

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST AND OF THE CHURCH (THE PRIESTLY PEOPLE)

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*Research Notes offered to the MSP
participants to the Annual Retreat, Baguio
19-24 November 2012.*

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Abbreviations:

- **LG: *Lumen Gentium***, 1965, 10-11
- **CL: *Christifideles Laici***, Apostolic Exhortation by John Paul II, 1988
- **PDV: *Pastores Dabo Vobis***, Apostolic Exhortation by John Paul II, 1992
- **EDE: *Ecclesia De Eucharistia***, Encyclical Letter by John Paul II, 2003

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WE ARE A PRIESTLY PEOPLE

(Reflections on our Baptismal Priesthood)

INTRODUCTION

Bitterness & Resentment

“Baptism makes all Christians priests, in as much as it unites, it grafts them to the body of Christ, it consecrates them so that with their presence in the world they may insure the continuous manifestation of the communion between God and Humanity”.

Since at least forty years ago, theology and the Magisterium insist on a “priestly” reading of our Christian existence; and yet, even today, when we hear the words “priest” or “priesthood”, it is exclusively in order to designate the ordained minister. In short, the very idea of baptismal priesthood has not yet succeeded in penetrating the mentality or even the common vocabulary of our Christian communities”.

This is how an issue of the theological magazine *Credere Oggi* (January 2003) by the title “Baptismal Priesthood and Ministerial Priesthood” introduced the topic of what is commonly known as “The common priesthood of the Faithful”.

This realization of the little progress that the Christian community has made in receiving and assimilating the Council teaching about the baptismal priesthood of the faithful and consequently the persistent danger of over emphasizing the ministerial priesthood and its importance (*clericalism*) become bitter, almost exasperated complaint in the following letter of a prominent Catholic lay man to a Catholic magazine.

To the remark of a bishop: “The Council of Trent has invented the seminaries in order to form the priests, we are now in need of forming the adult Christians”, he reacts bitterly: Where has Vatican II ended? Not a

single hint, not the slightest reference to the complete, immense teaching of the Council, about the priestly-prophetic-royal power of the baptized.

“Priests are missing; it is high time that the lay people become conscious of their baptism!” our worrying bishops admonish. This is what makes our lay man go mad: “No! We must live out and actuate our baptism all the time, independently of the abundance or scarcity of priests.

Lay persons must always claim sacramentally their being priests-prophets-kings in the Church (*sacramentally: meaning: because of the sacraments of Christian Initiation*).

This is not what has happened so far: because of the prevailing clericalism, even when gatherings are organized in order to study the conciliar magisterium concerning the baptismal priesthood, ironically the presiders (usually lay) end by being sidelined by the chaplains (clergy) who are supposed to assist! I am now nasty: it appears as if the hierarchy thinks that they represent the totality of the Church: a perfect organism if the laity were not there!

There is much truth in all this. I was already thinking about this when I was in Africa on the occasion of priestly ordinations’ feasts; I have just come back from Bicol where I have taken part in the Feast of ordination and thanks giving mass of our 8th Filipino priest: a real triumph, a feast that brought together the whole town, a feast of joy, of ambition, a marvelous feast, a feast that honors the ministerial priesthood.

St Francis of Assisi, who did not want to be ordained as a priest because he thought he was unworthy, used to say that if he had met with an angel walking with a priest, he would have greeted first the priest and then the angel! One of the things that move me very deeply and that I met only in the Philippines, is the children coming to me at the end of the Mass for the blessing: *Mano, po! Mano, po!*

All this is beautiful, but what about the baptismal priesthood? It is like the hidden treasure that most of the people have forgotten the existence of.

The Hidden Treasure: The Articulations of our research

Apart from any sense of resentment, the theology of our baptismal priesthood, what is commonly called the “common priesthood of the

faithful” is a hidden treasure, a wealth that can enlighten our life and become a source of inspiration for our individual spiritualities. This is the purpose of these reflections. They will be articulated in 4 parts since we are going to meet in the recollections of August, September, October and November.

