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# **“You are ... a royal priesthood ... so that you may announce ...” (1 Pet. 2:9). Reflections of two lay female theologians**

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**Abstract:** Beginning with an informal and personal conversational style that attracts the reader's interest, two female theology faculty teaching staff members present their honest feelings and convictions, which lead them to a theological reflection on the priesthood, from their perspective as women. Different aspects of vocation and identity are uncovered. The concept of empowerment is discussed. A brief overview is given of changes in the understanding of priesthood in history. Findings of a priest-survey provide four 'priest-types'. Aspects of the contemporary situation are given. Specific examples are cited for raising questions and drawing inferences.

**Keywords:** Women, priesthood, common priesthood, mediator, vocation, identity, empowerment, types of priests.

This article is really in need of a special introduction. This is so because it intends to build bridges between worlds which are quite far away from each other and which seem to work quite differently. It needs a serious introduction because this article tries to contribute some thoughts and feelings to try and reach a mutual understanding between dialogue-partners, between members of the same Catholic Church, between people who are trying to follow the same person and work for one and the same Kingdom of God, and at the same time between persons whose backgrounds, basic experiences and fundamental convictions might be quite different or even opposing ones. So dear readers, please do not skip

this introduction part (as one is tempted to do quite often) but allow yourself for a short period of time to be taken into another part of the world, to be introduced into another perspective which surely is not the only one, but which is one alongside other ones.

This article on the priesthood is written by two *lay* theologians. This article about priesthood in the Catholic Church is written by two *female* lay theologians. And this article about priesthood in the Catholic Church, published in an Indian journal, is written by two lay female theologians from the *West*, from Austria, a small European country. To accept the request to write this article was by itself an adventure for us. Dear readers, we invite you to join us on this adventure-journey into maybe unknown areas of experience and thought. (We will surely do the same as we go through the other articles of this journal once it is published.) Come, let's go, "Chalo"!

### **What shapes our reflection on this sensitive topic?**

#### **- An introduction to our view-point in the form of a conversation**

Teresa (T): How did you feel and what did you think when I asked you if you are interested to write together with me this article about priesthood? What kind of difficulties did you see and in what way did it challenge you?

Anna (A): It was in the middle of summer and it was like a request from another planet. It was just bizarre to be asked to write something about this topic when at the same time it is very clear that so many things around this topic of priesthood – like priesthood of women – cannot be said and done. Still I felt this topic is somehow important for

me, for my reflection, but also for what I would call an existential practice of religion and faith. Priesthood has a significance according to me. That was the reason why I accepted to write this article, presupposed that we do it together. There is within me a deep conviction that something like priesthood is needed in a religion. And what about you?

T: First of all, I was quite happy to write something for the JDV journal, principally as I am interested very much in the Indian context. But the problem was the topic; I really felt quite uneasy with it. I felt mainly that this priesthood-topic has nothing to do with me personally, it simply does not touch me existentially in any way. Priestess is something I will never be, something I will never be allowed to become, officially, something I am not even allowed to think about. It simply does not affect me. And what challenged, and in the end convinced me to start working on this topic, was the fact that I think it is simply unjust and wrong that I am not allowed to consider priesthood as something which can also be a part of my world.

A: And what about the impression which I described that priesthood is something essential for religion. Is this impression also familiar to you?

T: This impression is hardly there for me. Although when I start reflecting how religion works and how I personally grew up in a Christian surrounding, then I have to say that, yes, my family participated regularly in parish activities. We went for weekly mass and of course I saw the priest presiding at the Eucharist. But at home my family was critical towards the Church and still pious at the same time. My brother and I were told that priests are

also just human beings and that what they say has to be critically evaluated like all other people's opinions. Just the fact that a priest is a priest was irrelevant.

A: That means this numinous dimension is not closely connected for you with priesthood?

T: Yes, that is right. When I think of priests I think more of pragmatic, administrative people than of mystical ones.

A: As I see it, on this point my approach is different. First of all my family was not against the clergy, not at all. The youngest brother of my mother was supposed to become a priest. In the end he did not become one. But becoming or being a priest was connected with high esteem. And, yes, I had the impression, that being a priest is something special, something extra-ordinary. Still as a young girl I never had the wish to become a priestess. This exclusion was not important for me at that time. Only later at the age of around 20 I started to think more about the impossibility for women to join priesthood, and I realized that there is something at the bottom of these traditions which I am not ready just to agree to. One more experience which I would like to share at this point is the following. Personally I never felt the vocation to become a priestess. However, I remember one course which I taught at the Theological Faculty, during which two female students shared that they do feel very clearly about this particular vocation. And to hear that so directly from the mouth of committed, intelligent and nice young women, really impressed me a lot. These were not some crazy women, like we are made to believe sometimes, that those who would like to opt for priesthood are just crazy and narcissistic. These were very simple, honest and

committed women who feel ready to serve the Church as woman priests.

