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## **A Public Property Called Priest**

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**Abstract:** The focus is on ministerial priesthood. It is difficult to combine institutional priesthood and the prophetic function. These roles can be combined in the living out of the Eucharist, which is more than a cultic celebration of the Mass. Sharing in the priesthood of Christ is through sharing in His self-sacrificing mission. Being one with Christ makes the priest one with people. A priest is a public person, with priesthood claiming the totality of his human person. The power and authority that a priest has comes from his self-emptying like Christ. Important characteristics of priestly service in the Indian context are spelt out.

**Keywords:** Priest, priesthood, prophet, public, celibacy, priestly function, Indian context.

How to 'tame' a prophet?

Ordain him a priest!

A priest celebrating the golden jubilee of his priesthood is a contradiction in terms.

He should not have survived to see that day.

He should have been 'spent' and 'worn out' long ago!

A loaf of bread is not to be kept in the showcase...so is a priest.

If it is kept, it only gathers fungus.

A loaf of bread is to be broken and consumed...

So that it can enliven the hungry!

"The greatest suffering of the Church is the sin of its priests."<sup>1</sup>

"Priests are celibates, not old bachelors."<sup>2</sup>

“Scandals that arise when priests fail to live celibacy are not just about priestly discipline, but rather about a failed understanding of human love.”<sup>3</sup>

“Eternal paradox of the priest: He bears within him those who are contrary. He reconciles, at the price of his life, fidelity to God with fidelity to man. He seems poor and feeble.... He has neither political power nor financial means, nor the force of arms that others use to conquer the earth. His strength lies in being unarmed and being able to do all things in the One who gives him strength.”<sup>4</sup>

“Intrinsically linked to the sacramental nature of ecclesial ministry is its character as service. Entirely dependent on Christ who gives mission and authority. ministers are truly ‘slaves of Christ’ for us. Because the word and grace of which they are ministers are not their own, but are given to them by Christ for the sake of others, they must freely become the slaves of all.”<sup>5</sup>

The year for the priests has seen an enormous amount of literature being produced all over the world about “priest” and “priesthood”. In most of the literature it is customary to begin with the OT and NT understanding of priesthood; trace its development in the history of the Church; distinguish between the ‘common priesthood’ of all baptised Christians and the ‘ministerial priesthood’ of the ordained priests; and finally offer a few reflections on its current role and relevance. While such attempts are very valuable, I do not intend to offer such a systematic reflection here. I would rather allow the above citations shape and direct my train of thoughts. Further, my focus in this article will be on ministerial priesthood and not common priesthood.

## **1. The drama of priests and prophets**

In the history and pre-history of religion, it seems difficult to find a religious tradition that did not have its own priests and prophets. It is generally accepted that priesthood evolves from a simple to a more complex form in the history of a given religious tradition. Most of the time, “priest” and “prophet” remain as distinct and at times even mutually conflicting roles. Perhaps as a rare phenomenon Christian theology combines them into the single person of the priest. Such an attempt though looks theologically idyllic, nevertheless has its own problematic consequences if it is subjected to an honest and rigorous sociological and hermeneutical critique. This is for the simple reason that while the priest in and through his concrete actions (be it strictly religious, political, cultural etc.) tries to maintain the status quo<sup>6</sup>, the prophet, in being faithful to his/her vocation, deconstructs it<sup>7</sup>; thereby laying the foundation for a reconstruction.<sup>8</sup> The implied tensions between prophets and priests in texts such as Am 5:21; Jer 7:21; Hos 6:6; Is 1:11 should be understood from this perspective. In a similar vein, R. Brown’s distinction between the “missionary apostleship” (which is more the function of an itinerant preacher and prophet like St. Paul, who is constantly on the move and keeps contact with the community established by him or by another through occasional visits and letters) and a “residential episcopate” (who takes care of an already founded community by residing with it) in the early church brings out the difference between their respective “character traits” and “mental outlook” required to play their respective roles. Brown considers them as different from and “sometimes opposed” to each other.<sup>9</sup> From a sociological point of view Max Weber is emphatic in saying: “The [priest] lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition,

while the prophet's claim is based on personal revelation and charisma. It is no accident that almost no prophets have emerged from the priestly class."<sup>10</sup> In the Biblical traditions, certainly, these two roles do not try to liquidate each other; but in a dialectic tension contribute to the continuity, progress and purification of societies.<sup>11</sup> Hence it is important to understand the significance of implanting such roles in the single person of a priest in the Christian tradition.

On the part of a priest there may be many ways of fulfilling these roles. But here I choose to explicate one important way within the Christian tradition. I choose to call it the "way of the Eucharist". The lived out Eucharistic reality can combine priesthood and prophethood into a single person and/or a single community in a very unique and effective way.

## **2. The Eucharist integrates...**

Sociologically, the Christian Eucharistic celebration can be dealt with under the rubric of cult and/or ritual. In this sense the priest has a very important role in it. However, from the point of view of a truly liberative and responsible theology, the Eucharist transcends a mere cultic and/or ritual context and presents itself as the warp and woof of Christian life. It is here that the priest and the prophet can merge into a single person or a single community in the context of his/its Eucharistic life.