1. *Introduction: We are a priestly people.* We start from the realization that the theology and spirituality of the baptismal priesthood is rather unknown; that it is a hidden wealth of the Council, that it will constitute a source of enrichment if we took the time to know and to deepen this knowledge of it especially in prayer.

We continue by demonstrating that there is a baptismal priesthood or common priesthood of the faithful, that the ministerial priesthood is not in opposition or competition to it, but it is in function of it, at the service of it. We try to understand and state emphatically that the priesthood of the Church is one. This priesthood by which we all are a priestly people derives from the priesthood of Christ and is exercised in union with Christ, the High Priest of the New Testament. The priesthood of the baptized is actually the way Christ associates us to his priesthood.

We then dwell on the terminology of priesthood in order to clarify what constitute the core of the role and function of a priest and we come to the conclusion that the core is MEDIATION, to bridge the infinite gap between God and Humanity.

We conclude the first part by considering how the priesthood is the development of the covenant, is born in the context of the covenant and has as its origin God’s initiative of Revelation and involvement with Humanity in Jesus.

2. **The Priesthood of Jesus** (Jesus Christ is the High Priest of the New Testament). It is essential to penetrate the originality of the priesthood of Jesus as the High Priest of the New Testament. Jesus Christ mediates ontologically because of the Incarnation: He is anointed as priest by the hypostatic union. But he mediates also dynamically because he learned through obedience and suffering to be a compassionate mediator.

The originality of Christ’s priesthood as the comprehensive category that embraces his entire work of salvation is theologically developed very early in tradition by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.

The concept of **sacrifice** according to Rene’ Girard, French philosopher and anthropologist, is completely changed by Christ who really brings humanity to its maturity.

3. The Eucharist is the Christian Passover: like the Passover meal is presented as having preceded the actual event of God's intervention to liberate his people and then remained as the ritual memorial of that event that was meant to continue in the life of the faithful Israelites of every generation; in the same way, the Eucharist represents the way Jesus announced openly and celebrated his coming death on the Cross during the last supper, before the actual event of our salvation took place.

Afterwards, and up to now, it was and is the ritual memorial of that event, with the originality of Jesus' real, sacramental presence and it is meant to help the followers of Jesus to live out the mystery of their association to the Priesthood of Christ in their every day life.

The ministerial priesthood has a distinct role in making Christ present in his Church, his priestly people.

4. The Priesthood of the Church: we are a priestly people because Christ associates us to his priesthood. Our mediation with Jesus is first of all a mediation of life. The universal vocation to holiness finds its place in this priestly perspective. Then there is the mediation of witness by which we are a prophetic people. The missionary mandate flows from our being a prophetic people. Hence comes the universal responsibility for the spreading of the Gospel.

Lastly, there is the mediation of the secular character of our Christian vocation. By this we fulfill our call to be a kingly people and it is expressed by the universal task to bring to God all created realities. The prophetic and kingly dimensions are like subordinate functions of the priestly nature of the people of God. These are the guidelines for the development of a spirituality of the baptismal priesthood.

I. THE EXISTENCE OF THE BAPTISMAL PRIESTHOOD

“With the one definitive sacrifice of the cross, Jesus communicated to all his disciples the dignity and mission of priest of the new and eternal Covenant. And thus the promise that God had made to Israel was fulfilled: “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). According to saint Peter, the whole people of the New Covenant is established as “ a spiritual house”, “a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 2:5). The baptized

are “living stones” who build the spiritual edifice by keeping close to Christ, “that living stone...in God’s sight chosen and precious” (1 Pt 2:4).

The new priestly people which is the Church not only has its authentic image in Christ, but also receives from him a real ontological share in his one eternal priesthood, to which she must conform every aspect of her life”.

PDV 13

“The truth of the priest as it emerges from the Word of God, that is, From Jesus Christ himself and from his constitutive plan for the Church, is thus proclaimed with joyful gratitude by the **Preface of the Liturgy of the Chrism Mass**: “*By your Holy Spirit you anointed your only Son High Priest of the new and eternal Covenant. With wisdom and love you have planned that this one priesthood should continue in the Church. Christ gives the dignity of a royal priesthood to the people he has made his own*”.