T: When I was a young girl I was rejected from being an altar girl. And there is the deep sentiment that basically the Church is more frightened than happy about my contributions, that at the level where I am very much myself I have no place in the Church, but that I disturb the order. Earlier I said, I do not want to become a priestess, but I want to have the right to decide about that. But nowadays I think maybe this statement was made too fast and mainly served as a protection for me. If I tell myself that I am not interested to work in the Church as a priestly leader then I do not have to feel the pain of rejection. Today it is very clear to me that I am called to and that I want to grow in openness, faith and spiritual depth and that I want to help others to do so. I am very sad about the fact that the official Church teaching wants me to believe that there is something basically wrong about my body which is completely contrary to my personal experience.

### **Vocation and identity. Vocation – “Discovery of who one is and what one has to say”**

Whenever one hears the term “vocation” or the call to “pray for vocations” most of the Christians are tempted to think primarily of the vocation to become priest or the vocation to join a religious congregation. Depending on the personal attitude towards the Catholic Church in general and celibate life in particular, this kind of vocation is associated with appreciation, esteem and recognition or with amazement, suspicion or even rejection. Too easily one loses sight of the fact that each and every human person is called by God and that each woman and man, each girl and boy carries a vocation which we believers

are supposed to be thankful for, and for whose discovery we are supposed to pray for. Following this understanding, vocation is not a very particular event, which happens from time to time and to very extra-ordinary persons, but vocation becomes a call which remains a promise and a challenge to all of us. It is a promise because it assures us that according to the Christian understanding God calls each individual person, be it a small or a big person, a young or an old person, a more intelligent or a more simple person, a sick or a healthy person, be it a female or a male person, a homosexual or a heterosexual person. At the same time, vocation remains a challenge because it reminds us of the fact that each person is asked to depart again and again from what we have considered to be our permanent home, and to travel towards a deeper understanding and realisation of the Divine Truth.

One more very interesting aspect of vocation is that the conviction that vocation is not something which affects only a few, but something which affects everyone, does not turn it into something banal, but radicalizes it. With vocation it is not the way it is with precious stones, which means the less you find, the more precious they are. In this context it is completely the opposite way, the more people are able to live out their vocation, the closer we are to the realisation of the Kingdom of God. Following this line I agree with Klemens Schaupp<sup>1</sup>, a pastoral theologian from Austria, who defines vocation as “discovery of who one is and what one has to say”. In describing vocation in this way it is very close to the description of what we call identity. To develop one’s identity means to discover one’s vocation and vice versa. Before I continue with this link between identity and vocation (in part 2.2) I want to stress once again that this broad understanding of vocation

should not be considered as something ephemeral or something which we can easily agree to in order to pass on to the so called “extra-ordinary” vocation. If we are really interested to understand what vocation means, it is wiser to look at the ordinary than at the so called extra-ordinary. The astonishing and radical truth is not that a few are chosen, but that all are called; the extra-ordinary is that all ordinary people are anointed to be extra-ordinary. In order not to miss this, we are in need of a deep awareness which will enable us to develop the courage to live an ordinary life carrying the extra-ordinary mystery.

This ‘extra-ordinary ordinary’ truth is at the same time not something which is limited to the Christian anthropology, as we can see when we listen to Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian mystic, who says: “The divine music is continuously there within us, but our noisy senses drown this subtle music, which is completely different and enormously more awesome than anything else, which we are able to perceive.”<sup>2</sup>

Still it has been, and is, a struggle to keep this theological-anthropological conviction alive. Also among Christians we can find the longing to look for mediators who shall be in charge of the human-divine relationship and who shall bridge the human and divine sphere. “The temptation to establish traditional sacerdotal priests seems to be a very basic human temptation at times when religious insecurity, fear and doubt are dominating [...]”<sup>3</sup> But this bridge between the human and divine sphere has been built in and through the Christ event, he himself has become the bridge on which all of us – lay women and men, children, sisters, brothers and fathers, and even crocodiles, tigers and alpine marmots, to name just a few creatures – have the honour to travel towards the Ultimate

