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The Ecclesial Vocation of the Priest. A Vatican Council II Perspective

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Abstract: An overview of priesthood in history is provided. The change in the understanding of priesthood that Vatican II brings is highlighted, especially the noteworthy aspects of its teaching regarding priesthood for today's world. Different dimensions of the ecclesial vocation of the ministerial priesthood are presented. Serving the people of God, sacramentalizing Christian leadership and fostering dialogue as a way of life are among the major elements of a relevant priesthood for today.

Keywords: Priest, history of priesthood, Vatican II priesthood, ecclesial vocation, ministerial priest, common priesthood, sacramental service.

The year of the priest may have been declared in the context of many concerns, e.g. the scandals caused by pedophile clergymen, the alarming increase of priest-less parishes, etc., but it offers Catholics an opportunity to reflect seriously on the vocation of the priest. Further, as the sub-title indicates, the Vatican II documents *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Optatam Totius* offer suitable points of reference to elaborate on the function of the priest in the Church—*aggiornamento* (updating) being the overall aim of the council.

As one of the seven sacraments in the Church, the priesthood is a constitutive element of the Church. The need for priests is tied up with the Church's self-understanding as a worshipping community organically united to Christ the head and celebrating its liturgy

through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The common priesthood of all the members forming the Church is given visible, concrete and efficacious expression through the ministry of the priest. In turn, the ministerial priesthood achieves its intended purpose in the midst of the People of God called to be identified with Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit.

If the sacraments in the Church are meant to build up community—the Body of Christ—centred on the Eucharist, the ecclesial aspect of the vocation of a priest should merit more attention in writings celebrating the year of the priest. Too often, the priesthood is viewed mostly as the personal vocation one lives out individually in response to the call of God. The priest's life of prayer, self-introspection, selflessness, closeness to God and personal holiness are viewed with little concern given to his ecclesial ministry. Left out of consideration is the fact that it is the Church that requires the ministry of the priest for specific tasks—primarily the building up of the Body of Christ—and sets down the job description into which he must fit! Hence, wanting to be faithful to God's call in the Church is not a sufficient reason for a person to enlist for the priesthood. It is the Church that decides and calls him to fulfill the requirements of the ministerial priesthood. And this is what takes place at the ordination of a priest.

In this essay, an effort is made to articulate the different dimensions that make up the ecclesial vocation of the ministerial priesthood. When the Church calls a person to the priesthood it is these dimensions that give substance to the vocation to the priesthood. Another way of saying the same thing is to inquire how the job description of a priest enables him to carry out the authentic priestly mission of Christ in the Church and in the world. We shall try to

understand the priesthood by examining its meaning in the pre-Christian era, considering what the New Testament and Catholic Tradition tell us about the Christian priesthood, and then understanding how Vatican II looks at the priesthood. In the light of the council's intuitions and official church documents a concrete vision for today's priest is offered.

I. An Overview of the Priesthood in History

In general, the function of the priesthood has been linked generally to that of offering religious sacrifice. At the same time, the notion of sacrifice itself is complex and varied. Sacrifice is well described in the following words:

The offering of something, animate or inanimate, in a ritual procedure which establishes, or mobilizes, a relationship of mutuality between one who sacrifices (whether individual or group) and the recipient—who may be human but more often is of another order, e.g. God or spirit. Sacrifice pervades virtually all religions, but it is extremely difficult to say precisely what the meanings of sacrifice are—perhaps because the meanings are so many. Sacrifice is clearly much more than technique: it involves drama, ritual, and action, transforming whatever it is that is sacrificed beyond its mundane role: in general, nothing that is sacrificed has intrinsic worth or holiness before it is set apart; it is sacrifice that gives it added value. Sacrifice has been understood as expiation of fault or sin; as propitiation of an angry deity; as apotropaic (turning away punishment, disaster, etc.); as purgation; as an expression of gratitude; as substitutionary...as commensal, establishing union with God or with others in a community; as maintaining cosmic order; as celebration...as catharsis;¹ as a surrogate offering at the level of power and its distribution.

