

**THE ORDAINED PRIEST AS
A SACRAMENT OF CHRIST,
THE MEDIATOR OF GOD'S
WORD TO THE COMMUNITY**

Mediating God's Word

Christ the priest-mediator of God's word to the community

Because God is the initiator of all communion with God, and because we cannot respond to God's loving invitation without first receiving it, the communication of God's word is the first movement of the mediation of the priest. It was so for the priests of the Old Testament. It is so for Jesus the High Priest. The Letter to the Hebrews opens with a portrayal of Jesus as the one through whom God communicates to the world:

By various stages

and in various ways

in times of old

GOD *speaking* to the Fathers

in the prophets

with the end of those days

spoke to us in a SON,

whom he established heir of all

through whom also he made the ages

who, being the shining-forth of his glory

and the expression of his reality,

and continuing to carry all things [to their goal]

with his *utterance* of power

involving himself in effecting purification from sins,

took his seat to the right of the Majesty on high.

– Hebrews 1:1-3

The author goes on to establish that Jesus is a 'trustworthy high priest' (Hebrews 2:17). We can be confident that the word which he speaks comes to us from God. Moses was trustworthy (Numbers 12:6-8). How much more so is Jesus (Hebrews 3:1-6). The section devoted to God's word concludes with the following hymn:

The word of God is living, active, sharper than any two-edged sword,

piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow;

it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

There is no creature that is hidden from God; all is laid bare before God.

The word faces us towards God.

– Hebrews 4:12-13

The priest as a sacrament of Christ mediating God's word

by preaching and teaching

In *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium* (1999), the Congregation for the

Clergy writes:

From a pastoral perspective, the primary action of evangelisation is logically considered to be preaching. From the perspective of intentionality, however, the primary element of evangelisation must be celebration of the sacraments, especially of Penance and the Blessed Eucharist. (page 18)

Christ the priest-mediator speaks his word to the community through the ordained priest, the sacrament of his presence as Head of the Assembly which is his Body. God's word is communicated by preaching and teaching which reveal who God is and who we are in communion with God; and by governing which reveals God's will. The self-revelation by God is to draw us into the loving communion in which holiness consists. Since the initiator of life is God, the first function of ordained priests is to mediate God's word. We will look here at this aspect of priestly mediation. Later we will look at the priest as a sacrament of Christ the Priest who mediates the community's response to God.

We read in the First Epistle to Timothy: 'Let the presbyters who lead well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching' (1 Timothy 5:17). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts the community: 'Remember those leading you, those who spoke to you God's word' (Hebrews 13:7). In the documents of the Vatican Council we read:

Since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests to preach the Gospel of God to all.

– PO, n. 4

Their ministration ... begins with the announcement of the gospel.

– PO, n.2

By the sacrament of Order, presbyters are configured to Christ the priest as servants of the Head. [They must be] prepared to listen to the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ who gives them life and guidance.

– PO, n.12

When an ordained priest mediates God's word to an individual or group or community in his role as priest, he is doing so precisely as a sacrament of Christ-as-Head. He speaks to people from his experience of the reality of their lives. If he is to connect them with God, he must speak from the communion with God which he experiences and into which he invites them. People are hungering and thirsting to know the mystery of God and to be drawn into the sacred. In the words of the late Cardinal Bernardin, we are 'Bearers of the Mystery'.

It is vitally important that we 'preach with authority', connecting people with God, the author of revelation. Bernardin writes: 'we are meant to lure the believers onto healthy spiritual ground'. We are inviting them into the sanctuary. The priest should know the tradition and be able to communicate it in public in an engaging way. The following definition of the magisterium is a reminder that orthodox teaching is teaching that remains in touch with the Spirit in people's lives. John Thornhill writes:

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The expression of the gift of the Spirit, whereby the Church's pastors serve the community of believers by discerning what the Spirit is saying to the whole Church, calling it to a witness and life which is a faithful expression of the unchanging truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of human history.