Reality. According to the testimony of the New Testament (cf. 1 Tim 2,5), there is only one mediator between God and humans – and that is Jesus Christ. All other people can strive to become followers of him. Bernd Jochen Hilberath writes: “To be priest means: to give one’s life for the sake of others [...] – as followers of Jesus Christ. [...] Ever since [the Christ event] a mediator is not necessary anymore. He [Jesus Christ] has related us with God for good.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Vocation – built on the pillars of identity**

The link between vocation and identity shall be explored a little further here. Hilarion Petzold speaks of five pillars of identity<sup>5</sup>, by which he means areas of human life which are important for the development of a person. These five pillars are: (1) the body with all its joyful and painful sensations; (2) human relationships of different closeness; (3) work/activity through which a person is able to express what is important to her/him and through which a person can contribute something to society; (4) material as well as intellectual resources (like education) and (5) values which are part of one’s worldview or faith, and which help to stabilise the person in the midst of everyday experiences. If it is argued here that to discover one’s vocation means to develop one’s identity and vice versa, the desire is to show that vocation is not understood as something which is in opposition to the unfolding of a *personality*, but that it goes side by side. All the five factors or areas of human life mentioned above, do have a strong impact on a person’s development, and nobody can just ignore those areas. One day or the other one will feel the importance of these areas, and the need to find a way to integrate these into one’s life. As identity-



development is a life-long process, it is also suggested that vocation be understood more as a development-process than a one-time decision.

When it comes to the question as to why not define vocation as something which goes against human nature and longing, it is preferred to use the expression and the concept of the “three-fold sound of the one Divine voice” which was introduced by Josef Maureder, an Austrian Jesuit and psychotherapist. By this term he wants to express that the one Divine voice which calls each individual person can be perceived in a three-fold way – in what a person *can* become and do, *wants* to become and do, and *is supposed* to become and do. According to him these three dimensions of the one vocation are not in rivalry with each other (e.g., that a person is called to do what he or she is not able or ready to do) but do – when we have a close look – support each other.<sup>6</sup> Vocation is built on our abilities, our freedom and our longing.

### **Vocation as self-awareness instead of self-centeredness** – “See, there is ...”

If vocation goes along with the discovery of one’s identity, it does also go along with the realisation of an ever growing self-awareness. A person can realise more and more who he or she is and what she or he has to say and to do. This self-awareness is at the same time very different from selfish and narcissist self-centeredness. To develop towards self-awareness as well as to be aware of the temptation of self-centeredness is important for ordained priests as well as for people belonging to the common priesthood. Especially when we are working in religious fields like religious education, pastoral care, spiritual direction, parish activities, liturgical services or

academic theology, we are supposed to speak and act in a way which makes it perceivable that not we ourselves – as conductors, preachers, professors or ordained priests – are the centre of our professional activities and enterprises, but that through our commitments we are trying to point at someone else. The most important criteria of religious teaching, liturgical activity and pastoral care seems to be the question whether these activities point to the doers or ‘conductors’, or to the mystery and reality in our midst, and at the same time beyond these activities. Javier Melloni, a Spain Jesuit, writes: “The theological word about the Mystery gives us a deeper understanding of It [the Mystery] in so far as it [the theological word] is transcended.”<sup>7</sup> Melloni uses the distinctions “idol – icon” and “dungeon – cathedral” to illustrate his thought. A theological word and a liturgical activity can serve as an “icon” or a “cathedral” and point towards something which is in and beyond the word or the activity, but it can also point at the theological word and the liturgical activity itself in a self-centered manner, and become an “idol” or a “dungeon”.

Thinking about this, there is one person from the New Testament who comes to mind in a special way – John the Baptist, and his pointing towards Jesus. In John’s Gospel he is telling the priests and Levites who come to question him that he himself is not the Messiah, and on the following day when he sees Jesus, he tells the people: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, ‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’ I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.” (John 1,29-31). All of us are called through

baptism to “prepare the way of the Lord” and to “make straight his paths” (Mt 3,3). So we can tell other people as well as ourselves: “See, there is ...”.

