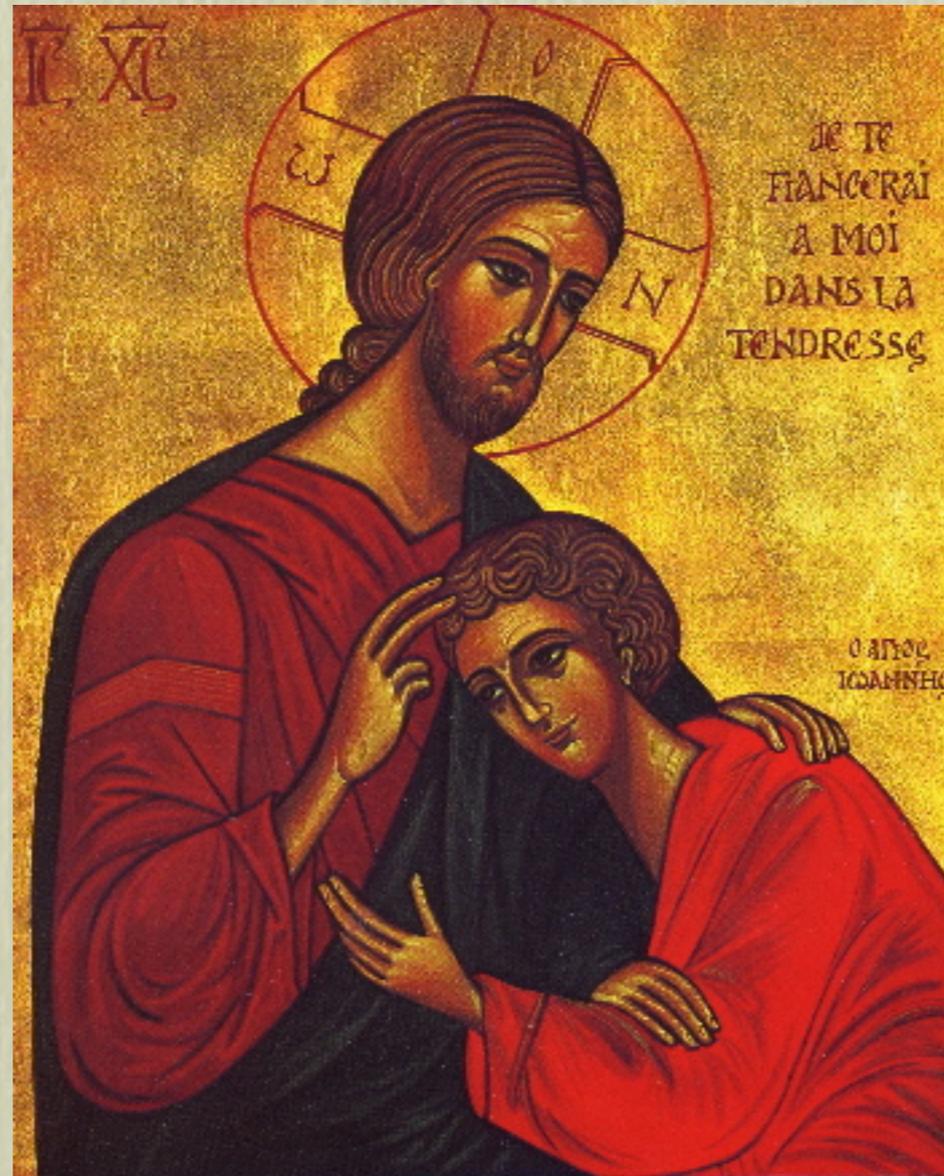


01. Introduction

‘I will raise up for myself a faithful priest
who will act according to what is in my heart’ (1 Samuel 2:35).