(A) Priesthood in the Greco-Roman World

In the Greco-Roman urban world the practice existed of men and women being chosen to serve gods and

goddesses.² Those serving in that capacity were referred to as “priests” or “priestesses”. Among them, some served as priests throughout their lives whereas others were given fixed terms. One finds evidence of the hereditary nature of priestly office. In other instances, there were publicly elected persons who fulfilled the priestly office. This priesthood was an honoured function yet it could also be sold to the highest bidder. Sometimes priests performed their duties only on special occasions, as required, but would continue carrying out other mundane tasks, e.g. social and political activities. Leadership roles were reflected in the jobs done by the father in a family, the head of a social group or officials in a city. Priests assisted those exercising leadership roles. Priests are also seen as expounders of sacred texts and mediators of divination. In the Greco-Roman world, the understanding of the priest was very different from what we find today.

...in English, ‘priest’ is used as a generic term ...but implies a potentially misleading unity of conception and an analogy with the roles of priesthood in later religions. Pagan priests did not form a separate group or caste and seldom devoted their whole lives to religious activity; characteristically, they performed their religious duties on special occasions or when required and otherwise continued with the same range of social or political activities as other members of their social groups. Above all, there was no religious community, separate from the civic community, with its own personnel or power-structure. Nor did priests monopolize religious action or communication with the gods and goddesses: fathers of families, leaders of social groups, officials of the city, all had the power of religious action, with priests as advisers or helpers.³

In the priesthood of the Greco-Roman world, one does not find resemblances to the three levels of Christian Order (deacons, priests and bishops) present in the Catholic priesthood.

(B) Priesthood in Israel

In Judaism, priests belonged to the hereditary class entrusted with “the performance of the cultic ceremonies of the Jerusalem Temple.”⁴ Besides ritual functions, they also conducted sacrificial services.⁵

According to Numbers 1:48-53 and 3:5-40, the Levites were singled out for the service of the Tabernacle... The changing role of the Levites in relation to the Temple reflects the consequences (and conflict) resulting from the building of the Temple, the centralization of the cult and the reordering of the Temple after the Exile, through all of which the priesthoods of Aaron and Zadok had to be accommodated. Levi was the only tribe to lack fixed territory in the Promised Land and in consequence of their religious duties received tithes. The Levites seem to have been subject to priests, the descendants of Aaron, although, according to Deuteronomy 18:6-9, all Levites are fit to serve in the Sanctuary. During the period of the monarchy, the Levites became state officials in their administration of the cult; they became eventually the Temple singers.⁶

Playing his part in a structured society, the priest in Israel was one who took care of varied services.⁷ At the same time, group pressures obliged the priest—perhaps against his better judgment—to accommodate the commands and wishes of secular society. At the time of the monarchy, the priest busied himself with giving oracles using the *urim* and *thummim*, providing religious instruction to the people and offering sacrifice.⁸ By New Testament times, the sole function of the priest was to offer sacrifice and when Jesus appeared the Jewish priesthood had become decidedly cultic.

(C) Priesthood in the New Testament

While there are references to Jesus as priest in the NT (e.g. Hebrews), he does not come from a priestly family.

Even more, Jesus is seen making a prophetic critique of the religious leaders through his actions and words.⁹ As is well known, the gospels do not depict the mission of Jesus in terms of cultic ritual. Yet, the reference point in the life of Jesus is the Father from whom he comes and to whom he will return. Doing the will of his Father is the vocation of Jesus and within that vocation he manifests his love, care and concern for people in his world. Hence, when we find the Letter to the Hebrews depicting Jesus as the high priest, the significance of that priesthood obtains from

(a) his solidarity with humankind in all things except sin (2:17-18; 4:15), and (b) his divine sonship, manifested through his perfect obedience in suffering (5:7-10)... Jesus is [thus] both a natural priest (in virtue of his divine sonship), and professional priest (because of his 'ordination' by God).¹⁰

The Eucharistic institutional text in Matthew refers to the covenantal sacrifice that Jesus offers for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26/28). As the perfect high priest Jesus has offered, once and for all, the sacrifice that makes any other sacrifice unnecessary (Heb 7:11-28; 8:1-10:18). In fact, the type of sacrifice found in the OT has no place in the NT since Jesus himself is the perfect priest as well as the perfect victim whose offering is already made through his life, death and resurrection.

