orr). Consequently, the paradigm of priestliness in the Church is the priesthood of all believers. The presbyterate is in service to the more comprehensive priesthood of all believers. The essential point is not to separate these two modalities of Christ’s priestly mission (Rosato), but rather to see them as mutually related expressions of that very priesthood. Neither priestly expression is “above” or simply “over against” the other. Vatican II never maintains the superiority of one modality of the priesthood vis-à-vis the other, only that these two forms of the one priesthood of Christ are “different in kind and not only in degree” (LG 10). This expression of the difference in form or modality of the one priesthood of Christ as participated in by believers in general and by ministerial priest-presbyters cannot be used to argue for a division between them, since the passage goes out of its way to argue that they are “ordered to each other.”

The mutuality of the two expressions of the priesthood of Christ is reinforced by the post-synodal apostolic exhortation Pastores dabo vobis [henceforth PDV] of John Paul II. The responsibility which all in the Church bear, and which is communicated radically to all in the sacraments of initiation, remains the theoretical basis for considering the priesthood. It is possible to understand the difference between the two forms as relating to different “functions,” e.g., presiding

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at the Eucharist, but I think it is better to understand the difference in how they are related to each other. As we will see below when examining the notion of relations (Buckley, 35–39), the concept of relationality pertains not only to the Trinity but to the created order as well. When dealing with “persons,” it is inaccurate to speak only about “the essence of human being” or “human nature” without also discussing human interpersonal relations. The “person” is always both a “nature” and “relations” (Zizioulas, 27–65).

**In Persona Christi**

In recent years, the theology of the ministerial presbyterate has been marked by discussion centering on John Paul II’s frequent insistence of the teaching of Vatican II that the priest acts *in persona Christi*—“in the person of Christ” (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 33, *LG* 10, 28, and *PO* 2, 13) (Donovan, 27–28). The phrase has become something of a rallying point in the elaboration of different theologies of the ordained ministry. Some theologians understand the expression to mean that the ministerial priest-presbyter, compared to the ordinary believer, is marked by a further “ontological” change. The teaching of the Council of Trent on the “indelible character” effected by ordination is often cited in support of this ontological modification (Galot and Evans). The sacrament of Orders so affects the presbyter that he is “configured” to Christ the Priest in a unique way that is best described in “ontological” terms. Functional vocabulary is not adequate to express the profound difference caused by the sacrament of orders which claims the whole of the ministerial priest (Butler, 73–76).

Because the discussion has been framed in terms of ontological versus functional categories, the real issue has been neglected. The terms of the discussion have tended to highlight one element of the ministerial priesthood, viz., the individual, at the expense of the other, viz., the corporate. The first option states that the priest-presbyter is an individual Christian who has been uniquely conformed to Christ the Priest and who effects his priesthood primarily in celebrating the Eucharist and in a life of intimacy with Christ which further extends this eucharistic dimension. The second maintains that the priest-presbyter exercises his ministry primarily through participation in the mission of the whole *presbyterium* of the diocese. In the latter case, the individual priest-presbyter accomplishes his duties in the name of his fellow presbyters who are in communion with the bishop who is the head of the presbytery. *PDV* helps us see how the individual and corporate dimensions are effectively preserved in their mutuality. John Paul’s apostolic exhortation helps defuse the polarizing tension by adding new elements from trinitarian thought and the ecclesiology of communion. What emerges is an enriched and more balanced expression of the priestly character of the whole Church in its twofold expression, i.e., in the people of God and in its ordained priest-presbyters.
Vatican II was clear in pointing to the Church as an expression of the trinitarian mystery (LG 2–4, Ad gentes 2, Gaudium et spes 1). In its search for a better trinitarian synthesis, postconciliar theological reflection has considered the proper relationship between the christological and the pneumatological dimensions of the church and has gained a more profound insight into the implications of the council’s teaching on the trinitarian character of the Church. The key to this understanding of the Church has been to examine the relations in the operations of the trinitarian persons. Progress has been made by acknowledging the mutuality of those relations. The life of the Trinity is an expression of divine relations of knowledge and love among Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father loves the Son and thereby constitutes him as a subsistent relation, while the return of unbounded love from the Son to the Father is “another,” the Spirit—a bond of superabundant love between Father and Son. Thus, theologians who have been reconsidering the mystery of the Trinity and how it applies to the Christian life have given added weight to the notion of “relations” as constituting the “persons” of the Trinity (LaCugna, 1985, 1991 and Hill).