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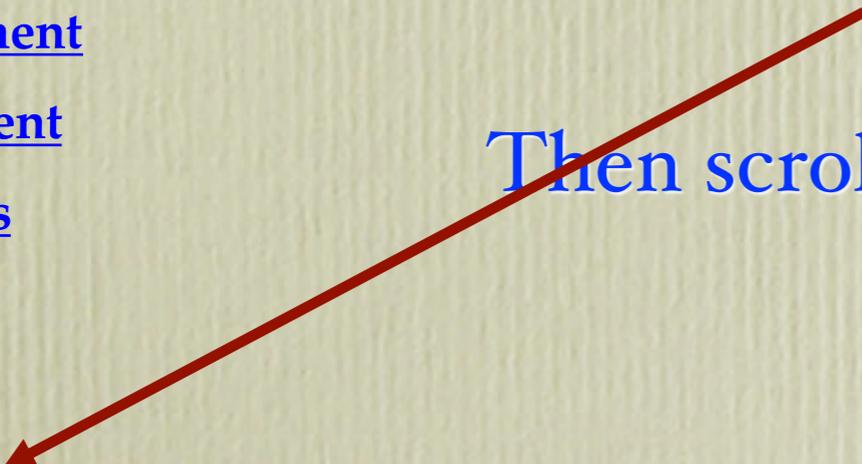
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Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World
Gaudium et Spes §1

‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties
of the men and women of this age,
especially those who are in any way afflicted,
these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties
of the followers of Christ.

Indeed nothing genuinely human
fails to raise an echo in their hearts,
for theirs is a community composed of men and women.

United in Christ,
they are led by the Holy Spirit
in their journey to the kingdom of their Father
and they have welcomed the news of salvation
which is meant for everyone.’

The circumstances of people's lives are constantly changing. Different questions are being asked and, as Pope John XXIII said in his opening address to the Council:

'The substance of the ancient teaching of the deposit of faith is one thing; the way in which it is presented is another.'

The Church as a living organism relating to a changing world is also undergoing constant change, and since the priesthood is defined in relation to the Church, we must expect changes in the way priesthood is exercised.

David Walker names some of the changes (*Models of Spirituality for Ordained Ministers*, in *Priesthood: the hard questions* (Ed. Gerald Gleeson, EJDwyer 1993) page 18):

‘We are experiencing a new understanding of the church and the role of ministry within it, as well as a re-evaluation of the role of the laity within the church, which is causing us to reflect further on their relationship to the ordained minister.

Today, holiness is not seen as demanding separation from the world, but as able to be lived to the full in any Christian way of life; it is identified much more with the baptismal life of the believer than with any post-baptismal vocation. Part of this new approach to holiness is a new understanding of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the temporal. All of these movements are motivating us to re-evaluate the meaning of ordained ministry, its role in the community, and the spirituality that is to be associated with it.’

Part of the difficulty is that things are changing very rapidly. Furthermore, many of the changes as far as we priests are concerned do not feel good. In many ways John O'Donohue is right: 'The landscape has shattered and the old maps no longer offer guidance or direction' (*Minding the Threshold* in *The Furrow*, June 1998, 326).

He says elsewhere that there is no point in priests: 'clinging desperately to their particular ledge of conviction as the ocean of different consciousness rises all about them' (*The priestliness of the human heart* in *The Way Supplement* 83, 1995, 44).

At the same time, while it is essential that we adapt our way of exercising the priesthood in a changing and more collaborative Church, it is important to reaffirm that the identity of the priest, as expressed in the writings of the early centuries down through the documents of the Vatican Council and since, has remained substantially the same. It is important to reassert this as we seek new ways of carrying out our ministry.

In an article published in the ACR (January 1999), entitled *'Understanding the Church's present difficulties, and the reactions they are producing'*, John Thornhill SM reminds us of some of the shortcomings of the Church which the Second Vatican Council set out to reform:

- it was strongly reactionary in character;
- it saw itself as apart from the world;
- it was excessively institutionalised;
- it was theologically and pastorally rigid;
- it paid little attention to the sources of vitality found in the Scriptures, the Sacramental Mysteries and the wealth of experience found in Tradition.