The NT community that witnesses through its life and deeds to Jesus Christ now has the task of making concrete or actualizing the priestly function of Jesus. What Jesus did throughout his life, the NT Church must continue doing. I Peter 2:9-10 describes the church community in the NT as follows:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:9 interprets Exodus 19:6 "...you shall be to me a kingdom of priests a holy nation." What God had done for the people of Israel, he has now done for the Christian community. The status of being "God's own people" will be seen in declaring the mighty works of God that have found their fullest expression in the person of Jesus (Isaiah 43:21 "...the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.") Clearly, it is the whole Christian community that is priestly by fully giving itself over to God and by doing the will of the Father. It is this action that shows Jesus to be a priest and the Church in offering itself to the Father as Jesus did, follows in his footsteps.

The New Testament community is gifted with charisms for carrying out its different ministries. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul instructs his audience about the charisms (gifts of the Spirit) that are to be found in the community and their finality. Charisms are for the common good, for building the Body of Christ. However, among these charisms we do not find the priesthood mentioned. Further, one does not encounter a monolithic Church as we see in present times; rather there were many Christian communities that were structured differently one from another. It is with Ignatius of Antioch (110 CE) that one finds a Church headed by a monarchical episcopate.¹¹ Church structures varied significantly from place to place; however, by the second century the following must be noted:

While the New Testament shows a trend towards the development of (such) a mono-episcopal structure, it remains faithful to its insight that the mediating priesthood is restricted to Jesus and to the community he has founded. Church officials, even in the latest strata of the New Testament, are

never called or thought of as sacral persons or cultic priests. They are seen as pastoral ministers, exercising a charismatic ministry of service and oversight.¹²

Already at this stage one can see the unity of the worshipping Church that is founded on the relationship between the person who animates, leads and facilitates the community's worship and the members of the worshipping community. The function of worship exists in the community because the Church as a whole (the Body of Christ) makes its offering to the Father. The specific identity of the priest is tied up with the church community even while the priest is the one authorized or ordained for carrying out his ministry.

(D) Priesthood in the History of the Church

With the era of Constantine (ca. 288-337), Church and State become partners and the pomp and circumstance of the secular rulers invade the Church. By the 4th century, sacerdotalism enters the Church and is reflected in the Christian clergy whose task was to offer sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Eucharist. The Eucharistic table becomes the altar on which the sacrifice takes place in an unbloody manner! Sacerdotalism is the setting apart of a cadre of persons who are separated from the people and who function as a privileged group enabling the community to worship. The priestly "caste" was born in the Church. Sacerdotalism suggests that the form and function of the OT priesthood was introduced into the priesthood of the NT. Gradually, the priest's focus was on the cultic ritual and less on leading the community to fulfill its role of declaring "the wonderful deeds" of God as stated in 1 Peter 2:9-10. The main cultic ritual was the Eucharist.

During the fifth century, when Augustine referred to

the Eucharist as Body of Christ he meant the presence of Christ in and together with the worshipping community. The Eucharistic presence of Christ in the sacred species was acknowledged tacitly as we see in the accounts of Justin Martyr who speaks about the Eucharistic species being taken to those unable to be present at the Eucharistic sacrifice. However, by the 9th century we come across efforts to explain how Christ (*Christus solus*) is present in the Eucharistic species. As a result, the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the sacred species begins to take shape in the writing of two monks: Radbertus (Christ physically present) and Ratramnus (spiritually and mysteriously present).¹³ Since the priest celebrated the Eucharistic sacrifice, he was seen as the one who effected the change in the bread and wine so that Christ became (substantially) present. The whole Eucharistic action reflected the traditional function of the priest which was to offer sacrifice and to bring about the Real Presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine...