For this to happen, the Eucharist needs to be seen as a reality wider than what we call Mass, which in turn is a cultic-celebrative and sacramental dimension of the Eucharist. We take the cue from the life of Jesus himself. The whole life of Jesus is a single Eucharist. The Last

Supper, where he shared the bread and cup can be seen as sacramental representation of what he already did during his ministry (a real breaking of himself in selfless love and service) and what he did on the cross – a real giving of himself in obedience to the Father. This totality constitutes the first Eucharist. The Eucharist is the kenosis of God; God emptying Godself out of infinite love in order to be one with us, to save us. Its memory should not only be ‘recalled’ and celebrated at the Mass but more importantly be lived at every moment of the life of a priest and a Christian community. It is in this sense that the participation in the “Eucharistic toil” (the prophetic, healing and teaching praxis of Jesus) becomes the necessary and inseparable dimension of the “Eucharistic meal” (the Mass). It is only in the living out of both these dimensions of the Eucharistic reality (“toil” and “meal”) that the priest and the Eucharistic community can be priest and prophet simultaneously. Eucharist in this sense plays an integrating role in the life of a Christian community.<sup>12</sup>

Eucharist understood in the above sense guards against any ‘taming’ of a prophet by means of priestly ordination. That is because living out of the Eucharistic reality necessitates that a priest be first and foremost a prophet. Eucharist leads the prophet in his or her prophetic praxis to offer a sacrifice of the self by means of participating in the self-sacrificing Eucharist of Jesus. Rightly then the archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn affirms “the priesthood is more than a job; it is a special call to holiness through sacrificial love and service to others.” Emphasizing this dimension of priesthood, he says, “if the priesthood is not an experience of self-sacrificing love, then inevitably it will become a kind of loveless clericalism, more concerned with power and prestige than

with the priesthood of the crucified Lord.”<sup>13</sup> *Pastores dabo vobis* rightly integrates the spiritual life of priests with their service (No.21): “The spiritual life of the ministers of the New Testament should therefore be marked by this fundamental attitude of service to the people of God.” This emphasis on sacrificial and loving service prevents priestly ordination being looked upon as claiming any privilege, position, precedence or power.

The leadership, the cultic and the prophetic roles of a priest thus have meaning and significance only within the framework of the total Eucharistic reality.

Linking priesthood to the Eucharist in a narrow cultic sense was of Scholastic origin and got a further impetus in the manual theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such an emphasis, in fact was reinforced by the Council of Trent, which itself was more a reaction to the troubling questions raised by the “Reformers” than a positive enrichment of the doctrine of the Eucharist and the Priesthood.. Vatican II attempted to modify this understanding.<sup>14</sup> Basing its own teaching on the ministry of Jesus, the Council interrelates three important offices of Jesus the priest in defining priesthood in the church; namely, like Jesus, an ordained minister is a teacher, sanctifier and leader in the Church. Priests are called to exercise these offices in communion with the bishop (LG 21). “Bishops, in a resplendent and visible manner, take the place of Christ himself, teacher, shepherd, and priest, and act as his representatives” (LG 21; cf. PO 12, LG 6). “Priests represent Christ and are the collaborators of the order of bishops in that threefold sacred duty which, of its nature, pertains to the mission of the Church” (AG 39; cf. PO 1; LG 28).

It is true that the scholastic link between priesthood and the Eucharist depicted a narrow perspective in understanding the Christian priesthood and that the teaching of Vatican II has broadened and deepened it. However, one must pay attention to the fact that given a more comprehensive understanding of the Eucharistic reality itself, Vatican II's broadened understanding of the priesthood can be meaningfully situated within it. The recent teaching of the FABC is particularly helpful in this regard.<sup>15</sup> The document interprets every part of the Eucharistic celebration in the context of the Asian realities and attempts to integrate a Christian response within the Eucharistic reality. Living the Eucharistic reality in this sense certainly goes beyond celebrating Mass; and by the same token the role of a priest extends beyond presiding at the celebration of the Mass and finds its fulfilment in facilitating a dynamic by which Eucharistic reality becomes the warp and woof of the totality of Christian life. And such a priestly ministry cannot but be prophetic. That is why the Nicaraguan revolutionary priest Miguel D'escoto, during the peak of the Nicaraguan revolution said: "I looked on all of life as a preparation for the next Mass, and the fulfilment of the commitment made in the last Mass".<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Freedom of a priest – a freedom to be...**

The priesthood of Jesus in the letter to the Hebrews is compared to that of Melchisadek. The point of comparison is that it is not a traditional priesthood, nor is it one that is hereditarily transmitted. That is why Melchizedek's genealogy is not referred to. The name Melchizedek in Hebrew simply means king (*mēlek*) of righteousness (*ṣəḏāqāh*). These considerations shed significant light on

the NT understanding of the priesthood of Jesus which is shared by every baptised Christian in general and a priest in particular.

Such a priesthood stands radically distinguished from the priesthood understood in the anthropological and sociological sense – something that is essentially connected to cultic practices. The essential dimension of Christian priesthood lies in the “cult” of self-sacrifice. Such a consideration brings to our awareness a whole lot of commonly forgotten dimensions of Christian priesthood.

A Jesus-like priest like the “Son of Man who has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk 9:58) is called to a life of freedom from all interior and exterior compulsions in order to be fully and totally available for the service of the Reign of God.

Sharing in the priesthood of Jesus should not be reduced to the words and actions related to the sacrament of ordination. Sharing in such a priesthood also is a process brought about by sharing in the self-sacrificing mission of Jesus. Therefore, one who is ordained a priest has to become more and more a priest in daily life after ordination, through kenotic love expressed in sacrificial service.