### **Vocation – in bonds**

If we look at our world in general, and at our societies in particular, in a realistic manner, the description “already and not yet” regarding the realisation of the Kingdom of God is very accurate. Besides the truth that all human beings (and maybe also all other beings) are called to discover their extra-ordinariness, it is also true that quite often people are confronted with forces and circumstances which hinder them from unfolding their full capacities. People are kept small or are made to believe that they are unimportant and less precious than other people. Vocation is kept in bonds. Of course the basic vocation through God can never be undone by such worldly mechanics of power and violence, but the flourishing of the vocation can be handicapped tremendously. In the worst case this can lead to the physical or psychic death of people, in a less dramatic but still painful form, it might lead to disappointment and withdrawal. The opposite of the dynamics of bonded vocations would be the dynamics of empowerment. The term “empowerment” in a non-theological sense “means [...] the strengthening of self-power, autonomy and self-direction. Empowerment describes courage building processes [...] in which people in situations of shortage, of discrimination or of social exclusion start to take matters into their own hands by becoming aware of their own abilities, by developing their own strength and by learning to use their individual and collective resources for a self-determined conduct of life.”<sup>8</sup> Thomas Abraham, Indian professor emeritus for

adult education, defines empowerment as “the means by which the individual, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to work together towards enhancing the quality of life of themselves and others.” If we speak about empowerment in a theological context, it is important to stress that all human efforts which are essential for the improvement of the situation, and for the abolishing of structures of disadvantage and discrimination are carried by the empowerment which is given by God. Hermann Stenger, an Austrian pastoral theologian, has been working a lot on this topic and speaks in the field of pastoral work of a threefold empowerment by God. He distinguishes between (1) the empowerment to life, (2) the election to faith and (3) the vocation to pastoral service.<sup>9</sup> It is only on this three-fold fundamental that it makes sense to start thinking about the development of particular skills.

But as said above, the dynamics of a theologically founded empowerment is the opposite of the dynamics of disempowerment, which unfortunately captures many areas of our living-together. So does it also happen in the Church, and at times, through a certain way of discussing about the priesthood and practicing the priesthood. Surely many ordained priests as well as many people belonging to the common priesthood support empowering processes and help men and women to come up. Still, it is also true that some structures which are closely connected to the usual understanding and practice of priesthood, do serve processes of disempowerment and exclusion. And unfortunately women are affected by this, simply because of their gender. An example from the Austrian context can be given here to make this point more comprehensible.

Maybe it is not a very dramatic example, but it is a good example because it shows the impact of small incidents which are sometimes difficult to be noticed, because they happen so silently or because we are too much used to them. This example is the story of the vocation of Katharina Achraimer an Austrian woman who has been working in different pastoral fields for more than 30 years.<sup>10</sup> She narrates that in 1962 during mass she suddenly heard an inner voice which told her: “I need you. I need you in front.” She was touched by “a very subtle and still all-powerful reality, to which all other things were secondary”. For many years she did not dare to tell anyone about this experience. At home the family were farmers and she had not gone for higher education so far. Some years later she came to know that in Vienna women could go for a course to become pastoral assistants. She attended that course and thereafter worked for 36 years in different pastoral fields like parish, school and hospital. The terms with which her work and her position were named, changed several times during her life, which shows that the Church is entering here into new areas, and that the tradition has to grow with the changing circumstances. When Katharina Achraimer is reflecting on her life today she describes besides joys, painful experiences as well, which were connected to her vocation, which did not really fit into the structures of the Church. For example, on All Saints’ Day when she was told by the priest that maybe it would be better if she – who was responsible for the pastoral work in one part of the town throughout the year – stayed at home, because he did not know where to put her during the ceremony. In three parishes she was the first one to take over the responsibility for the parish after the priests had left (as the number of priests is decreasing). And for many years she had to live with

statements like: “We do not have a priest anymore. And now he is even replaced by a woman!” The people got used to her presence after some time, but always just as a compromise and a temporary solution, because no priest was available. Katharina Achrainger concludes today: “It is not vocation which constitutes holiness, but the fidelity with which vocation is lived out.”