By the twelfth century, the era of Berengar began and in response to the questions about the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, emphasis on the sacred species became the main focus of the Eucharistic cult, especially the cult of the Eucharist outside the mass. In 1088, "absolute ordination" was permitted which weakened the link between the priest and the community he served.¹⁴ Much later in the sixteenth century and in the atmosphere of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent reaffirmed the sacrament of Order that conferred on the priest the *potestas ordinis*. The emphasis on the cultic character of the priest was further accentuated with particular reference to the celebration of the Eucharist and Penance/Reconciliation.¹⁵ In considering the sacramental

action, little emphasis was laid on the word of God as compared to the power exercised by the ordained priest in celebrating the mysteries of salvation.

The reforms of Trent produced seminary training for the priest that not only educated him but also made him a more pliable instrument in the hands of the bishop. Such seminary training was not contextual and produced priests with a worldview, knowledge and spirituality that were scholastic and European. Such training gave rise to a clerical mentality in priests that was reflected in their way of life—supported in part by church law regarding the observance of celibacy—and it underlined the privileged status of priests (and bishops) in society. In 1947, the encyclical *Mediator Dei* of Pius XII, while confirming the Liturgical Movement that sought people's participation in the liturgy, felt the need to emphasize the difference between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood (ND 1731-1734).

Vatican II heralded a change in the understanding of the priest. While it did not disregard the cultic function of the priest it situated it in his ministerial identity so that the common priesthood of the Christian community was the point of departure for the ministerial priesthood. It also stressed the fact that the priest acts as the extension of the bishop who remains the head of the local Church.

II. The Priesthood and Vatican II

Vatican Council II was an event of unique importance during the Church's history in the 20th century. It was a moment when the Church began to understand itself not merely in itself but in relation to the whole world. This appeared clearly in *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and in *Gaudium et Spes*,

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The first document viewed the Church as the People of God because of God's call addressed to all persons. The second saw the Church as a partner with the world of the secular facing modern-day challenges. Vatican II was a council that invited Catholics to rethink their identity and mission as members of the Church situated in the world.

Such rethinking would surely have an impact on at least two discernible groupings in the Church: the laity and the hierarchy. All, even members of the hierarchy begin their Christian life by first becoming part of the People of God and therefore sharing in the common priesthood. What then could Vatican II say that was specific and concrete about the hierarchy which would apply to bishops and priests in so far as they celebrated divine worship? We shall try to answer this question by looking first at the texts of *Optatam Totius*, Decree on the Training of Priests and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the ministry and Life of Priests.¹⁶

(A) Noteworthy Aspects in the Documents

Optatam Totius

In sharp contrast to the single pattern of seminary studies envisaged by the 16th century Tridentate reforms, Vatican II asks that "each nation or rite should have its own *Programme of Priestly Training*." (OT 1) The Priests' Charter for India, already revised once, was the result of the new thinking.

Major seminaries were to train future priests "for the ministry of the Word," "for the ministry of worship," and "to undertake the ministry of the shepherd." (OT 4) These are also the main functions of the bishop whom the priest represents in the ministry. The three functions mentioned

are proper of the bishop as well as the priest and focus on a common goal: the building up of God's People into the Body of Christ.

The priest is to be a man of prayer. (OT 8) The priest must be and seen to be a man of God whose assessments in this world must use both sound reason and deep faith. To lead the community in prayer, he must have familiarity with God that accompanies him in the three functions that he is asked to perform: proclamation of the word, sacramental celebration and exercising pastoral care.

During formation the priest should be trained in the exercise of responsible freedom. (11) The priest is ordained for the community of faith. He is accountable to different constituencies: ecclesiastical superiors, the tradition of the Church and the very community that he serves through his priestly ministry.