John O'Malley SJ has provided us with 'a simple litany' of the changes in church style indicated by the Council's vocabulary:

from commands to invitations,

from threats to persuasion,

from monologue to conversation,

from ruling to serving,

from withdrawn to integrated,

from vertical and top-down to horizontal,

from exclusion to inclusion,

from static to changing,

from passive acceptance to active engagement,

from behaviour modification to conversion of heart,

from the dictates of law to the dictates of conscience,

from external conformity to the joyful pursuit of holiness.

To fail to believe in the world is to fail to believe in people It is to fail to believe in God who is present loving the world and drawing everyone into communion in order that 'all will be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4). Every person is made from love and for love. Everyone is called to enjoy divine communion and everyone has a word to say and a spirit to share.

Yes, there is darkness and sin and dysfunction and there is need for conversion, but Joseph Bernardin reminds us: 'The Incarnation means that nothing of our humanity is alien to God or untouched by divine power ... All of our human experience becomes in principle a route of access to the divine' (*Priests: Religious Leaders, Doctors of the Soul* in Origins)

Everyone recognises that there is a profound hunger and thirst for the spiritual in today's world. Many of yesterday's answers are, of course, still relevant, but they will need to be communicated in language that meets today's questions and today's quest.

Furthermore, people are looking for help from people whose lives they recognise as being real, and relevant.

What are people looking to a priest for? In the article just quoted, Bernardin speaks powerfully of the priest as a **Bearer of the Mystery** and a **Doctor of the soul**. He concludes:

‘We are not dispensable ‘functionaries’ in the church; we are bridges to the very mystery of God and healers of the soul. When we claim this identity unapologetically, we not only find ourselves; we also provide the church and our culture with the sustenance they require. This is the vocation, the reality, to which we are called. It is not dependent on numbers, or structures, or chancery offices, or any of the things we thought so essential, so important, but are now completely changed or are no more. Rather, it is dependent on the Lord Jesus, who never changes, and to whom we are irrevocably united through ordination – the Lord Jesus (who is the mystery of God and the healer of the soul) whom we make present in a tangible and inviting way each day to the countless people whom we serve. To him be honour and glory, now and always’ (*Priests: Religious Leaders, Doctors of the Soul* in Origins).

John Thornhill SM

‘The church’s institutional structures exist to promote what is paramount in the church’s life: helping people find a life-giving relationship with God. Pastors who make this their overriding priority, consciously directing the pastoral guidance they exercise within their communities to this end, and sharing the truth of their own faith journey with their people, will find that their people respond positively. Pastors, on the other hand, whose vision is little more than administering a well-disciplined system, will find that their well-intentioned efforts often meet with dissatisfaction – as their people instinctively recognise that, before all else, membership of the church should develop their life-giving relationship with God.’