N. 15: PDV

“Through Baptism the lay faithful are made one body with Christ and are established among the People of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the Church and the world”.

CL 9

“Thus with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, the baptized share in the same mission of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior-Messiah”.

CL 13

“He who was born of the Virgin Mary, the carpenter’s Son- as he was thought to be – Son of the living God (confessed by Peter), has come to make us ‘ a kingdom of priests’. The Second Vatican Council has reminded us of the mystery of this power and of the fact that the mission-continues in the Church. Everyone, the whole People of God, shares in this threefold mission”...

The participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King finds its source in the anointing of Baptism, its further development in Confirmation and its realization and dynamic sustenance in the Holy Eucharist. It is a participation given to each member

of the lay faithful individually, in as much as each is one of the many who form the one Body of the Lord: in fact Jesus showers his gifts upon the Church which is his Body and his Spouse.

In such a way individuals are sharers in the threefold mission of Christ in virtue of their being members of the Church, as St. Peter clearly teaches, when he defines the baptized as “ a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pt 2:9). Saint Augustine writes: “ As we call everyone ‘Christians’ in virtue of a mystical anointing, so we call everyone ‘priests’ because all are members of only one priesthood”.

CL 14

II. BAPTISMAL PRIESTHOOD AND MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

“Christ gives the dignity of a royal priesthood to the people he has made his own. From these, with a brother’s love, he chooses men to share his sacred ministry by the laying on of hands. He appointed them to renew his name the sacrifice of redemption as they set before your family his paschal meal. He calls them to lead your holy people in love, nourish them by your word, and strengthen them through the sacraments. Father, they are to give their lives in your service and for the salvation of your people as they strive to grow in the likeness of Christ and honor you by their courageous witness of faith and love”.

PDV 15

“The ministry of the (ordained) priest is entirely on behalf of the Church; it aims at promoting the exercise of the common priesthood of the entire people of God.

Consequently, the ordained priesthood ought not to be thought of as existing prior to the Church, because it is totally at the service of the Church. Nor should it be considered as posterior to the ecclesial community, as if the Church could be imagined as already established without this priesthood.

N.16: PDV

“Finally, because their role and task within the Church do not replace but promote the baptismal priesthood of the entire people of God, leading it to its full ecclesial realization, priests have a positive and helping relationship to the laity. Priests are there to serve the faith, hope and charity of the laity. They recognize and uphold, as brothers and friends, the dignity of the laity as children of God and help them to exercise fully their specific role in the overall context of the Church’s mission.

The ministerial priesthood conferred by the Sacrament of the Holy Orders and the common or “royal” priesthood of the faithful, which differ

essentially and not only in degree, are ordered one to the other, for each in its own way derives from the one priesthood of Christ.

Indeed, the ministerial priesthood does not of itself signify a greater degree of holiness with regard to the common priesthood of the faithful; through it, Christ gives to priests, in the Spirit, a particular gift so that they can help the People of God to exercise faithfully and fully the common priesthood that it has received”.

N. 17: PDV

III. THE SOURCE OF PRIESTHOOD IS CHRIST

“The priesthood of Christ, the expression of his absolute “newness” in salvation history, constitutes the one source and essential model of the priesthood shared by all Christian and the priest in particular. Reference to Christ is thus the absolutely necessary key for understanding the reality of priesthood”.

PDV 12

“Jesus Christ has revealed in himself the perfect and definitive features of the priesthood of the new Covenant. He did this throughout his earthly life, but especially in the central event of his passion, Death and Resurrection.

As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, Jesus, being a man like us and at the same time the only begotten Son of God, is in his very being the perfect mediator between the Father and Humanity (Cf. Heb 8-9)”.

PDV 13

IV. THE PRIESTHOOD IS ONE

As it emerges from the careful examination of the biblical sources and the teaching of Vatican II, we must understand the priesthood of the New Testament as one: it is actually the Priesthood of Christ; there is no other priesthood. It is Christ who associates us to his priesthood as he associates us to his salvific suffering and to his mission.