The retrieval of the patristic understanding resonates well with our contemporary experience of person as constituted not simply by some permanent, universal nature, but by the fact of that nature’s demand for existing in relationship with some “other.” Only when both dimensions are present do we have a grasp of the person that corresponds to our human longing for self-understanding (Gunton, 163–79, 180–88, and 214–29). The contemporary notion of being in dynamic relationship and openness to others constitutes our understanding of human being as “personal” being and goes beyond modernity’s notion of the person as an individual center of consciousness (Rahner, 103–15 and Moltmann, 171–74). But how does patristic and Thomistic trinitarian thought relate to the issue at hand, the priestliness of the Church and its ministry?

Only when the “persons” of the Trinity are seen in a relational way does it become clear why PDV portrays ministry in trinitarian terms. First, this can be said of the priestly ministry of the whole Church. The priesthood of the people of God, too, is trinitarian. At its heart stands the mystery of unconditional love. Every instance of authentic love of neighbor is also an expression of divine love. The act of love, in its very mutuality, is always unitive. In the end, love does not demand that the “object” of that love be God directly or exclusively. Genuine love
of neighbor is love of the triune God (Rahner, 1966, 1969, 1983). As a graced instance of love, human love is an expression of the life of the Trinity as love begetting, begotten, and shared. What happens to the believer in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist is extended throughout the whole life of the believer in acts of love initiated by faith and exercised in hope.

This relational understanding of the Trinity helps us better understand the priest-presbyter whose ministry is directed toward the Father as that ministry’s goal, through the Son as the model or exemplar of selfless service, obedience, and love, and in the Spirit as the pervasive power which effects that ministry as gift. The ordained priesthood expresses in its own unique way the Church as trinitarian, but does so in a bond of mutuality with the more encompassing priesthood of the whole people of God. In this way, too, the ordained presbyterate is truly “ministerial,” in so far as it brings to expression the character of “service” inherent in any genuine act of love. In a way peculiar to itself, ordained ministry points to the selfless, other-directed quality of genuine love.

Such conjunctive thinking, which relates the general and the ministerial priesthood of the Church, provides nuances to the approach taken in recent Vatican documents. Too often the ecclesial dimension—expressed in the phrase that the priest acts “in the person of the Church” (in persona ecclesiae)—is played off against the christological dimension—expressed in the phrase that the priest-presbyter acts “in the person of Christ” (in persona Christi) (Kilmartin, 1974, 1977, McIntyre, Martimort, and Power). The ecclesial dimension that the presbyter acts as a valid representative of the church (Dulles, 33–41) is not denied but is presented as something secondary. But we saw above that the trinitarian thrust of the ministry places the former christocentric concentration of the priest-presbyter in the broader context of the whole mystery of the Trinity. The ecclesial or pneumatological dimension is inherently related to the christological dimension of the ministry. They are not separable but define one another by mutual relations. Ordained ministry gains by such an expanded interpretive horizon. Our understanding of the Trinity also grows by being correlated with the concrete existential demands of human existence. The Trinity is no longer viewed in purely conceptual terms as a “doctrine” to be believed, but is further correlated with our human horizon of full existence as love given and received. By its trinitarian focus, PDV opens up new perspectives on ministry that are not yet evident in the Church’s life.