John Thornhill quotes Karl Rahner

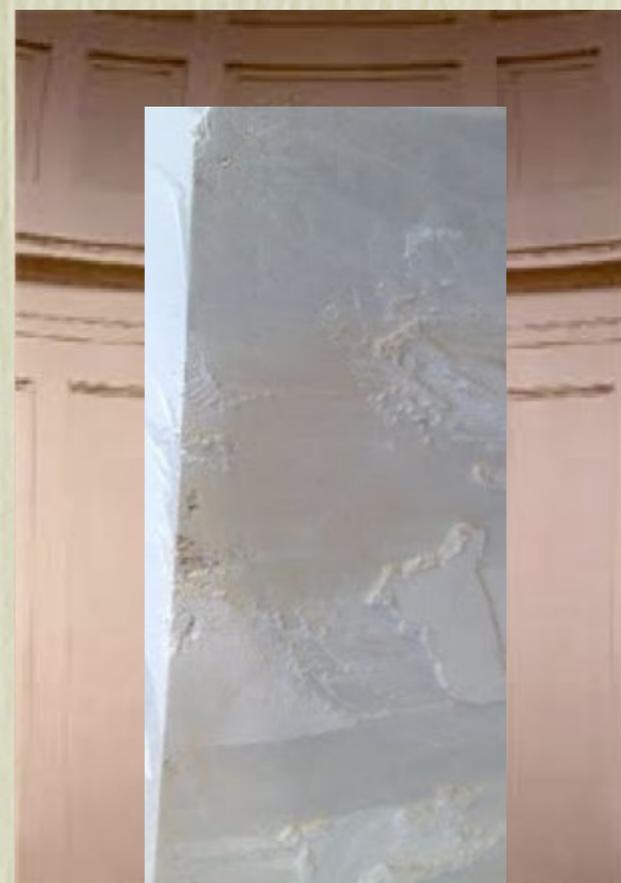
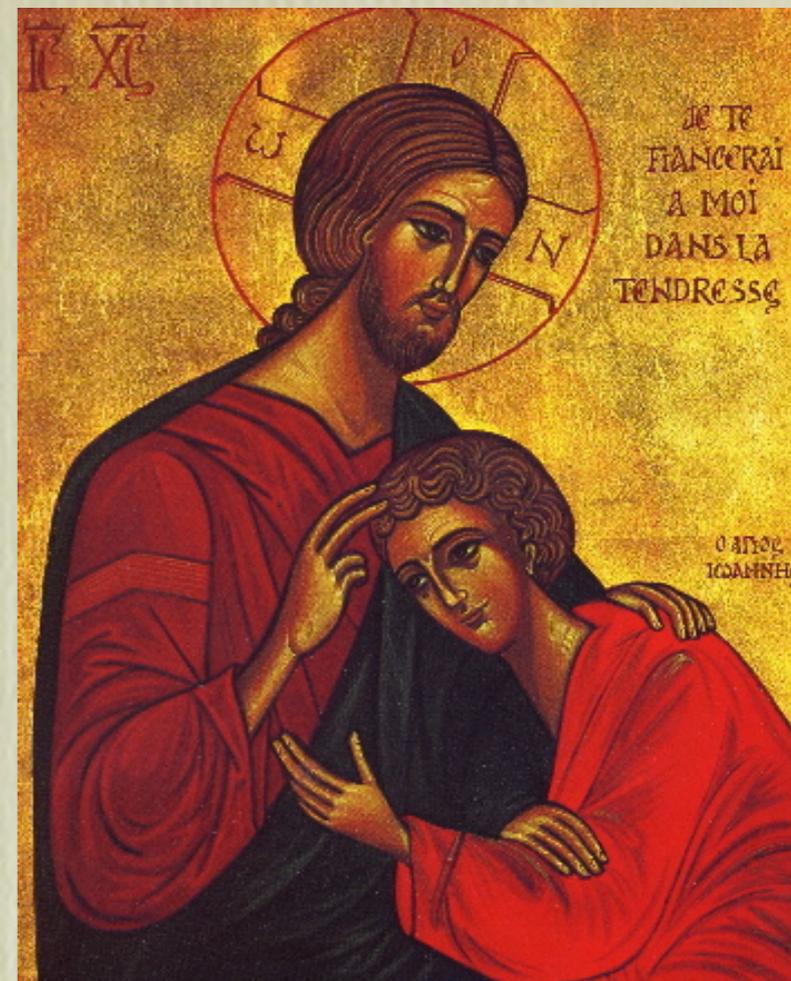
‘The priest can bring life to the preaching of the Gospel only if (as well as and as far as it is granted to him) he is a mystagogue of that ultimate, internal, religious experience of God and his grace, without which no one can in the long run resist the pressure of his secularised environment and remain a Christian. Without this the pastor will be little more than a cultic and ecclesiastical official celebrating no longer credible ceremonies. The ability to pray ought not to be seen as a sectoral occupation in his life but as a basic structure of his existence, since he is the very one who ought always to accept, as dependent on it, the presence of the absolute mystery facing everyone, and truly to live it in freedom. The priest today is primarily the servant of the faith of others.’