Priestly formation should envisage sending persons for higher studies. (18)

Chances for ongoing formation should be made available throughout a priest's life. (22)

Presbyterorum Ordinis

This document spells out in three chapters salient aspects of the life and ministry of the priest.

The introduction states that the priest receives his ordination and mission from the bishop to serve and build up the People of God (PO 1).

The first chapter teaches that through his anointing at ordination the priest can act *in persona Christi, capitis* (PO 2) and affirms that priests are set apart to carry out what God has ordained for them among his people. (PO 3)

The function of the priest in his sacramental capacity is situated in the midst of a worshipping community. (A concrete consequence was the discouraging of private masses. i.e. without a congregation.)

The second chapter describes the priest's task: to proclaim the word of God, celebrate the sacraments and build community. (PO 4, 5) The priest is not to serve any ideology or party. (PO 6) The Priests' Senate is a concrete manifestation of the sharing of the priesthood by the bishop and the priests. (PO 7) Lay participation in serving the Church is to be fostered by the priest. (PO 9) Priestly vocations should be shared among Churches and those going to new areas of apostolate should prepare themselves suitably to undertake the tasks awaiting them. (10).

The third and final chapter dwells on the life of the priests. It teaches that a priest is sanctified through his ministry. (PO 12) The idea held by some that the priestly ministry will so exhaust a priest that he must return to fill himself with God's love and grace in order to go back and minister to his people must be reassessed. Such reassessment does not suggest that the priest has no need of personal prayer. However such an idea reveals a theologically questionable understanding of both the priestly ministry and priestly sanctification. If the priest is not sanctified through his ministry, could it not be that the celebration of the sacraments has become a mechanical function that satisfies the requirement of ritualistic action and no more? Hence PO 13 states that those in the ministry "will acquire holiness in their own distinctive way by exercising their functions sincerely and tirelessly in the Spirit of Christ." Mention is then made of the humility and obedience that are proper to a priest. (PO 14-

15)

About celibacy, PO 16 says the following:

It is true that it is not demanded of the priesthood by its nature. This is clear from the practice of the primitive Church and the tradition of the Eastern Churches where in addition to those—including all bishops—who choose from the gift of grace to preserve celibacy, there are also many excellent married priests.

The same number also says that what (celibacy) is legislated by law in the Latin Church “is liberally granted by the Father, provided those who share Christ’s priesthood through the sacrament of Order, and indeed the whole Church, ask for that gift humbly and earnestly.” It must be noted however that celibacy refers to a state of life that required no more than an individual’s personal choice, whereas the priesthood is a function that is a constitutive part of the Church. Each of the two options must be discerned for what they are!

PO 17 while inviting the priest “to embrace voluntary poverty” is also mindful of the Christ-like stewardship that he should practise in the use of temporal goods.

PO 19-20 reminds the priest that the proclamation of the word as well as the celebration of the Eucharist will sustain him; ongoing formation as well as deeper studies should accompany his priestly life. A priest should be given a just remuneration.

Three points stand out in these two documents: 1) the priest is the bishop’s representative and exercises in his priestly ministry the functions of the bishop (proclamation of the word, celebration of the sacraments and pastoral care); 2) the sanctification of the priest takes place through the exercise of his ministry; 3) the community over which

he exercises pastoral care is the context of his sanctification.

(B) The Vocation of a Priest according to Vatican II

Vatican II has done well by clearly stating the precise functions of the priest in his ministry and not labouring the point of how the ordained ministry is different from the common priesthood not only in degree but also in essence. (PO 2, LG 10) In addition, OT 1 realizes that the ministerial functions must be contextualized thus opening the possibility for creativity in one's ministry so that the community is served and its specific needs met. Through these functions, the priest sanctifies himself. The vocation of the priest in Vatican II is spelt out more elaborately in the following three areas:

(a) Serving God's People

The Church universal is to be realized in the local Church. The *ecclesia* is to be formed in each of the contexts in which the priest exercises his ministry. In the first place, it is the parish community that must witness to the presence of Christ in the world. In today's India, rural and urban societies are more educated than before. Knowledge and new technologies are more accessible to persons and the priest is called to initiate processes by which the presence of the Church in the secular world acts as a leaven in the dough. This is also an age where the social sciences have assisted in bringing awareness to society of the achievements and setbacks present in our civilization. Since the Church affirms a rational basis for its Christian faith, these sciences could assist in assessing truth of claims made by the Church with regard to Christian practices and their effects. For instance, surveys that yield quantitative data can show whether the

traditional ministries of the Church are producing the desired fruit or whether foundationless presumptions are being made by interested parties. The claims of spirituality in the face of formal religion must be scrutinized and New Age movements need to be assessed. To enable the Church to contribute to the humanization of men and women and build them into a community, bishops and priests are called to fulfill complex and varied tasks. This is what *Gaudium et Spes* asks of those who constitute the People of God. Can the priest offer the required leadership to God's People seeking to make Christ present in the world?

The priest's vocation is not merely the celebration of the Eucharist and Reconciliation. His vocation calls him to sacramentalize Christian leadership in as many forms as possible. He is called to represent the likeness of Christ when dealing with those whom he serves. In turn, the people will more easily realize the Christ-likeness in their own lives by drawing inspiration from the priest. This would mean that the fulfillment of a priest's vocation would lie both in the sanctuary and in society. After all, the Eucharistic community does not cease to exist when the mass ends. In fact, because a community is Eucharistic—in that it lives the word of God in everyday life—it is drawn to participate in the sacrifice of the altar and is united in Jesus Christ.

To serve God's people as a priest is the office to which the Church calls the priest. That the person called must be celibate is a free choice that the person must make, in keeping with the stipulation of the Latin Church. Such a choice must be made *a-priori*. A person must first ask himself if he is truly called to live out the celibate life before wanting to serve the Church as a priest. Even

though the celibate life has been lived out by persons throughout the history of the Church, it remains God's free gift given to a person. (PO 16) A gift can be requested; it cannot be presumed! One has still to justify theologically the claim made in PO 16 that "the gift of celibacy, so appropriate to the priesthood of the New Testament, is liberally granted by the Father, provided those who share Christ's priesthood through the sacrament of Order, and indeed the whole Church, ask for that gift humbly and earnestly."

One may sketch out a vision of the priesthood that is captivating and inspiring. One may point out that the priest is called to be an *Alter Christus* and through his life and ministry witnesses in a unique manner to the Christ event present in the Christian Tradition. However, the ministerial priesthood—even though constitutive of the Church—remains a function of the institutional Church. The decision to offer oneself to carry out that function is the result of a man's personal discernment. But since the Latin Church requires a candidate who is called to celibacy, a man must first discern whether or not he is called to celibacy before he offers himself for the priestly ministry. Celibacy is a state of life that obliges one to make a serious discernment before he decides on the ministerial priesthood in the Latin Church.

The ultimate source of strength to serve God's People in the priesthood must come from the person of Jesus Christ. This reminds the priest that in his baptism he was identified with Christ and that the sacraments in the Church are meant to make that identification more complete. His ordination is another opportunity for him to conform more totally with Jesus Christ.

(b) The Specific Functions the Priest is called to Perform

The first duty of the priest is to proclaim the word of God from the small bible and the big bible. The small bible refers to the sacred scriptures, the revealed word that speaks of God's love, mercy, forgiveness and his providential care for every human person as manifested in the life and work of Jesus Christ. The big bible is the whole of creation—humankind in general—and reminds all persons of goodwill that a caring God presides over the destiny of all persons even though it may not always appear to be so. It will not be enough for the priest to pray and perform his spiritual duties (his annual retreat) yet neglect ongoing formation and updating himself in the study of the sacred scriptures (DV, chapter 6) and the sciences in general. While canon law obliges the priest to make an annual retreat it is regrettable that a similar obligation does not exist for him to update himself for his ministry.