### **Common Priesthood and the diversity of priestly self-concepts.**

#### **- Relation between the common priesthood of the faithful and the hierarchical priesthood**

“And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.” (Mt 27,51). This act shows that the so called holy order which was dominant so far and which allowed only the high priest to have access to the sanctum was abolished by God himself. “Through the death and resurrection of Jesus each person can be equally immediate to God.”<sup>11</sup> From a historical perspective on religions it is evident, that traditionally priests have been understood as mediators between heaven and earth, between God/gods and humans. “As persons associated to cult they established the link between the transcendental and earthy sphere. Therefore they are looked upon as somebody extra-ordinary.”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus has broken with this understanding of priesthood radically. He himself did not consider his actions to be priestly. In the early Church the terms for cultic-priestly functions, which are familiar to us today, were not used, but instead terms which originate in societal functions like “episkopos”, the custodian, or “presbyteros”, the eldest or principal. According to the testimony of the New Testament, that which was often considered as the

particular priestly – to establish the link between heaven and earth – is principally possible for each human person. All people can have without any further mediation, access to God. The only true mediator who is between God and humans, is the true high priest (cf. Heb. 5,5) Jesus Christ. “His death on the cross is the completion of all sacrifices and the end of priesthood in the traditional meaning.”<sup>13</sup> As “holy priesthood” (cf. 1 Pet. 2,4-10) all baptised people have a part in Christ, all share in this vocation, and the priestly ordination takes place in baptism. There is no more need for particular God-mediators, in order to build up a relationship with God. This claim is tremendously radical and it was not always possible to keep it up. The deeply rooted tradition of the sacerdotal priest proved to be strong and so the understanding of priesthood in the Church was soon again shaped by the traditional idea of priesthood as mediation. Nevertheless this traditional idea was also questioned from time to time, as it happened during the time of the Reformation for example.

This tension is perceivable even today in the Catholic Church. In the documents of the Second Vatican Council the common priesthood of all the faithful is stressed. The relation between the common priesthood and the hierarchical priesthood is described in the following way: “If therefore in the Church everyone does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God. (cf. 2 Pet. 1,1) And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> What is stated here is an overcoming of the separation

between clergy and laity concerning sanctity. With this the Council opted for an understanding of priesthood which does not go along with an overestimation of the sacral dimension of priesthood.<sup>15</sup>

At present it seems that in the western world again a phenomenon is taking place that one could describe as “re-sacralisation” of the priesthood. A strong longing for transcendence can be observed and so people who are expected to be in touch with the holy sphere are in great demand. In times of crises many persons ask for a priest sharing the assumption that the priest has a more direct relation to God. Given this situation the leading Church institutions, academic theology as well as individual priests are challenged to remain rooted in the theology of Vatican II. Depending on the culture and the social situation, this challenge will take different shapes. It might be helpful to become aware of the shape this phenomenon takes in one’s own local Church situation: In what way is the relation between sacred and profane interpreted and lived out in my local Church situation? In what way is the relation between priests and laity lived out and understood? From what or whom (culture, religion, religious communities, ...) do we want to turn away? With what or whom do we want to go along?

### **Characterisation of different ways of living out priesthood**

Of course within each local Church not only *one* view of priesthood or *one* idea of ministry exists, but several different ones. In 2001 an empirical investigation was published which had been conducted among priests in Eastern and Western Europe.<sup>16</sup> It was the aim of this investigation, which was called “Priest 2000”, to survey



the different understandings of vocation and ministry prevalent among priests. So the questionnaire included questions about personal spirituality, about estimation of Church developments, about the joys and difficulties of priestly life, etc. The results of the questionnaire were categorized and on the basis of that, four “priest types” were deduced. A more detailed description of these four types of priests would be interesting in connection with the reflections on common and hierarchical priesthood because the four priest types value and deal with this relation (between common and hierarchical priesthood) quite differently. There are tremendous differences in the style of pastoral activity and proclamation. Furthermore, this investigation is illuminative when it is looked upon from the perspective of the laity, especially from the perspective of women. So the four types are presented below in a brief manner.

#### **- The clergyman who is timeless**

This priest sees himself clearly as a priest of Jesus Christ. According to him Christ has established the priestly ministry, and through ordination he has been introduced into the service of Christ. This service is considered to be the fulfillment of his life. Concerning modern life-style and modern culture he behaves in a reserved or even hostile manner. According to him there are more disadvantages than advantages which come along with the culture of (post-)modernism. Accordingly he is sceptical and/or hostile when it comes to an opening of the Church towards this culture. In his view the Second Vatican Council has contributed to an inappropriate secularisation of the Church. The spirit of the time is considered to be a peril for the Church order and structures. The most important priestly activities are the

celebration of the Eucharist and proclamation. Participation of the laity is not particularly desirable.