John Thornhill continues:

‘In taking up this challenge, we should weigh carefully Rahner’s parenthesis, ‘as well as and as far as it is granted to him’. Our ministry will be fruitful, if we sincerely offer the service of which we are capable. As we have already remarked, those pastors who effectively foster the faith, hope and love which constitutes the essential covenant-relationship between God and the church, and who help their people find God in the reality of their lives, are accepted by their people as effective spiritual leaders, whatever limitations they may have in their own talents.’

As we reflect on some of these changes, let us continue to focus on the central core of our calling which is to be Beloved Disciples, knowing Jesus' love and listening as he invites us to share his mission and to be instruments of his love in that part of the vineyard where providence has placed us.

Paul spoke of us as 'God's work of art' (Ephesians 2:10). Michelangelo had the gift of being able to see the finished product already in the crude marble. The grace given to us as priests is similar. From our communion with God, we are to see in others the work of art that God is gracing them to become.



For all the changes that we are experiencing, our key ministry as priests is the same as when we were ordained. Through us Jesus has chosen to teach, to sanctify and to govern the community placed in our care.

In '*I will give you shepherds (PDV)*', John-Paul II speaks of the 'threefold ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral charity' (n.26). He writes: 'In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ the head and shepherd:

- authoritatively proclaiming his word,
- repeating his acts of forgiveness and offer of salvation, particularly in Baptism, Penance and the Eucharist.
- showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit' (n.15).

It is Jesus' love that alone can make this possible, and nothing can separate us from his love unless we choose to separate ourselves from him. Teresa of Avila reminds us: 'Keep your eyes fixed on him. He never takes his eyes off you' (Way of Perfection, 26.3).

Whatever joys we are now experiencing in our ministry, we know that they are a privileged sharing in the joy of the Heart of Jesus.

Whatever difficulties or disappointments we are having, we know that they are a privileged sharing in his cross.

So let us accept his invitation to come aside for a short while and rest (Mark 6:31). Rest in his company. Enjoy in prayer a quality of communion with him that will draw us nearer to his heart and that will enlighten and sustain us when we return to our current ministry and life.

The document on the priesthood from Vatican II went through a number of drafts. A significant change was in the title which took the final form of '*Decree on the ministry and life of presbyters*'. It was recognised that our spiritual life happens in the real world of our ministry.

Pope John-Paul II speaks of the 'spiritual life that grows through the exercise of the ministry' (PDV n.25).

Tony Philpot, in his book '*Priesthood in Reality*' (Kevin Mayhew 1998, page 79) uses the image of a car battery which charges itself up when the car is running.

Our ministry is about communion. We come to others from our communion with God, and Jesus draws them into deeper communion through our ministry.

Saint Dominic spoke of our vocation: ‘contemplata tradere’ (to hand on what we have received in contemplation).

Saint Ignatius of Loyola used a similar expression: ‘in actione contemplativus’ (contemplative in action). In prayer we are drawn deeper into communion with God. It is from this communion that we are sent into mission.

John O'Donohue writes: 'The priest is drawn to the frontiers ... where divinity suffuses humanity. In order to attend to these frontiers, the priest must be alive to the depth and complexity of his own interiority' (The Priestliness of the human heart, page 48).

Let us reflect again on Paul's words to Timothy: 'Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of the elders laid their hands upon you' (1 Timothy 4:14).

'I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of temerity, but a spirit of power and love and self control' (2 Timothy 1:6).

Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, n. 4

‘Priests partake of their grace and office through Christ the eternal and only mediator. They should grow in the love of God and of their neighbour by the daily exercise of their duty, should keep the bond of priestly fellowship, should abound in every spiritual good and bear living witness of God to all, imitating those priests who, in the course of the centuries, left behind them an outstanding example of holiness, often in a humble and hidden service. Their praise lives on in God’s church. They have a duty to pray and offer sacrifice for their people and for the whole people of God, appreciating what they do and imitating what they touch with their hands. Rather than be held back by perils and hardships in their apostolic labours, they should rise to greater holiness, nourishing and fostering their action with an overflowing contemplation, for the delight of the entire church of God.’