A sacramental spirituality reassures people that God is ever present in the midst of human activity and that God offers himself to each one as the fulfillment of his/her life. Sacraments are the symbols of our relationship to God and the celebration of the sacraments is the articulation of a shared love, hope and strength to support men and women in their pilgrim journey to the promised land. Given his office of serving the community, the priest is a visible and concrete reminder of this sacramental articulation.

Pastoral care of the faithful is not a one-way street. The priest is asked to share, not merely give! Vatican II asks the priest to exercise a ministerial priesthood which first originates in the common priesthood of the faithful. The whole People of God comes from the Father and by

identifying with Jesus Christ—through the power of the Spirit—returns to the Father. The ministerial priest sacramentalizes (i.e. makes visible and accessible) the ministry of Jesus Christ himself (*ex opere operato*) so that the People of God can worship the Father and surrender themselves to him.¹⁷ The liturgy is the *locus* where this takes place. Both, the priest and the people have their respective roles to perform. Parish teams formed for attending to the different needs of people express the diversity of the Church's sacramental action in the unity of one mission of Christ.

In addition to the priest or religious who work fulltime for the Church, one can also envisage laypersons who continue in their secular life in the world yet find themselves able to offer quality time for serving the Church. Such a vocation could be referred to as Lay Ecclesial Ministry. Such a ministry could be carried out by committed men and women who want to distinguish themselves in serving the Church but keeping to their state of life in the world, i.e. continuing as single individuals or as married persons without religious vows or promises.

(C) Priesthood and the fostering of Dialogue as a Way of Life

In the Indian context where many faiths exist side by side, there is need to build up humane communities where persons of all persuasions—Christians included—share common values and strive towards a humanizing goal. Dialogue begins with an understanding of unity underlying diversity and the presumption that the God whom the Christian worships in faith has also left his footprints in religions other than Christianity. It is the same God who calls all persons into unity. The Christian

paradigm of faith should enable the believer to recognize God's action in the world of pluralism and to collaborate actively in bringing about a just and humane society based on the values of God's Reign in this world. Dialogue is a means of achieving both.

Dialogue is at ease with an enriching pluralism for the benefit of all peoples. God's plan is to bring about fulfillment in human history as a whole (one plan of salvation). True dialogue does not mute the prophetic element of the gospel message nor does it ignore the 'option for the poor' that must characterize the Church's mission to the poor and oppressed. It is an occasion for understanding and feeling with the other. It seeks to discover how God has been working in the hearts and minds of those belonging to different faiths. Such discovery is mutual and is a path to common sharing and community building.

The road to dialogue begins with recognizing the other and as a consequence the relativizing of the self. Initially, there is a feeling of threat from, or even hostility towards, the other. Then both parties continue in a state of uninvolved existence. Finally, a curiosity develops and (mutual) interest begins to grow. At this stage, the course is set for dialogue. For the Church in India as well as for the priest who serves the Church in his local community, promoting such dialogue must be seen as essential to the mission of Christ in today's world. Such activity would fittingly realize the Christian community as a World Church and, in the process, fulfill the dream of pope John XXIII's *aggiornamento*.

¹ John Bowker (editor): *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 1997, 'Sacrifice', p 833.

Jeffrey Carter (Editor): *Understanding Religious Sacrifice (a Reader)*, Continuum, New York/London, 2003, pp 2-7.

² Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Editors): *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition revised, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp 1245-6. The ideas expressed in this paragraph are taken from this source.

³ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, p. 1245.

⁴ John Bowker (Editor): *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 1997, p 767.

⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier (Editor): *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1985, pp 821-823.

⁶ *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, pp 574-575.

⁷ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, p. 821: (Jewish priestly identity): "The priesthood was limited by Pentateuchal law to the Levites, that is, members of the family of Levi, the son of Jacob. According to Deuteronomy, all the levitical families had a right to the priesthood since they did not receive an inheritance of land like the other tribes (Deut. 10:8-9). Aaron and his sons exclusively received the anointing oil and were attired in special clothing of the priesthood (Exod. 28-29). The families of Eli at the temple of Shiloh (1 Sam. 14:3), Zadok in Jerusalem (Ezek. 40:46), and Amaziah at Bethel (Amos 7:10-17) were not specified as Aaronides but were of levitical descent."