Jesus responded to his times by means of discerning the will of God in the signs of his times. The recently announced model for priests, St. John Vianney’s mission was fitting to his times (among other things, spending more than 18 hours a day in the confessional). A Jesus-like priest is essentially a person of discernment; one who longs to find the will of God in the signs of the times and finds the greatest fulfilment of life in doing it.



#### **4. A dually relational existence: one with Christ, one with humans**

“A priest is a slave of Christ, who himself became a slave when he took on human nature” (Benedict XVI)<sup>17</sup>.

*Pastores dabo vobis* (No. 12) speaking about the nature of ministerial priesthood says: “the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood cannot be defined except through [the] multiple and rich interconnection of relationships” [to God, to the church, to their superiors, to fellow priests, to the local community, and themselves].

The vocation to the priesthood is a call to relativize one’s own existence and thereby order it radically in terms of relationship with Christ on the one hand, and with the people of God on the other. It means that a priest, to be faithful to such a calling, cannot afford to exist for himself. Defining one’s existence in relation to Christ is vividly expressed in the words of St. Paul in Galatians 2:20 – “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” That amounts to being a “slave of Christ” in the most radical sense; having no will of one’s own, but that of Christ. In fact such a relationship points towards a radical union.<sup>18</sup> At the same time a priest, precisely because of this union with Christ, is called to find the concrete expression of it in terms of him being one with the people of God whom he serves; thereby making the kenosis of Christ in an unique sense his own. It is because of such a possibility that Fernando Cardenal was able to say: “any step taken against a commitment to the people would be against God’s will. It would be a sin.”<sup>19</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI has beautifully expressed this idea:

... authentic service to the Word requires from the priest that he strains toward a deep abnegation of himself, until being able to

say with the Apostle, 'It is not I who lives, but Christ who lives in me'...Now then, to be the 'voice' of the Word doesn't constitute for the priest a merely functional element,... On the contrary, it presupposes a substantial 'losing oneself' in Christ, participating in his mystery of death and resurrection with all of oneself: intelligence, liberty, will, and the offering of one's own body as a living sacrifice... profoundly united to the Word of the Father, who in incarnating himself, has taken the form of a slave, has made himself a slave. The priest is a slave of Christ in the sense that his existence, ontologically configured to Christ, takes on an essentially relational character: He is in Christ, through Christ, and with Christ at the service of man. Precisely because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people.<sup>20</sup>

In sum a priest, to be true to his vocation needs to transcend his natural instinct for self-preservation, thereby radically relativizing his very existence in the service of God and His people. However, it would be naïve to think that this relativization, this being "ontologically configured to Christ" occurs magically and instantaneously at the moment of ordination. Rather, it has to be a prolonged process of painful purification and transformation, all through formation, leading up to ordination and continuing all through life after ordination.

## **5. Someone for all, at all times and yet "alone" at the end of the day**

Parental support, friendships, spousal intimacy, etc., certainly play unique roles in making life not only bearable but also truly fruitful and meaningful. However, a Jesus-like priest, paradoxically, is called to experience a certain type of "aloneness" or solitude in the very mission of being available for service in an unconditional manner. It is this paradox that makes him someone very special. For instance, at the critical moments of life such as

initiation into the religious tradition (by means of baptism, confirmation), spiritual healing/renewal, wedding, sickness, death, etc., the accompanying by a priest stands a class apart from such acts on the part of anyone else. However, a Jesus-like priest is called to deprive himself of all the self-advantages that could come his way due to such ministries.

Emphasizing this aspect John Paul II writes in his Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday 2005:

Christ's self-giving, which has its origin in the Trinitarian life of the God who is Love, reaches its culmination in the sacrifice of the Cross, sacramentally anticipated in the Last Supper. It is impossible – for the priest – to repeat the words of consecration without feeling caught up in this spiritual movement [...] The priest must learn to apply these words also to himself, and to speak them with truth and generosity. If he is able to offer himself as a gift, placing himself at the disposal of the community and at the service of anyone in need, his life takes on its true meaning. This is exactly what Jesus expected of his apostles. [...] It is also what the people of God expect of a priest.<sup>21</sup>

A service of this type is both, a privilege and a responsibility. It is a privilege because, a priest has access to such forums where a penitent bares himself/herself so completely that no other forum can facilitate it. It is a 'privilege' because a priest can be instrumental in the hands of God to heal and build penitents, both as individuals and as a community at a very deep level. Benedict XVI has powerfully brought out this fact in one of his recent interactions with the parish priests in Rome.

And who knows the men of today better than the parish priest? ... to the pastor, men often come normally, without a mask, without other pretexts, but in situations of suffering, infirmity, death, family issues. They come to the confessional unmasked, with their own being. It seems to me that no other profession

gives this possibility of knowing man as he is in his humanity,  
and not in the role he has in society.<sup>22</sup>

It is precisely for this reason that this ‘privilege’ becomes at once a serious responsibility for a priest: to act not merely in the name of Christ but like Christ in bringing about healing and reconciliation in the life of the person before him.

Every human person, irrespective of his/her state of life, experiences at the depth of his/her heart a certain degree of aloneness. It is an existential aloneness. One can treat it as loneliness in the negative sense and react in such a way as to fill it with ‘things’ that really do not fill or take it as a ‘solitude’ – a space to encounter the Source of one’s being there at the depth of one’s heart. In this context a priest, once again has a special privilege of encountering the Creator right through the day in people and situations and then at the end of the day, as it were, in the solitude of his heart. Experience tells us how these two encounters can be mutually enriching.