**- The man of God who is open to the present time**

This priest looks upon himself as bridge-builder, as pontifex. He stands at the tension between the (official) Church and the world. He supports the opening of the Church towards the world which was initiated by the Second Vatican Council. He is the “born priest”, a man of the middle position, who nevertheless asserts his position. A contemporary proclamation of the Gospel is particularly important to him and he is ready to spend a good amount of time for this through preaching and spiritual direction. He likes to be in public and takes a stand on contemporary topics. His self-concept is a prophetic one. The advice of laity is welcomed by him. Still there are also areas, in which he – being aware of his ordained ministry – does not allow anyone to intervene.

**- The man of the Church who is close to the present time**

This priest has quite a distinct understanding of his vocation. The personal call of God for serving in the Church is his reliable foundation. The view on the Church as it was established by the Second Vatican Council is according to him, a very stable foundation, and he is very much interested in a consequent realisation of the ideas of the Vatican Council. He is looking for steps for the realization of the teachings of the Council, especially from the side of the Roman headquarters. The conviction of being called by God goes side by side with a striving for professionalism. This kind of priest wants to execute his vocation and his profession in a very professional manner, and is consequently ready to acquire additional

qualifications and skills. At the same time he pays attention to his limits and takes care of his spare time and private life. He is not by all means interested to be rooted in a parish, but is open to work in different and also less traditional fields of pastoral work.

### **The leader of the parish who is up-to-date**

The theology of the common priesthood of all the baptised persons is at the bottom of his acting as a priest. He sees his ministry as being a brother among brothers and sisters. His vision is of a Church which lives the Gospel values and which is at the same time open to the modern world and society. According to him this is the only way to be in touch with the modern culture. The Vatican Council was according to him path-breaking, but the period after the Council more a step backwards than forwards. This priest appreciates highly the decision of individuals, and wants that these decisions be accepted and appreciated also by the Church officials. "This refers to the possibility for remarried-divorced couples to be fully part of the sacramental community as well as to the life-form of priests."<sup>17</sup> He considers the admission of women for priesthood as theologically justifiable and pastorally preferable. In his priestly activity, pastoral care for each individual person and *diaconia* have a high significance. He tries to improve the structures for participation of laity in decision-making processes.

Considering the priest-investigation as a whole, one has to keep in mind that a categorisation or typology like this does always show some relevant aspects, but it can also be misleading. A typology like this should not be understood as being the reality, but it may be a help in perceiving and interpreting realities which we face. In this article this

typology might give us a hint why believing together and working together for women and priests can take different shapes, and that these differences in cooperation are not explainable through personal sympathy alone. The particular understanding of vocation and ministry of a priest shapes the way in which he deals with lay people, especially with women. Of course it is not adequate to speak of *the* woman either. One could also try to develop a typology of women, by asking them about their understanding of ministry and vocation, and in what way they consider themselves as being called and as being in charge of a ministry. Such a survey is not available right now, so we have to help ourselves by using our imagination. For example, it seems to be quite expectable that a woman who is aware of sharing in the common priesthood and aware of her dignity as priestess, queen and prophet, which was confirmed in her baptism, will find it hard to work together – as also to pray and celebrate together – with a priest who sees himself as ‘timeless clergy-man’. Both of them will have to face lots of frustrations in their cooperative work, and quite often it will break after some time. The ‘timeless clergy-man’ as well as ‘the man of the Church who is close to the present time’ have in common their exclusive understanding of vocation. They perceive more the distinctive aspects than the common ground, with regard to the laity.

As this article is being written, one keeps asking oneself if at all this kind of typology is meaningful and helpful for the Indian situation. Surely it would have to be adapted in this so-different context, but maybe the European results can at least be inspiring to provoke a thought about the plurality of types among priests, and about the quite different communication and relation

patterns between priests and women which follow out of this plurality.

**What do we dream of when it comes to priesthood?**

**Ending and starting anew in the form of a conversation**

Anna (A): When I look at the Church in Austria and at priests whom I know, or at the seminarians whom I meet at the Theological Faculty and in my courses, I notice two things: Firstly I would say that there is a lot of heterogeneity among priests, and secondly that the young men who study for priesthood today are very different from the seminarians of twenty years ago. Another quite important impression which I have, is the change of the attitude of the believing community towards priests. Let me say that maybe twenty-five years ago a young man encountered mainly esteem and respect when he decided to join the seminary. Today that is really very different. There is a small group which very highly appreciates such a decision, but the majority – even of the practicing Catholics – shows ignorance or even rejection. So what young men encounter today when they want to become priests is not easy to digest. Maybe we also have to keep that in mind when we say that at times it is difficult to cooperate with seminarians or priests. Still, on a more general level, it is very evident today that the Catholic Church in Austria has lost significance and influence dramatically during the last fifty years. And interestingly, and also annoyingly, to me it seems that at the same time within the Church I can observe an over-estimation and stylisation of priesthood in a particular way. It looks like the less importance the Church has in society and in public life, the more the priest is put on a higher platform away from the people.