Theology of Communio

The thrust of contemporary trinitarian theology leads today to a greater insistence on an ecclesiology of communion (Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission-II, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Fahey,
Here, too, the Church as communion reorients both the general priesthood of the faithful and the ordained presbyterate. The Church is an expression in salvation history of the communion of the divine persons in the Trinity. The Trinity is the primordial expression of *communio*—a communion or *perichoresis* of divine persons who assume different yet mutually ordered relations to one another. The inner-trinitarian relations of origin of Son and Spirit from the Father constitute a divine unity-in-diversity or *communio*. In salvation history, too, we observe real differences in the activities of the divine persons yet fundamental unity in purpose or plan. For this reason, we may not reduce everything in the Church to one of its poles, the christological or the pneumatological. Both must be maintained, not in a puzzling paradox but in mutually-constituting relations. The Church is simultaneously both the “creation of the Word” and the “creation of the Spirit.” The Church was born both in the paschal mystery of the Lord’s death and resurrection and at the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost. In turn, the trinitarian *communio* expresses itself in the mystery of the Church as a transcendent or vertical communion between God and humankind, and an intersubjective or horizontal communion of persons. Thus, in the Church, there is communion of mission and ministry. In the ministry, too, there is communion of the general and the ministerial priesthood. The one complements the other, since one alone is inadequate. In this way the trinitarian character of the Church continues to be revealed in history. At the base of our understanding of the Church today lie a trinitarian theology of relationality and an ecclesiology of communion.

Turning to *PDV*, we note that it corroborates both the trinitarian and *communio* understandings of the Church. At a number of points, the document says that the priest-presbyter stands “in the forefront” of the Church. The phrase comes from the seventh recommendation of the Eighth Ordinary Synod of Bishops (1990). The intent of the bishops was clearly to situate the ordained minister in the very heart of the Church: “The ministry of the priest is entirely on behalf of the church; it aims at promoting the exercise of the common priesthood of the entire people of God” (no. 16). Whatever authority the presbyter possesses in the exercise of his office, it is given with a view to the ministry of the whole Church and not primarily with a view to the presbyter himself.

*PDV* also frequently uses the expression that the priest-presbyter represents Christ “Head and Shepherd” of his Church (nos. 12, 15–18, 30–31, 42–43, 49, 61). The effect is not to separate the priest-presbyter from the community of believers.
but rather to situate him in their midst. The presbyter is a representative of the headship of Christ precisely in so far as he is a “shepherd.” The pastoral image goes a long way in modifying the widespread understanding of the priest as “taken from among men and made their representative before God” (Heb 5:1). This common misunderstanding that the priest is “set apart” has often led to the mistaken idea that he occupies a higher plane of Christian identity. Instead, the phrase that the priest-presbyter acts as “Head and Shepherd” aims to stress the fundamentally communitarian and pastoral character of the office.

**Linguistic Considerations**

Unlike some Romance languages, English has only one noun to express the office of priest-presbyter in the Church, the word “priest,” an abbreviated form of the Greek loan word *presbyter*. In Latin, however, different nuances can be expressed by using either *sacerdos* or *presbyter*. The words come from different semantic fields of meaning, and each has its role to play in speaking about the ordained ministry. In many contexts, the English term “priest” must serve the needs of the more cultic term *sacerdos* (Talley). A “priest” is an ordained minister who celebrates the liturgy (cult) and administers the sacraments.

In itself, the term *presbyter* draws on the early Church’s experience of “presbyters” or “elders,” at first themselves leaders, and subsequently counselors to the bishop on the many matters pertaining to the whole community. Several generations would pass before the word presbyter-elder would assume specifically “sacerdotal” vocabulary as priest-presbyter (Tillard, 1973). Moreover, it is usually used in the plural because the presbyters constituted a “body of elders” or *presbyterium* (Burtchaell). It is a biblical term of noble lineage. “Presbyter” is also the term Vatican II preferred because it is more inclusive of the pastoral office and because it moves away from the pronounced “sacerdotal” connotations of the scholastic and late medieval Catholic understanding of the priesthood (Vorgrimler, 210–14). Its strength was found in its ability to affirm other dimensions of the ordained ministry beyond presiding at the liturgy and celebrating the Church’s sacraments. These broader aspects included the presbyter’s mission of pastoring, teaching, and offering counsel to the bishop and his presbytery. “Presbyter,” then, is available to express pastoral aspects of the official ministry that have been neglected in the modern history of the office, especially since the Council of Trent (Osborne, 248–306 and 326–33).