The priestly solitude is directly linked to priestly celibacy. Though celibacy may not be the most important factor in being a priest,<sup>23</sup> yet integrating the demands of celibacy in a way that makes a priest ‘passionate’ about his mission, can make his life only richer.<sup>24</sup> In fact “fidelity to my people in their battle” says Fernando Cardenal, “has always been a powerful reason for being faithful to my vow of celibacy”.<sup>25</sup> To connect priestly celibacy to ministry is not bypass the other related issues such as physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and social dimensions of ‘priestly loneliness’. Addressing them adequately falls beyond the scope of this article. Here I would like restrict myself to saying that the

emotional void, pain and tensions that a priest experiences due to his celibacy as such need not be negative or self-destructive. Priestly ministry and spirituality do offer space and opportunities for a healthy integration of such factors into a self-sacrificing love.

### **Can a priest have a ‘private life’?<sup>26</sup>**

In common parlance the public personalities are those who are in some way accountable to the public. A priest in this sense is certainly a ‘public personality’. But we need to clarify the nature of the ‘public-ness’ of a priest. It seems to stand a class apart from any other type of ‘public-ness’. This is because, sociologically speaking, a priest plays the role of a ‘mediating functionary’ in a system called religion, which in turn is a ‘total system’; in the sense that it makes or mediates absolute claims on the totality of the human person. Seen from this perspective, to be a priest cannot be a part-time job. (Perhaps the traditional concept of indelibility of priestly character has to be understood also in this sense. Namely, indelibility is not only a temporally permanent phenomenon but more importantly an all-pervading character that affects the person of the priest in its totality.) Our interest here is to reflect on the consequences of such a fact.

A priest certainly has his ‘private life’ – he needs to eat, recreate, rest and so on. But to be true to his vocation, none of these things can be independent from or unrelated to his mission. They have to be undertaken to the extent and only to the extent they have a positive contribution to make to the priestly mission. A priest cannot claim some aspect of his life or time solely for himself, as unrelated to his priestly mission. In this sense a priest should lack a ‘private life’ for himself.

## 6. Credibility, power, authority, honour and relevance of a priest

I always have had an acute sense of uneasiness whenever I saw a priest being made much of for the sole reason that he was a priest. I feel very uncomfortable when priests assume for themselves some exalted roles such as 'ruler' (understood as a man having control over others), 'sacred person' (in the sense of being separated from and holier than others) etc., and try to justify it theologically. I blush with shame when I see a priest dominating people; shouting at people from the pulpit; trying to control people by inducing fear and guilt in them; and taking advantage of their goodwill for his own glorification and gratification. Such moments as these have always nagged me with questions regarding the identity of a priest.

In a certain chapel there is a painting of Jesus. In that picture Jesus is clad in Mass vestments. Looking at that painting, I have always wondered: "What a mischief! Instead of painting a priest clad in the torn and blood stained clothes of Jesus and thereby challenging all priests to live like him, the artist has clad Jesus in priestly (cultic) clothes; thereby domesticating him." The best way, they say, to contain a prophet is to ordain him a priest!

Looking at Jesus' life, death and resurrection, I think a priest first and foremost should stop making any claims of honour and advantage, either spiritual or material for himself. A priest essentially is a 'public property' existing only 'to be used' for the real good of the people.<sup>27</sup> It is he who should exist for people and not people for him. It is only through such a complete self-emptying that a very different type of 'power' and 'authority' begin to emerge

in the person of a priest. In fact the Greek word for ‘authority’ is *exousia* (ex + ousia = from one’s essence/ from what one actually is, and not from outside). The building up of a true “Kingdom community” is possible only through such authority, as Jesus himself has shown us.

It was while looking at the way Jesus helplessly suffered and died that the Roman Centurian in Mk 15:39 exclaims: ‘Truly this man was God’s Son’ – and not while seeing him performing powerful miracles. In a similar way, John the Baptist has his disclaimer in Jn 1:20-23 that he is not the Christ, neither the expected prophet nor Elijah but a voice crying out in the wilderness (unheeded by the ‘respectable people’). Indeed a *chapatti* is not to be kept in a showcase but to be torn into pieces and eaten; a broom is not placed on a lamp stand, but is used to sweep the floor and then thrown in the corner. It is some such imagery that makes us aware of what a priest should be in order to exercise the type of authority that is exercised by the Crucified and Risen One. In fact only such authority can touch and transform people and thereby become instrumental in the sprouting of the Reign of God in their hearts. Any other type of authority only subjugates and does not liberate. Rightly then Fernando Cardenal, right during his tenure as the member of the Sandinista Assembly and vice-coordinator of the National Executive Committee of the youth movement said: “I fear the risks of power. I strive to place everything I have in the service of the poor”.<sup>28</sup>

Does this description put a one-sided and imbalanced emphasis on the identity of a priest? Maybe. But I am convinced that without it, the rest of the dimensions may not make one a priest after the image of Jesus the “High

Priest” who offered the sacrifice of his own life (Heb 9:26;10:12;13:11-13).

Will it be very impractical to be a priest of this sort? Can a priest survive like this? A companion of mine once exclaimed in a theology class: “All that was fine for Jesus to say and do what he said and did; after all he survived in his ministry only for three years according to the Gospel of John; and just for a year according to the synoptics!” The professor shot back: “If you want to live like Jesus, do not expect to last longer than that”! One wonders: Is the choice for a priest, then, between ‘living long’, ‘establishing much’, earning a big name (and if possible a big fortune) on the one hand, and living like Jesus on the other with all the hazards and painful consequences?