It is not enough for the priest to be, in the words of John Thornhill, 'a dedicated and unselfish administrator of a remarkable organisation'. He is called to be a spiritual guide to discipleship.

The demise of the Catholic sub-culture requires of the priest that he find words to connect with people who are living in the midst of the world with its 'joys and hopes, its grief and anxiety' (GS n.1). We are not reinforcing a sub-culture; we are nourishing disciples with a mission, 'equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.' (Ephesians 4:12).

The invitation to meet people on their own pad in the secular city is an invitation to discover God there and to be an instrument of God's loving compassion there where people are. We need to be exploring real questions, not repeating abstractions that fail to connect. We need to check that the people find our words worth listening to. If we find that we do not have this gift, it is our responsibility as leaders of the community to find someone who has it. We need to be careful not to neglect certain parish bodies while we concentrate on others and we must avoid using fear as a tool, limiting people's freedom as an instrument of control. We are sacraments of a liberating God.

The priest as a man of faith

To be a mediator of the word we must learn to listen to the word in faith. Writing at the height of Babylonian power and only a few years before the capture of Jerusalem, the prophet Habbakuk concludes his statement as follows. It is a remarkable statement of faith:

Even though the fig tree does not blossom, and there is no fruit on the vine;
even though the yield of the olive fails, and the fields afford no food;
even though the sheep vanish from the fold, and the stalls stand empty of cattle -
yet I will rejoice in Yahweh, I will exult in God my saviour.
Yahweh my Lord is my strength. He makes my feet as light as a doe's;
He sets my steps on the heights.

– Habakkuk 3:17-19

In the New Testament, Luke presents Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the perfect disciple. This is especially so because of her faith, as the words of her cousin Elizabeth declare:

Blessed is she (Mary) who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.

– Luke 1:45

Peter fails in courage but Jesus prays that his faith will be steady:

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have

turned again, strengthen your brethren.

– Luke 22:31-32

Mark is harder on the disciples. They lose faith, but it is restored thanks to the fidelity of Jesus:

You will all lose faith ... However, after my resurrection, I shall go before you into Galilee.

– Mark 14:27

Faith is a major theme also for John. Suffice here to quote Jesus words to Thomas in the final scene of the Gospel:

Jesus said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.

– John 20:27

The following two poems by the Australian poet, James McAuley, give lyrical expression to the essence of faith. The second poem was composed just months before his death:

Though all men should desert you my faith shall not grow less,
but keep that single virtue of simple thankfulness.

Pursuit had closed around me, terrors had pressed me low;
you sought me and you found me, and I will not let you go.

The hearts of men grow colder, the final things draw near.

Forms vanish, kingdoms moulder, the antirealm is here
whose order is derangement: close-driven, yet alone,
men reach the last estrangement, the sense of nature gone.

Though the stars run distracted, and from wounds deep rancours flow,
while the mystery is enacted I will not let you go’ (*In a late hour*).

I know that faith is like a root that’s tough, inert and old;

yet it can send up its green shoot and flower against the cold.

I know there is a grace that flows when all the springs run dry;

it wells up to renew the rose and lift the cedars high. (1st May 1976)

The priest as a sacrament of Christ mediating God’s will by governing

The word coming from the risen Christ, besides revealing who God is and how God has chosen to relate to us, is also a word that guides us as to how we should respond. This directing word also is mediated to the Christian community especially through those who are ordained to leadership of that community. The leadership exercised by the ordained priest relates to the Body as such and is a sacrament of the leadership of the Body exercised by Christ the Head. The ordained priest is a sacrament of Christ directing the community to do God’s will. This role includes the mediation of commanding, discerning, directing and governing. Various dimension of this role are highlighted in the following texts from the new Testament:

We are God’s fellow-workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.

– 1Corinthians 3:9

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This is how one should regard us, as personal servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

– 1Corinthians 4:1

The Lord's slave must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, able to teach, forbearing, correcting with gentleness those who oppose the truth. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth.

– 2Timothy 2:24-26

Never be a dictator over any group that is put in your charge, but be an example that the whole flock will follow.