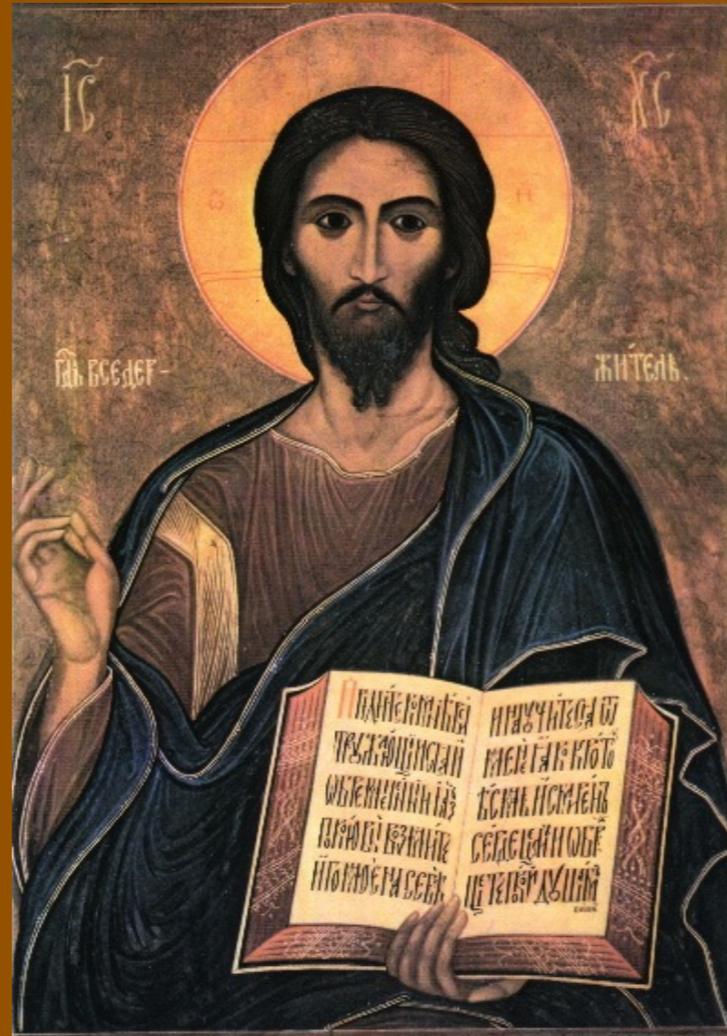
How do you see the priesthood within the church's life and ministry?

How do you see yourself, with your unique gifts and calling ('You have not chosen me, I have chosen you'), within the ministry of priests in the Church and in the world?

How does your story fit into the long story of the priesthood?

Avery Dulles offers four models of the ordained ministerial priesthood. Each of the four is clearly relevant. You might find, however, that you instinctively relate to one of them more than to the others.

1. a minister of the Word
2. a cultic figure ordained to administer the Sacraments
3. a pastoral leader of a community of disciples
4. an icon of Christ



I have loved you

Words and Music Michael Joncas

(Text based on Jer 31:3; Ps 24:3.)

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I have loved you
with an everlasting love
I have called you,
and you are mine.

I have loved you
with an everlasting love
I have called you,
and you are mine.

Seek the face of the Lord
and long for him
he will bring you his
light and his peace.



I have loved you
with an everlasting love
I have called you,
and you are mine.

I have loved you
with an everlasting love
I have called you,
and you are mine.

Seek the face of the Lord
and long for him,
he will bring you his
joy and his hope.



I have loved you
with an everlasting love
I have called you,
and you are mine.

I have loved you
with an everlasting love
I have called you,
and you are mine.

Seek the face of the Lord
and long for him,
he will bring you his
care and his love.