Teresa (T): Sometimes I think this is almost like an indigestible cocktail for young men – on the one side they have to face lack of understanding and rejection, and on the other side they hear or read that the priest is supposed to be someone especially pious, immaculate and extraordinary, and that the priest is somehow in opposition to society. That touches already the question of what I am dreaming of when it comes to priesthood. I am dreaming of young people (male and female) who are able to grow into priesthood without going into opposition to society, people who do not base their holiness in trying to be away or apart from the ordinary. So I would say I am dreaming of priestly people who do not feel the urge to separate the profane and the holy but who can feel, live out and develop their vocation in the midst of people who are doing the same. I am dreaming of priestly people who do not have to be so much concerned about their own status but who can – like all other people around them – discover who they are and what they have to say. I am dreaming of priestly people who can let go their extra-ordinary status and develop the courage to be ordinary and at the same time discover the extra-ordinariness within the human nature.

A: That reminds me of the incidents which happened in the diocese of Salzburg (our neighbouring diocese) recently, and maybe your dreams can be a help to understand what actually has occurred there. In the September volume of the diocesan journal of Salzburg, a person in a leadership position at the diocesan department for pastoral care, and who is a married man, wrote that the question of gender justice is an essential question for the future of the Church, independently from the question whether there are sufficient male candidates for priesthood

or not. And just this statement was enough to start a hurting internet-discussion. In the end he had to apologize publicly in the same journal, and “correct” his statement. For me it is an alarming sign that a little scratching at the male priest image to which we are used to, creates so much irritation. Questions which are so evident and so pressing in our society today seem to be “taboo” in certain church circles. So it looks to me that the Church is not in a relation of companionship with “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” (*Gaudium et Spes* 1) of the people, but in opposition as you would say.

T: I am sure that there are social, political and economic questions in which it is right for the Church and for us as Christians to be in opposition. I think this prophetic role of Christian testimony is a very important one, but this prophetic role has to be based – according to me – on a fundamental solidarity and awareness that the Kingdom of God has already started to exist in the midst of our world, and that basically we can trust in the hope that inspiring and life-giving ideas can come towards us from those areas, movements and people who are not so closely connected to the visible official Church.

A: When I think of the future of the Church the first word which comes to my mind is change or transformation. And this will not happen all of a sudden but slowly. And in this transformation process spiritual people who are ready to work in the different fields of pastoral care will be needed. One more thing which is very much related to the future of the Church according to me, comes to my mind now. Recently I read an article about gender justice in religious life. At the end of this article a few questions for self-reflection are listed. These questions are primarily addressed to Religious Sisters, but I think

they can be reflected upon by any woman – and also by any man. Let me quote these questions to close our sharing and our article: “(1) Biographies of women do often develop from an exclusive ‘existence for others’ to the discovery of an ‘own life of self-awareness’. Do I have the courage as Religious Sister to let go of role-behaviour which is expected by the society and by the Church, and to discover a life-form which is really appropriate for women of our days? (2) Are internalised minority feelings as woman familiar to me? (3) Do I go through spiritual experiences of alienation in a Church which is masculine in many aspects? Do I, do we, create space for authentic female spirituality and liturgy?”<sup>18</sup>

As we said in the beginning it was an adventure to write this article. Besides many interesting theological questions which we came across during the process of discussing the content of this article, it became very clear to both of us that even our two perspectives, our basic experiences and convictions differ at certain points even though we share a common ground in many ways. The more attentively one looks at people, the more one discovers their uniqueness. May we as Catholic Church become more and more capable to receive and appreciate the gift of diversity while moving on a common ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Schaupp, Klemens, Gott im Leben entdecken. Einfuehrung in die geistliche Begleitung, Verlagsgemeinschaft Topos plus, Kavelaer 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi, Mahatma, Die Religion der Wahrheit, Aus Mahatma Gandhis schriftlichem Nachlass ausgewaehlt von M. S. Deshpande und R. K. Prabhu, translated by Franz Langmayr, Perlinger Verlag, Woergl 1982, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Schmid, F. Peter, Gottesvermittler. Das Beduerfnis nach “dem Priester” als Herausforderung an die Seelsorge, in: Diakonia. Internationale Zeitschrift fuer die Praxis der Kirche, vol. 34. / 1



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(January 2003) 178-185, here 184. The translation of these quotes from German to English has been done by the authors of this article.