These considerations lead us to reflect on a difficult problem that many priests and religious face today. To begin with, we have an interesting passage from Paul: “I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided.” (1 Cor 7:32-33). Paul certainly is not speaking about priests or elders in the Corinthian community. In fact “priest”, “presbyteros” (elder) and “episkopos” (overseer or bishop) do not occur even once in the two letters to the Corinthians (among the Pauline non-pastoral epistles “priest” occurs only once: Rom 15:16). Their usage is almost exclusively restricted to the Pastorals. Hence in the passage cited above, Paul may be speaking about any of those Christians who by free choice dedicated themselves exclusively to the ‘service of the gospel’ (Rom 15:16). They could have been unmarried persons or those who had left their families for the sake of



the ministry.

The significant point is that Paul has recognized a situation of conflict between love and commitment to the Lord and to the ‘affairs of the world’ all of which need not to be evil in themselves; like for instance, as Paul enumerates, pleasing one’s spouse and children. In fact married persons are called to live their marital commitment precisely by loving their spouses and children and thereby loving God. However the love of one’s family in the case of a married person can come in the way of one’s commitment to the Lord: married persons, for instance, to make their spouses and children happy may earn money through illegal and immoral means, etc.

A priest who runs an institution, for instance, may face a similar situation. His love for the institution and for the many who benefit by it may lead him to get involved in many types of corrupt, illegal and immoral practices – just to ‘keep up a high standard in the institution’ or ‘to make the institution posh, famous and widely known’ or ‘in order to survive in the competition among similar institutions’, or ‘to maintain public relations’ or ‘to establish a social network’, etc. Under such circumstances the priest in question faces the conflict between his faithfulness to the Lord and his commitment to his institution. At times in such cases the commitment to the institution and the commitment to one’s own need-gratification can hardly be distinguished. Though there may not be easy solutions in such circumstances, one important question needs to be reflected upon: Is the institution and apostolate a means or an end? If the “service of the Gospel” is the end, then it cannot be achieved by such means which are through and through

anti-Gospel. This principle can be applied to any apostolate that a priest is involved in. The prophetic words of Mother Teresa become apt in this context: It is not important to be successful; it is important to be faithful. Credibility and relevance of a priest depend on his faithfulness to God and not on his success according to 'worldly' standards.

## **7. Knowing the world... interpreting the Word**

A Jesus-like priest acquires a unique place and a role in a given context. Such a priest is fully and radically related to the world and the human persons, and encounters them at the deepest possible level. It is precisely due to such encounters that the priest is able to interpret the Word salvifically in the given situation. We have a very enlightening example in the OT: the debate between prophets Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jer 28:1-17). Jeremiah interprets the Word of the Lord and concludes that the people of Israel have to be in exile according to the will of God. Whereas Hananiah (essentially a court prophet) wanting to please the people and the palace speaks the words of comfort – that God will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar. The debate ends with these terrifying words of Jeremiah: “Listen Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made these people trust in a lie” (Jer 28:15). An earlier verse describes such false prophets – “See, therefore, I am against the prophets, says the LORD, who steal my words from one another.” (Jer 23:30). Both Jeremiah and Hananiah were accepted prophets of their times; but the fundamental difference between them was, while Jeremiah interpreted the Word of God contextually (in the light of the signs of his times), Hananiah blindly and deafly “stuck to the tradition” and only stole the words

of prophet Isaiah uttered some 200 years before him in a very different context.

Jesus' own contextual reading of the scriptural texts made a clear and liberating distinction between what "was said to those of ancient times" and "but I say to you" (Mt 5:21f). Rightly then Benedict XVI says: "We cannot simply work with great formulas, [although] truths, without putting them in the context of today's world. Through study and what the masters of theology and our personal experience with God tell us, we must translate these great words, so that they enter into the proclamation of God to the man of today."<sup>29</sup>

We do not need to emphasize further how a priest needs to hold history on the one hand, Bible on the other and both close to his heart.

### *History, culture and priest: a person for all seasons*

E. Schillebeeckx's study<sup>30</sup> of the priestly ministry in the first and the second millennia of the Christian era shows the differential understanding of the roles of episkopos and presbyteros. For instance he notes, in the early church only the bishop, as the leader of the community in a collegial association with his presbyters presided over Eucharistic celebrations. But as the Christian communities spread and the bishop could not be present for every Eucharistic celebration, the presbyters began to preside over them, even though they were not consecrated for this role. They could do this by virtue of their actual leadership role in the community (also as delegates of the bishop and by the unanimous acclamation of the local church). Clement I opines that though it is normal for the episkopos to preside over, "other eminent members, with the approval of the whole church"<sup>31</sup> can also play that role. Tertullian goes

one step further: “Where no college of ministers has been appointed, you, the laity, must celebrate the eucharist and baptize; in that case you are your own priests, for where two or three are gathered together, there is the Church.”<sup>32</sup> It is in the second millennium, that we see the emergence of a predominantly juridical view of the priestly ministry “almost exclusively concentrated on the ministry and less concentrated on the church, in which ‘sacrament’ and ‘law’ are detached from each other.”<sup>33</sup>