Unfortunately, the language of recent Vatican documents on the priesthood and ministry has stressed “sacerdotal” over “presbyteral” vocabulary. Does this really matter all that much? I maintain that it does. Emphasis on sacerdotal vocabulary with regard to the priesthood has the tendency to continue to create needless ambiguity regarding the content and meaning of the term “priest” as it
is employed in technical and non-technical contexts. Language is not a neutral vehicle for communicating meaning. Vocabulary is both denotative and connotative, and both meanings affect the understanding of persons and the concrete praxis of a culture. Language is inherently cultural, functioning as an active and a passive agent of meaning. Words are rarely totally value free. They subtly form personal, social, and political reality externally, as well as internally express intramental understanding. The term “priest” connotes to most readers sacerdotal/cultic/sacramental responsibilities and activities exercised by the ordained minister, and is used invariably in contexts where his leadership role is exercised in presiding over the community’s liturgy and sacraments. The term “presbyter” connotes an office of shared or corporate leadership expressed especially in preaching and teaching, as well as governing activity (the ministry of the Word and pastoral leadership), actions that are exercised together with his fellow presbyters, especially the bishop, but also with deacons, lay colleagues in ministry, and the duly elected or appointed representatives of the community. In order to point to the interconnection of both dimensions of the ordained ministry, I have preferred to use the somewhat cumbersome expression of “priest-presbyter.”

If the Church is going to translate the insights of the equality of all believers in the priestly people of God and the unity of the mission and ministry of the Church, then the English term “priest” must make room for the more flexible “presbyter” or “priest-presbyter.” During the current transitional period, in which the ministerial office is struggling to emerge in an altered form, it is important for the process itself that we use “priestly” references with care. The English term “priest” has come to mean the sacerdos or cult-figure and presider, so necessary for the corporate ritual expression of the Christian faith. In particular, we must try to become more comfortable with the strange-sounding terms “presbyter” and “presbyteral.” They are not attempts to oust sacerdotal vocabulary but to expand the reference to include the full range of pastoral responsibilities exercised by the priest-presbyter.

**Conclusion**

As the Church embarks on its third millennium, issues of ministry, and the presbyteral ministry in particular, will continue to demand courage, crea-
tivity, and openness to the Spirit on the part of all believers, and perhaps especially on the part of the ordained. There will be moments of great challenge, calling for conversion and growth on the part of presbyters, but also moments of theological insight on what is happening in the exercise of ministry. Issues of ministry will continue to loom large in the coming years, but as theologians pursue other, more fundamental or central matters of the faith, we can be confident that theology will work hand in hand with continued theological reflection on ministerial praxis in our communities.

The point of this article has been to show the richness of the theological resources available in the process of theological discernment, especially in trinitarian theology and the theology of communion as it applies to the mystery of the Church. Vatican II, in the Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis redintegratio 11), gives us an invaluable resource with its teaching on a “hierarchy of truths” of the faith. The point of the teaching is not to dismiss, denigrate, or demote any of the Church’s doctrines but to urge us to look for the underlying unity and harmony of the living faith of believers as an interconnected totality of beliefs and practices. There is an inherent “logic” or intelligibility of our faith as a whole, so that what is clearer in one area of the faith might be employed to elucidate problematic questions in other areas. This article has suggested that in rethinking presbyteral identity, we would do well to do so by drawing upon our deepening appreciation of the Trinity, Christ, the Spirit, and the Church as *communio*.

At this moment in history, matters sometimes appear dark and threatening, with polarization and disillusionment increasing among Catholics, and with the distance growing between Catholics and their separated sisters and brothers in Christ on issues of official ministry. But we are not without hope for eventual breakthroughs on reaching consensus among us. Previous challenges in the Church to change, i.e., to go deeper into the substance of the Catholic faith, have resulted in tension and conflict. Still, out of these struggles comes a renewed and clarified vision of the faith and its effective proclamation. The postconciliar phase we are currently going through is an integral part of the conciliar process itself, and that includes the continued conflicts associated with it. The ongoing reception of Vatican II will be long and often painful. It will demand all the spiritual and intellectual resources we can muster, as well as the emotional maturity our predecessors in the faith worked so hard to inculcate in us. We owe them nothing less than a spirit of openness to the genuine impulses of the Spirit among us.

**References**