So, the priesthood of the Church as priestly people exists in strict union with the priesthood of Jesus Christ and is exercised together with the power and the presence of the Risen Christ in our midst. There is no reason therefore to think that the necessary difference between the Baptismal Priesthood and the Ministerial Priesthood introduces a division in the

Priesthood of the people of God. We have to see the Ministerial Priesthood as existing within the Baptismal Priesthood and a function of it.

I receive great enlightenment from a sentence of Saint Augustine: **“With you I am a Christian, for you I am a Bishop”**. In the same way, I can say: “With you I am a member of the Baptismal Priesthood; for you I am a priest, meaning a member of the Ministerial Priesthood”. It is more important for me to belong to the Baptismal Priesthood than of the Ministerial one, as it is more important for Augustine to be a Christian than to be a Bishop.

To be precise, **there is only one Priesthood and it is the one of the people of God, the priestly people whom Christ associates to his priesthood, and within it there is the function of the Ministerial Priesthood**. It is only living out my Baptismal Priesthood that I can be a good Ministerial Priest. What is needed is to understand well and deeply what Priesthood is and to become aware of how this understanding can affect our life. In other words, this is the whole purpose of these reflections: **to acquire a priestly Spirituality**.

V. TERMINOLOGY

IERÁTEUMA= Priesthood

IEREUS= Priest

Priests are not often mentioned in the Gospels. The chief priests of the Jewish people are most active in the passion narratives; all four Gospels leave the impression that the priestly aristocracy was the most malevolent and the most active of all the groups that cooperated in bringing Jesus to death. That this is not a condemnation of the entire class is suggested by AA 6:7, which notes that a large number of priests were members of the Jerusalem church.

Jesus applies the title “priest” (Gk hierus) neither to Himself nor to His disciples, and the idea of a Christian priesthood is implicit in the new Testament.

The designation of priest in the first applied to the Christian community in 1 Pt 2:5; Apc 1:6; 5:10; 20:5. These passages are all applications of the title of Israel, “a kingdom of priests” (Ex 19:6) to the Church. The Church as the new Israel fulfills also this character of the old Israel; it is probable that the application has the same meaning as the original text, **that the group so designated has a priestly character because of its election and consecration.**

The missing element is supplied in **Hebrews**, which deals almost entirely with the priesthood of Jesus.

Ex 19:3-8

Moses then went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying: Say this to the house of Jacob, declare this to the sons of Israel, you yourselves have seen what I did with the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself,. From this you know that now, if you obey my voice and hold fast to my covenant, you of all the nations shall be my own for all the earth is mine. **I will count you a kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation.** Those are the words you are to speak to the sons of Israel. So Moses went and summon the elders of the people, putting before them all that Yahweh had bidden him. Then all the people answered as one: All that Yahweh has said, we will do. And Moses took the people’s reply back to Yahweh.”

1 Peter 2:4-10

He is the living stone, rejected by men but chosen y God and precious to him; set yourselves close to him so that you too, the holy priesthood that offers the spiritual sacrifices which Jesus Christ has made acceptable to God, may be living stone making a spiritual house. As scripture says: See how I lay in Zion a precious cornerstone that I have chosen and the man who rests his trust on it will not be disappointed. That means that for you who are believers, it is precious; but for unbelievers, the stone rejected by the builders has proved to be the keystone, a stone stumble over, a rock to bring men down. They stumble over it because they do not believe in the word; it was the fate in store for them.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people at all and now you are the People of God; once you were outside the mercy and now you have been given mercy.

Revelation 1:4-8

From John, to the seven churches of Asia: grace and peace to you from him who is, who was, and who is to come, from the seven spirits in his presence before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the First-born from the dead, the Ruler of the kings of the earth. **He loves us and has washed away our sins with his blood, and made us a line of kings, priest to serve his God and father;** to hi, then, be glory and power forever and ever. Amen. It is he who is coming on the clouds; everyone will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the races of the earth will mourn over him. This is the truth. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega says the Lord God, who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.