The understanding of the function and position of what we today call priest/ priesthood in Christianity has by no means been uniform from the time of Jesus up to now. Though the words *presbyteros* and *episkopos* of NT are today identified with ‘priest’ and ‘bishop’ respectively, in fact, their meaning and functions were not uniform during the apostolic age in various Christian communities. Certain uniformity in understanding of these roles seemed to have emerged from the mid-third century in the context of various pastoral needs.<sup>34</sup> It is significant to note that the Greek word *hiereus* or the Hebrew word *cohen* which can be correctly rendered into English as priest are not applied to those leaders of the early Christian communities who presided over the Eucharistic celebrations. Interestingly the letter to the Hebrews applies the title *hiereus* to Jesus and to all the baptised. But neither of these may have performed any cultic practices; except the ‘rite’ of sacrifice of their own lives, as the case may be. In this sense, for the early Christians there was only one *hiereus* or *cohen*, namely Jesus Christ. The whole Church and every baptised Christian shared the priesthood of Christ. Each Christian exercised this priesthood according to his/her position, role and office within the Christian community, according to its different needs at different

times and in different circumstances.

If this conclusion is acceptable then we have a set of very important implications for the understanding and functioning of Christian priesthood at all times.

As said earlier, a Jesus-like priest does not exist for himself; nor is his priesthood for his self-benefit. Pastoral needs of different times and places make various demands on priests. Within a general framework that characterises the priesthood of Jesus, a priest should be able to adapt himself according to such genuine pastoral needs. Pastoral needs are context bound; though, the existence of certain universal pastoral needs cannot be denied. Their specificity is shaped by the historicity of a community and its cultural milieu. These factors demand very specific contextual responses from a priest in the pastoral field. And under such circumstances the understanding of priesthood and its function need to be reinterpreted. Priesthood is for service of the people of God and not vice versa. It is this fact that makes a priest a person for all seasons.

A concrete corollary of this state of affairs is found in the necessity of a priest being “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22). No wonder, then, that the cultic, leadership and prophetic roles of a Christian priest take multiple expressions in the NT: envoy, the representative of Christ and the Father, steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1); fellow-worker of God (1 Cor 3:9); Christ’s friend (Jn 15:15); witness of Christ (Act 1:8); the preacher of the Word of God (Rom 15:16); preacher of the good news by Christ’s mandate (Eph 3:8); dispenser of the sacraments (2 Cor 5:18); teacher of the nations, fisher of men (Mt 4:19)<sup>35</sup>; and in and through these and similar functions he

is called to expound, proclaim, defend, and preach the Word.

## **8. Is there a unique specificity to Christian priesthood in India/Asia?**

If ministry and priesthood in essence are for service, and in the history of the Church the understanding of these concepts has not been uniform, but changed according to the demands of various contexts<sup>36</sup>, then we have a case for stipulating some unique specificities of these ‘institutions’ in the Indian/Asian context without however negating their universally defined and accepted common characteristics. This consideration gains significance also because of the fact that “ecclesiastical ministry means service to the world through an internal service to God’s people. The ecclesiastical ministry ... should provide the stimulus for Christian work in the world and for the world. It is internal ecclesiastical service to the outward-looking community of Christ.”<sup>37</sup>

The outward-looking character of his community is defined by none other than Christ himself, when he commissioned his disciples to go to the whole world... (Mt 28,17f). It is this command that should also shape the concrete forms of the offices and ministries in the church, including that of priesthood. In other words, “the ministerial structure which best achieves what Christ really meant by the Church, is the right ministerial structure for Christ’s Church.”<sup>38</sup> From this background we can further specify some important characteristics of ministerial priesthood in the Indian context.

### ***a. A priest who responds to the issue of alienation***

George Soares-Prabhu has pointed out a three-fold

alienation of Christian theologians in India.<sup>39</sup> Namely, alienation from the Indian people, alienation from the Indian intellectual circles, and alienation from the Christian people. These types of alienation can also be held as true of priests in India in general. An effective leadership role cannot be performed unless and until this alienation is substantially gotten rid of. It is for this reason that today we need a priest who is thoroughly but critically rooted in the local contexts, having deep knowledge of the local cultures and diverse religious texts and traditions; thereby inserting himself into situations, as it were, that can effectively give rise to theologies and liturgies with “local flavours” with a capacity to respond to contextual issues. A priest of today needs to widen his horizons beyond the confines of the Christian community under his pastoral care.

***b. A priest who communicates in intelligible and transforming language***

In India, unlike in the first world, priests and such religious leaders still have a considerable credibility and therefore a significant role in touching the lives of the people at the most fundamental level. In this sense religious leaders can play a very important role in providing a fundamental interpretability to life in general and to individuals in particular. But this is possible only if the priest as a religious leader can present the basic message of his religion in terms that makes sense to the current generation thereby responding to the current issues liberatively. A mere repetition of religious statements that belong to alien times and cultures reifies the potentially transformative religious rituals, symbols, metaphors, myths and narratives in the current contexts.

It is not possible to speak about an interpretative process unless we refer to the total milieu in which interpretation is done. Such a milieu is made up of not only the language and content of interpretation but very importantly the interpreter himself/herself. In other words, words and witness cannot be separated from each other in the act of interpreting a religious text for a community. In this connection the Indian audience always has had difficulties with the Christian proclamation right from the colonial times. When Mahatma Gandhi said “today I rebel against orthodox Christianity as I am convinced that it has distorted the message of Jesus”<sup>40</sup>, he was essentially referring to this problem.