– 1Peter 5:3

Obey your leaders and be submissive, for they are vigilant for your souls, as ones who will have to give account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighs, for that would be of no advantage to you.

– Hebrews.13:17

The Vatican documents also speak of the kind of governing which the Church entrusts to those with the sacrament of Order:

The hierarchy make wise laws in docile response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and exercise a supervisory and protective authority.

– LG, n. 45

The pastor's task extends to the formation of a genuine Christian community.

– PO, n. 6

It is for the pastors to pass judgment on the authenticity and good use of the gifts of the faithful, not, certainly, with a view to quenching the Spirit, but to testing everything and keeping what is good.

– AA, n. 3. (See also LG, n. 12)

The holders of office ... are dedicated to promoting the interest of their brothers and sisters, so that all who belong to the people of God may, through their free and well-ordered efforts towards a common goal, attain to salvation.

– LG, n. 18

While testing the spirits if they be of God, they must discover with faith, recognise with joy, and foster with diligence, the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity ... bringing about agreement among divergent outlooks in such a way that nobody may feel a stranger in the Christian community ... (They are to be) defenders of the common good.

– PO, n.9

John-Paul II writes in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance in the mission of the Church today (1984):

The sacrament of Orders is intended to give to the Church pastors who, besides being teachers and guides, are called to be witnesses and workers for unity, builders of the family of God, and builders and preservers of the communion of this family against the sources of division and dispersion. (n.27)

The ordained priest, as a sacrament of Christ directing the community to do God's will,

should be one who is able to facilitate the cooperative building of a community of inter-dependent people. He needs to respect people and their gifts. He should be able to foster their contribution to the building of the community and to contributing towards its mission in and to the world. He will need to be sufficiently integrated to be able to focus upon others without his own agenda dominating, and have the ability to listen and to relate to people in an attractive and liberating way.

In his book 'Priesthood in Reality', Tony Philpot reminds us that great saints began as ordinary parishioners. The first priest they knew, the priest who played an important role in forming their spirit, was their parish priest. Philpot reminds us that our place is to be between the general and the particular. This can feel at times like being between a rock and a hard place, and it involves us in the pain of being loyal to both. Let us not forget that Christ is the gate. If we go out to others through him we will undoubtedly find the Father drawing each person to himself. Our ministry is to listen to people while we listen to the Spirit of Jesus in our hearts, and to the local bishop in whose ministry we share. We are to respond in love with the best wisdom we have at the time, following the maxim of Saint Paul: 'Do the truth in love'(Ephesians 4:15).

We are to be peacemakers, pastors who reach out in love to all God's 'sheep', whether they are caught in the brambles of the left or the brambles of the right. It is our grace to keep on breaking down barriers as instruments of him who 'has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his person the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the law'(Ephesians 2:14).

Ours is a collaborative ministry. Love does not control. Such is the power given us by people that we must constantly be examining our use of it lest we abuse it. Lording it over others must not happen among us (Luke 22:26). Hierarchy is always at the service of communion. Philpot quotes from a 1995 publication of the Bishops of England and Wales, *The Sign We Give*:

When men and women collaborate in ministry, they cannot avoid entering the complex territory of understanding the complementarity of masculine and feminine within and between persons. Indeed, the Trinitarian basis of collaboration demands openness in this aspect of relationships. It may be highly charged and may seem risky to some, but it is one of the ways in which collaborative ministry offers a possibility of profound personal and spiritual growth.

The priest as a man of hope, patience and obedience

The priest will need hope and patience (Romans 8:24), for we are obviously pilgrims and pioneers in a relatively new situation in which the relevance of the Gospel is not evident to many. We are encouraged by the example of Abraham (Hebrews 11:8-10).

The power to command is dangerous when exercised by one who has not learned to obey. Obedience is at the heart of Jesus' relationship to God:

My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.

– John 4:34

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I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

– John 5:30

I do nothing on my own ... And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.'