Revelation 5:9-13

... and with them the twenty-four elders; each one of them was holding a harp and had a golden bowl full of incense made of the prayers of the saints. They sang a new hymn:

‘You are worthy to take the scroll
and break the seals of it,
because you were sacrificed, and with your blood
you bought men for God
of every race, language, people and nation
and **made them a line of kings and priests,**
to serve our God and to rule the world’.

In my vision, I heard the sound of an immense number of angels gathered round the throne and the animals and the elders; there were ten thousand times ten thousand of them and thousands upon thousands, shouting, ‘The Lamb that was sacrifices is worthy to be given power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and blessing’.

Revelation 20:4-6

Then I saw some thrones, and I saw those who are given the power to be judges take their seats on them. I saw the souls of all who had been beheaded for having witnessed for Jesus and for having preached God’s word, and those who refused to worship the beast or his statue and would not have the brand-mark on their foreheads or hands; they came to life, and

reigned with Christ for a thousand years. This is the first resurrection; the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were over. Happy and blessed are those who share in the first resurrection; the second death cannot affect them, **but they will be priests of God and of Christ and reign with him for a thousand years.**

Footnote: One interpretation makes this ‘resurrection’ of the martyrs (cf. Is 26:19; Ek 37) symbolize the recovery of the Church after the Roman persecution; the reign of a thousand years’ is then the period of the kingdom of Christ on earth from the end of persecution (the fall of Rome) to the Last Judgment (in 20:11f). According to Augustine and others who follow him, the ‘reign of a thousand years’ is to be reckoned from Christ’s resurrection, and the ‘first resurrection’ is baptism, cf. Rm 6:1-10; Jn 5:25-28. A literal interpretation of this verse was widespread in the early Church: after the first resurrection, of the martyrs, Christ was to return to reign on earth with his faithful for a thousand years. The literal millenarianism was censured.

The first death is on earth; the second ‘death’ is failure to win eternal life.

In all these passages the term used is **HIEREUS**. The term **IEREUS** does not have a correspondence in English. The only term that derives from **HIEREUS** in English is **Hieratic (cal)** that means ‘very solemn’.

The word **PRIEST** is a derivative of a Middle English term (*PREEST*) that comes from the Latin word: **PRESBYTER** (which in its turn comes from the Greek **PRESBYTEROS**, comparative of **PRESBUS**=old man) means **ELDER**.

The term that corresponds with **HIEREUS** is the Latin **SACERDOS** (in Italian: **SACERDOTE**) and it means: *person who deals with what is sacred*. In English there is only the adjective: *sacerdotal*.

VI. PRIESTHOOD MEANS MEDIATION

But the term which expresses better the nature of Priesthood is the Latin term: **PONTIFEX** (in Italian **PONTEFICE**) which means **BRIDGE MAKER/BUILDER: The Person who bridges the gap between God and Humanity: THE MEDIATOR**. In English we have the word: **PONTIFF** (The Supreme Pontiff); the adjective: *pontifical*, and the verb: *to pontificate* which has a derogatory meaning (to speak as if one were the only person to know the facts/but sarcastic).

MEDIATION is the best term to describe or define the mission of the Priest: to bridge the infinite gap between God and Humanity.

-This is how the letter to the *Hebrews* describes the Priesthood of Christ: the whole letter is a demonstration of the superiority of the worship, the sanctuary and the mediation of Christ, the supreme high priest of the New Testament:

“We have seen that he (Christ) has been given a ministry of a far higher order, and to the same degree it is a better covenant of which he is the MEDIATOR, founded on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

-This is how the same concept is neatly summarized and clearly expressed by the *Magisterium*:

“Jesus Christ has revealed in himself the perfect and definitive features of the priesthood of the new Covenant. He did this throughout his earthly life, but especially in the central event of his passion, Death and Resurrection.

As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, Jesus, being a man like us and at the same time the only begotten Son of God, is in his very being **the perfect mediator between the Father and Humanity** (Cf. Heb 8-9)”.

“The priesthood of Christ, the expression of his absolute “newness” in salvation history, constitutes the one source and essential model of the priesthood shared by all Christian and the priest in particular. Reference to Christ is thus the absolutely necessary key for understanding the reality of priesthood”.