A priest in India as the proclaimer of the Gospel of Jesus whether to the Christian community or to the wider society or both, needs to address such critique, among other things, as a hermeneutical problem arising in the context of proclamation and learn to respond to it constructively. The language of witness apart (which is the most powerful language of all times), a priest in India today needs to learn to be truly an ‘Indian priest’, ‘incarnating’ himself into the ‘soil’ of his community. Only then his proclamation can be transformatively intelligible to our people.

## Conclusion

I should like to conclude with the words of Benedict XVI: “What I have written in the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* is also true for priests: ‘Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction’”(No. 1).<sup>41</sup> These words strike two harmonious chords simultaneously: being a Christian, and



by extension, being a priest, is the result of an encounter with an event and with a person. The person is Jesus Christ; and the event is the Christ Event. But what is central to the Christ Event is the incarnation, which is presupposed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. If so, encountering the event of the incarnate Word entails encountering the human and the cosmic realities along with the divine. Hence the new and relevant horizons that the Pope speaks about can be brought into the life of a priest only if he allows himself to be deeply encountered by these realities in his context. It is this encounter that results in creating ever relevant horizons of experience, understanding and praxis and reconciles all alienation, thereby shaping the Christian priesthood in the order of the priesthood of the incarnate Word, Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI on inaugurating the year for priests, June 19, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Tapken, "Seminarians Not Considered Endangered Species", January 9, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani, "Cardinal stands up for priestly celibacy", May 29, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>4</sup> Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard, *Ecclesia*, n. 141, 14 December 1960, p. 21. Cited in "Pope: Priestly Formation a 'Delicate Mission'", June 7, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 876.

<sup>6</sup> "The crucial feature of the priesthood" according to Max Weber is "the specialization of a particular group of persons in the continuous operation of a cultic enterprise, *permanently associated* with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific social groups". See his *The Sociology of Religion*, 4<sup>th</sup> revised version, Ephraim Fischhoff, Beacon Press, Boston, 1963, p.30. Emphasis is mine, to show that in playing a role as this, a priest is naturally prone

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to maintain the status quo of a religious tradition and by extension, to whatever degree, the other related dimensions of life of a people. Rightly then J. Wach observes – “For the priesthood regular ritual observance and a fixed theology are essential” – “*Sociology of Religion*” in Gurvitch, George and Moore, Wilbert E. (eds), *Twentieth Century Sociology*, The Philosophical Library, New York, 1945, p. 365.

<sup>7</sup> W. Brueggemann exemplifies it in the case of Moses: “The radical break of Moses and Israel from imperial reality is a two-dimensional break from both the religion of static triumphalism and the politics of oppression and exploitation. Moses dismantled the religion of static triumphalism by exposing the gods and showing that in fact they had no power and were not gods. Thus, the mythical legitimacy of Pharaoh’s social world is destroyed, for it is shown that such a regime appeals to sanctions that in fact do not exist.” Alternatively, “Moses discloses Yahweh the sovereign one who acts in His lordly freedom, is extrapolated from no social reality...but acts towards His own purposes”. See his *The Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia, 1981, p.16.

<sup>8</sup> Prophet Jeremiah is called “to uproot and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, **to build and to plant.**” (Jer 1:10) We are familiar with such two-fold functions (deconstruction and reconstruction) being performed by great prophets of history such as Jesus, Buddha, Basava, Mohammad, Mahavira and others.

<sup>9</sup> R. E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1970, pp. 21-40 and 63. However the NT is virtually silent about Paul’s presiding over any Eucharistic celebration and also about a presbyter-Bishop performing such a function. Ibid., p.63.

<sup>10</sup> M. Weber, op.cit., pp.46-47.

<sup>11</sup> “Office [typical of priestly role] is connected with the Church as the Body of Christ, issuing from Christ the Head, whilst Charism [typical of prophetic role] is connected with the soul activity in the body issuing directly from the activity of the Spirit. The dialectical complementarity of soul and body constitutes and builds up ‘Man’”. – A. Brueggeman SJ, “Charism and Office: The Dialectic of Ministry”, in D.S. Amalorpavadass (ed), *Ministries in the Church in India*:

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*Research Seminar and Pastoral Consultation*, CBCI Center, New Delhi, 1976, p.30.

<sup>12</sup> Pope Benedict XVI in his *Sacramentum Caritas* presents the “social implications of the Eucharistic mystery” and “sanctification of the world and the protection of creation” as the significant consequences of participating in the Eucharist. See nn. 89 and 92.

<sup>13</sup> June 16, 2009 (Zenit.org)

<sup>14</sup> K. B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church*, Paulist Press: New York, 1988. p. 315f.

<sup>15</sup> FABC Papers, “Living the Eucharist in Asia” IX FABC Plenary Assembly, 10-16 August, 2009, No. 129.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in T. Cabestrero, *Ministers of God, Ministers of the People: Testimonies of Faith from Nicaragua*, (transl. by Robert R. Barr), Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, 1984 (first English translation 1983), p.121.

<sup>17</sup> “Pope Notes His Goal for Year for Priests: Reflects on Priorities for Ministry”, June 24, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>18</sup> The existence of only one will in the Holy Trinity is traditionally described in terms of the *perichoretic* union of the Persons and vice versa.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in T. Cabestrero, op.cit., p.69.

<sup>20</sup> “Pope Notes His Goal for Year for Priests: Reflects on Priorities for Ministry”, June 24, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>21</sup> Cited in “Our Priests, Our Heroes: Theologian Comments on Compilation of Vocation Stories”, - An interview with Christine Anne Mugridge, March 3, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>22</sup> “Q-and-A Session With Parish Priests (Part 1): Let Us Not Lose the Simplicity of the Truth”, March 3, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>23</sup> K. Rahner, *The Priesthood*, transl. By E. Quinn, The Seabury Press, New York, p. 145.