– Matthew 26:39 and 42

Obedience is also central to Jesus' expectations of his disciples:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

– Matthew 6:9-10

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

– Matthew 12:49-50

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

– Matthew 28:19-20

Teresa of Avila writes: 'In perfect conformity to God's will lies all our good' (*Interior Castle, II,1,8*). Doing God's will means 'seeking him with all our hearts'. God does not want us to obey blindly or automatically, without engaging our heart. He does not command from the outside as it were. God speaks also to our heart and he wants our obedience to come from our heart. This is what we mean by conscience: an attentive listening to the movements of our heart that are inspired by God. If we are attentive to our heart and listen to the directions of God that are picked up by our conscience, and if we humbly and faithfully respond to these inspirations from our heart, we are promised a special blessedness. The Book of Proverbs has the following advice:

More than all else, keep watch over your own heart, since there are the well-springs of life.

– Proverbs 4:23

We read also in the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach:

Heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than it is. Your soul often forewarns you. It is better than seven watchmen in a tower. While you heed your heart, beg the Most High to guide you in the path of truth.

* * * * *

Appendix.

The following warnings from the prophets could provide a good examination of conscience for those of us who are commissioned to be mediators of the Word.

Listen to the words I say ... Open your mouth and eat what I am about to give you ... Then go and speak.

– Ezekiel 2:8 and 3:1

The priests teach whatever they please and my people love it.

– Jeremiah 5:31

Prophet no less than priest, all practise fraud. They dress my people's wound without concern. Peace! Peace! they say, but there is no peace.

– Jeremiah 6:3 = 8:10

You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced;
you have overpowered me: you were the stronger.

I am a laughing-stock, everybody's butt ...

The word of Yahweh has meant for me insult, derision, all day long.

I used to say 'I will not think about him, I will not speak in his name any more.'

Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones.

The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not bear it.

– Jeremiah 20:7-9

Do not listen to what the prophets say, they are deluding you. They retail visions of their own, and not what comes from the mouth of Yahweh.

– Jeremiah 23:16

I have not sent them, yet they are running;

I have not spoken to them, yet they are prophesying.

– Jeremiah 23:21

Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream as his own! And let him who receives a word from me deliver it accurately! ... Does not my word burn like a fire? Is it not like a hammer shattering a rock?

– Jeremiah 23:28-29

I never sent them or commissioned them, and they serve no good purpose for this people.

– Jeremiah 23:32

Watch over my word to see it fulfilled.

– Jeremiah 1:12

The priests have never asked: 'Where is Yahweh?'

– Jeremiah 2:8

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My people have abandoned me, the fountain of living water, only to dig cisterns for themselves, leaky cisterns that hold no water.

– Jeremiah 2:13

The shepherds are the ones who have been stupid: they have not searched for Yahweh.

– Jeremiah 10:21

You shepherds have let my flock be scattered and go wandering and have not taken care of them.

– Jeremiah 23:2

The leader is like a sentry: his function is to keep watch and to warn of approaching danger.

– Ezekiel 2:16-21 and 33:1-9

Say to those who make up prophecies out of their own heads: The Lord Yahweh says, 'Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, without seeing anything! Like jackals in a ruin, so are your prophets, Israel. They have never ventured into the breach; they have never bothered to fortify the House of Israel, to stand fast in battle. They have empty visions and give lying prophecies and say: "It is Yahweh who speaks," although Yahweh has not sent them ... Instead of my people rebuilding the wall, these men come and slap on plaster.'

– Ezekiel 13:1-6,10

The priests have violated my laws, and desecrated my sanctuaries: they have drawn no distinction between the sacred and the profane.

– Ezekiel 22:26

Trouble for the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves. Shepherds ought to feed their flock, yet you have fed on milk, you have dressed yourselves in wool, you have sacrificed the fattest sheep, but failed to feed the flock. You have failed to make weak sheep strong, or to care for the sick ones, or bandage the wounded ones. You have failed to bring back strays or look after the lost ... My flock has been scattered all over the country; no one bothers about them, and no one looks for them.

– Ezekiel 34:1-6