PDV 12, 13

Technically Christ is the one and only true mediator: he is true man and true God, Col 2:9, and so the one and only intermediary, Rom 5:15-19; 1Tim 2:5; cf. 1 Co 3:22-23; 11:3, between God and the human race. He unites them and reconciles them, 2 Co 5:14-20. Through him come grace, Jo 1:16-17; Ep 1:7, and complete revelation, Heb 1:1-2. In heaven he continues to intercede for those who are faithful to him, 7:25.

Mediation describes the essence of the mission of the Priesthood and Priesthood on its turn embraces all the other theological categories that we

find in the New Testament to describe Jesus Christ's work and mission: Salvation/Redemption/Liberation.

It is the very purpose of these reflections to elaborate on the meaning of this mediation to which Jesus associate us, his Church, the priestly people, and to see what it means in terms of spirituality: how we live up to the expectations of our priestly spirituality.

VII. PRIESTHOOD IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVENANT

To understand properly the meaning of the Priesthood of the New Testament, we must see it as the climax of that relationship between God and Humankind that starts with Revelation and the Covenant.

1. It is with Abraham with whom the relationship of God with us becomes an historical event that reveals God's initiative of love.

This is well expressed in the famous episode of the visit of the three mysterious characters to Abraham and Sara:

Genesis 18:1-15

Yahweh appeared to him at the Oak of Mamre while he was sitting by the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up, and there he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them, and bowed to the ground. My lord,' he said 'I beg you, if I find favor with you, kindly do not pass your servant by. A little water shall be brought; you shall wash your feet and lie down under the tree. Let me fetch a little bread and you shall refresh yourselves before going further. That is why you have come in your servant's direction.' They replied, 'Do as you say'.

Abraham hastened to the tent to find Sarah. 'Hurry,' he said 'knead three bushels of flour and make loaves.' Then running to the cattle Abraham took a fine and tender calf and gave it to the servant, who hurried to prepare it. Then taking cream, milk and the calf he had prepared, he laid all before them, and they ate while he remained standing near them under the tree.

'Where is your wife Sarah? They asked him. 'She is in the tent' he replied. Then his guest said, 'I shall visit you again next year without fail, and your wife will then have a son'. Sarah was listening at the entrance of

the tent behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well on in years, and Sarah had ceased to have her monthly periods. So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, 'Now that I am past the age of child-bearing, and my husband is an old man, is pleasure to come my way again!' But Yahweh asked Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Am I really going to have a child now that I am old?"' Is anything too wonderful for Yahweh? At the same time next year I shall visit you again and Sarah will have a son'. 'I did not laugh' Sarah said, lying because she was afraid. But he replied, 'Oh yes, you did laugh'.

The intimacy between Yahweh and the family of Abraham is described so beautifully, with Trinitarian undertones, that this scene became the object of the world famous Rublev's icon. It shows God's involvement with humanity, his concern for them, his tenderness and his love. The Prophets will be those who show that at the heart of the Covenant there is love.

2. But love will imply very soon suffering/sacrifice/mediation/priesthood. Already we have a foretaste of this in the episode of Gideon and the Angel of Yahweh:

Judges 6:15-24

Gideon answered him, 'Forgive me, my lord, but how can I deliver Israel? My clan, you must know, is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least important in my family'. Yahweh answered him, 'I will be with you and you shall crush Midian as though it were a single man.' Gideon said to him. 'If I have found favour in your sight, give me a sign that it is you who speak to me. I beg you, do not go away until I come back. I will bring you my offering and set it down before you.' And he answered. 'I will stay until you return.'

Gideon went away and prepared a young goat and made unleavened cakes with an ephah of flour. He put the meat into a basket and the broth into a pot, then brought it all to him under the terebinth. As he came near, the angel of Yahweh said to him, 'Take the meat and unleavened cakes, put them on this rock and pour the broth over them'. Gideon did so. Then the angel of Yahweh reached out the tip of the staff in his hand and touched the meat and unleavened cakes. Fire sprang from the rock and consumed the meat and unleavened cakes and the angel of Yahweh vanished before his

eyes. Then Gideon knew this was the angel of Yahweh and he said, ‘Alas, my Lord Yahweh! I have seen the angel of Yahweh face to face! Yahweh answered him, ‘Peace be with you; have no fear; you will not die’. Gideon built an altar there to Yahweh and called it Yahweh-Peace.