<sup>24</sup> S. J. Rossetti, *The Joy of Priesthood*, ATC (reprint), Bangalore, 2009, (original publ. Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, 2005), Chapter 6.

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in T. Cabestrero, op.cit. p.81.

<sup>26</sup> The core insight of this section comes from, K. Rahner, op.cit., p.99f.

<sup>27</sup> “The office or ministry is a gift of God to the Church community, not primarily to the person of the minister as such”, says Gerwin van Leeuwen. “It is also certainly not a reward to persons who have served the Church well and it should never be seen as a profitable career.” – see his “Who is a Minister in Christ’s Church?”, in D. Amalorpavadass, op.cit., p.94.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in T. Cabestrero, op.cit., p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> “Pope Urges Pastors to Uphold Faith's Simplicity”, March 3, 2009 (Zenit.org).

<sup>30</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: A Case for Change*, SCM Press, London, 1984 (first published in 1981), especially the second chapter.

<sup>31</sup> I Clement 44.4-6. See M. Jourgon, “Remarques, sur le vocabulaire sacerdotal de la Prima Clementis”, in *Epektasis* (In honour of Cardinal J. Daniélou), Paris 1972, 109 ; J. Blond, in *L’eucharistie des premiers chrétiens*, Paris 1948, 38f. cited in Schillebeeckx, Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>32</sup> Tertullian, *De Exhort. Cast.* 7.3; cf. *De Praescriptione* 41, 5-8. G. Otrano, “*Nonne et laici sacerdotes sumus?*” (*Exhort. Cast.* 7.3), in *Vetera Christianorum* 8, 1971, 27-47. Cited in Schillebeeckx, ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Schillebeeckx, Ibid., p.52.

<sup>34</sup> Kenon B. Osborne, op.cit., presents a detailed study on this matter (especially chapters 2 and 3).

<sup>35</sup> Cited in K. Rahner, op.cit., pp 105-106.

<sup>36</sup> NT depicts a variety of ministries which certainly are not bound up with Apostleship: A ministry was entrusted to Archippus (Col 1:17), Timothy (2 Tim 4:5), Tychicus (Col 4:7; Eph 6:21) and Epaphras (Col 1:7). Serving at table is also considered as ministry (Acts 6:1; 4:3 cf. 10:40). A collection for the poor of Jerusalem is ministry (Acts 11:29; 12:25). Distribution of the financial aid among Christians in Jerusalem that Paul had collected in Macedonia and Achaia (Rom 15:25-26) is also called ministry (Rom 15:31). Helping the poor was at times

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referred as “ministry of the saints” (1 Cor 16:15; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:1). That is because such help produced a grateful attitude to God in the beneficiaries (2 Cor 9:12). Cited in J Pathrapankal, “‘Ministry’ in St. Paul”, in D. S. Amalorpavadass (ed), op.cit., pp. 207-208.

Similarly, we can also see how some of the early ministries changed in Christian tradition according to the contextual needs: some among seven men (Acts 6: 1-6) who were set apart for ministry of charity later became evangelists. Also the *Chor-Episcopoi* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, who were actual bishop-delegates took up non-episcopal works in the later centuries. – see A. Thannikot, “Church History and Ecumenism”, in D. S. Amalorpavadass, op.cit. p. 472.

<sup>37</sup> R. J. Bunik, *Priests for Tomorrow*, Translated from the Dutch by Frances Wilms, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1969, p. 50. Cited in Gerwin van Leeuwen, op.cit, pp. 94-95.

<sup>38</sup> Gerwin van Leeuwen, *ibid.*, p.95.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. G. Soares-Prabhu, “From Alienation to Inculturation: Some Reflections on Doing Theology in India Today”, in *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today: Collected Writings of George. M. Soares-Prabhu SJ*, Vol.1., Edited by Isaac Padinjarekuttu, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Theology Series, Pune and Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand 1999.

<sup>40</sup> M. K. Gandhi, “Harijan”, May 30, 1936.

We find many such passages in his writings. For instance: “It is my firm opinion” he wrote in ‘Young India’, “that Europe today represents not the Spirit of God or Christianity, but the Spirit of Satan... His (of Jesus Christ) so called followers measure their moral progress, by their material possessions”. See “The Message of Jesus Christ”, in ‘Young India’, September 8, 1920, p.30.

“If you go on serving people and ask them also to serve, they would understand. But you quote instead John 3:16 and ask them to believe it. That has no appeal to me, and I am sure people will not understand it. Where there has been acceptance of the Gospel through preaching, my complaint is that there has been some motive” – *Ibid.*, p.69.

Swami Vivekananda has similar words of advice to Christians: “Let me tell you, brethren, if you want to live....go back to Christ....Go

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back to him who had nowhere to lay his head....Yours is a religion preached in the name of luxury. What an irony of fate!...you can't serve God and Mammon at the same time...Better be ready to live in rags with Christ than to live in palaces without him." - "To Americans in Detroit" February 21, 1894, in "The Complete Works", in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. VIII, Swami Yogeshwarananda Advaita Ashrama, Himalayas, 1951., p.213.

<sup>41</sup> Address of Benedict XVI during the general audience in St. Peter's Square, July 1, 2009 (Zenit.org).