⁸ "Christian Priesthood in India Today," A Biblical Reflection by George Soares-Prabhu, p 219 in *A Biblical Theology for India*, Volume 2, edited with an introduction by Scaria Kuthirakkattel, Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth Theology Series, Pune 1999.

⁹ Seen as the eschatological revelation of God, Jesus could be better referred to as the eschatological prophet.

¹⁰ George Soares-Prabhu, p 223.

¹¹ Nathan Mitchell: *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist outside the Mass*, Pueblo Publishing Company, New York, 1982, p 48.

¹² George Soares-Prabhu, p 233.

¹³ Nathan Mitchell, pp 85-6: "Against Paschasius' perhaps exaggerated realism, Ratramnus (thus) proposed a more emphatically sacramental understanding of eucharistic (sic!) and presence. Like

Augustine before him, Ratramnus stressed the spiritual nature of eucharistic eating and drinking, actions that appeal to faith and not to any sensate or materialistic perceptions of flesh and blood. He recognized that the sacrament celebrates both the *corpus Christi mysticum* (eucharist) and the *corpus Christi quod est ecclesia* (church).”

¹⁴ The Council of Chalcedon (451) through its 6th canon, had prohibited “absolute ordination” or ordaining a priest without a specific charge in the Church, i.e. without a person being assigned to a city, village church, a martyr’s shrine or monastery.

¹⁵ ND 1707. Refer *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* edited by Jacques Dupuis, Theological Publications in India (TPI), Bangalore, seventh revised and enlarged edition, 2004.

¹⁶ A scheme of the two documents is offered:

Optatam Totius

Each nation/rite (Individual Church) should have its own programme of priestly training (1).

Vocations to the priesthood require the fostering of a sound way of life (3).

Major Seminaries to train for Ministry of Word, Worship and pastoral caring of people (4).

The spirit of prayer is to be an essential part of training to be a priest (8).

Training in responsible freedom (11).

The need for sending persons for higher studies (18).

Ongoing formation (22).

Presbyterorum Ordinis:

Ch. I: The Priesthood in the Church’s Mission (refer 1 Peter 2/5)

The Bishop’s ministry (proclamation of the world, celebration of the sacraments and pastoral care of the faithful) is handed to the priest as a subordinate. (1)

Sacramental anointing configures the priest to Christ so that he can act *in persona Christi, capitis*. (2)

Priests are set apart but remain amid God’s People to carry out the task that God has chosen for them. (3)

Ch. II: The Ministry of Priests

To proclaim God’s word and build community. (4)

Preaching the word should have as its end point: The

celebration of the Eucharist and Sacraments. (5) [The priest makes the bishop present in individual assemblies]

Pastoral Care to be shown especially to the poor. The Eucharist is the foundation on which we build. (6) [The priest is not to be the servant of any ideology or party]

Priests' Senate. (7)

Encourage participation of the laity in serving the Church. (9)

Sharing vocations and preparing for new fields. (10)

Ch. III: The Life of Priests

The priest is sanctified through his ministry. (12)

Sacramental celebration should take place with the intention of and according to the ministry of Christ. (13)

Humility and Obedience of the Priest. (14-15)

Celibacy. (16)

Voluntary poverty and income of the priest. (17)

What should sustain the priest: Proclamation of the word and celebration of the Eucharist. // Ongoing formation. // Material security. (19-20)

¹⁷ 'ex opere operato' = by the performance of the rite. The 'opus' of Jesus is to effect humankind's salvation; the Church witnesses to the 'opus' of Jesus through celebrating the sacramental mysteries, and the priest makes that 'opus' present in the celebration of individual sacraments. Far from being a thing of magic, the 'ex opere operato' refers to the salvific action of Jesus Christ that the priest makes present to the community he serves.