- <sup>4</sup> Hilberath, Bernd Jochen, Mit Gott in Verbindung bringen, in: Diakonia. Internationale Zeitschrift fuer die Praxis der Kirche, vol. 34. / 1 (January 2003) 161-162. . The translation of this quotation from German to English has been done by the authors of this article.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Petzold, Hilarion (Ed.), Die Rolle des Therapeuten und die therapeutische Beziehung, Junfermann-Verlag, Paderborn 1980, 233-236; cf. Ladenhauf, Karl-Heinz, Integrative Therapie und Gestalttherapie in der Seelsorge, Paderborn 1988, 108-119; cf. Schaupp, Gott im Leben entdecken, 35-36.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Maureder, Josef, Wir kommen, wohin wir schauen. Berufung leben heute, Tyrolia Verlag, Innsbruck – Wien <sup>2</sup>2005, 44-47.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Melloni, Javier, Ueberlieferung und Uneindeutigkeit der Heiligen Schrift und der Dogmen, in: Concilium. Internationale Zeitschrift fuer Theologie 43. Jg./Heft 1 (2007), Matthias-Gruenewald-Verlag der Schwabenverlag AG Mainz, 57-64, here 59.
- <sup>8</sup> Herriger, Herbert, Grundlagentext Empowerment, in: [www.empowerment.de/grundlagentext.html](http://www.empowerment.de/grundlagentext.html) (status: 7th December 2009).
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Stenger, Hermann, Kompetenz und Identitaet. Ein pastoraltheologischer Entwurf, in: Stenger, Hermann (Ed.), Eignung fuer die Berufe der Kirche. Klaerung – Beratung – Begleitung, Herder Verlag, Freiburg i. B. 1988, 34-39.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Achrainer, Katharina, Eine wechselvolle Ortsuche. Die Treue zur persoenlichen Berufung angesichts der ausschließenden Strukturen fuer Aemter in der Kirche, in: Panhofer, Johannes / Schneider, Sebastian (Ed.), Spuren in die Kirche von morgen. Erfahrungen mit Gemeindeleitung ohne Pfarrer vor Ort – Impulse fuer eine menschnahe Seelsorge, Matthias-Gruenewald Verlag der Schwabenverlag AG, Ostfildern 2009, 54-58.
- <sup>11</sup> Schmid, Gottesvermittler, 178.
- <sup>12</sup> Schmid, Gottesvermittler, 178.
- <sup>13</sup> Schmid, Gottesvermittler, 179.

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- <sup>14</sup> Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 32.
- <sup>15</sup> In the documents of the Second Vatican Council the term “presbyter” is mostly used while speaking of priests. This term replaces the term “sacerdos”, which goes back to the Old Testament. In the council of Trent and in all the documents following it till the Second Vatican Council, the priest was referred to as “sacerdos” or as “clergyman”. The consequent usage of the term “presbyter” which goes back to the New Testament shows a shift in the understanding of priesthood.
- <sup>16</sup> Zulehner, Paul / Hennersperger, Anna, “Sie gehen und werden nicht matt” (Jes 40,31). *Priester in heutiger Kultur. Ergebnisse der Studie Priester 2000*, Schwabenverlag AG, Ostfildern 2001. As preparation for this survey 51 qualitative interviews were conducted. These were evaluated and served as basis for the development of a detailed questionnaire, which was answered by around 3000 priests. The majority of the participating priests belonged to German speaking dioceses (Germany, Switzerland and Austria). A smaller, but still representative group, belonged to dioceses from Eastern Europe.
- <sup>17</sup> Zulehner / Hennersperger, “Sie gehen und werden nicht matt”. *Ergebnisse der Studie Priester 2000*, 160.
- <sup>18</sup> Schaupp, Walter / Wolfers, Melanie, *Geschlechtergerechtigkeit – im Ordensleben?!*, in: Gruber, Margareta / Kiechle, Stefan (Ed.), *Gottesfreundschaft. Ordensleben heute denken*, Echter Verlag, Wuerzburg 2007, 271.