3. But the figure that embodies the characteristics of priesthood, at the time of the Old Testament, is Moses. We see this in his role in performing the sacrifice that seals the Covenant between Yahweh and the chosen people; and especially in his mediation of intercession on the occasion of the episode of the golden calf.

Exodus 24:3-8

Moses went and told the people all the commands of Yahweh and all the ordinances. In answer, all the people said with one voice, ‘We will observe all the commands that Yahweh has decreed’. Moses put all the commands of Yahweh into writing, and early next morning he built an altar at the foot of the mountain, with twelve standing-stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he directed certain young Israelites to offer holocausts and to immolate bullocks to Yahweh as communion sacrifices. Half of the blood Moses took up and put into basins, the other half he cast on the altar. And taking the Book of the Covenant he read it to the listening people and they said, ‘We will observe all that Yahweh has decreed; we will obey’. Then Moses took the blood and cast it towards the people. ‘This’ he said ‘is the blood of the Covenant that Yahweh has made with you, containing all these rules’

Exodus 32: 7-14

Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, ‘Go down now, because your people whom you brought out of Egypt have apostatized. They have been quick to leave the way I marked out for them; they have made themselves a calf of molten metal and have worshipped it and offered it sacrifice. “Here is your God, Israel,” they have cried, “who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” Yahweh said to Moses, ‘ I can see how headstrong these people are! Leave me, now, my wrath shall blaze out against them and devour them; of you, however, I will make a great nation.

But Moses pleaded with Yahweh his God. ‘Yahweh,’ he said ‘why should your wrath blaze out against this people of yours whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with arm outstretched and mighty hand? Why let the Egyptians say, “ Ah, it was in treachery that he brought them out, to do them to death in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth”? Leave your burning wrath; relent and do not bring this disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your servants to whom by your own self you swore and made this promise: I will make your offspring as many as the stars of heaven, and all this land which I promised I will give to your descendants, and it shall be their heritage for ever. So Yahweh relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Moses and the prayer of the mediator: “*Standing in the breach*”

Once the promise begins to be fulfilled (Passover, the Exodus, the gift of the Law and the ratification of the covenant), the prayer of Moses becomes the most striking example of intercessory prayer, which will be fulfilled in ‘ the one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’.

Here again the initiative is God’s. From the midst of the burning bush he calls Moses. This event will remain one of the primordial images of prayer in the spiritual tradition of Jews and Christians alike. When ‘the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob’ calls Moses to be his servant, it is because he is the living God who wants men to live. God reveals himself in order to save them, though he does not do this alone or despite them: he calls Moses to be his messenger, an associate in his compassion, his work of salvation.

There is something of a divine plea in this mission, and only after long debate does Moses attune his own will to that of the Savior God. But in the dialogue in which God confides in him, Moses also learns how to pray: he balks, makes excuses, above all questions: and it is in response to his question that the Lord confides his ineffable name, which will be revealed through his mighty deeds.

‘Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friends.’ Moses’ prayer is characteristics of contemplative prayer by which God’s servant remains faithful to his mission. Moses converses with God often and at length, climbing the mountain to hear and entreat him and coming down to the people to repeat the words of his God for their guidance.

From this intimacy with the faithful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, Moses drew strength and determination for his

intercession. He does not pray for himself but for the people whom God made his own. Moses already intercedes for them during the battle with the Amalekites and prays to obtain healing for Miriam. But it is chiefly after their apostasy that Moses ‘stands in the breach’ before God in order to save the people.

The arguments of his prayer-for intercession is also a mysterious battle –will inspire the boldness of the great intercessors among the Jewish people and in the Church: God is love; he is therefore righteous and faithful; he cannot contradict himself; he must remember his marvelous deeds, since his glory is at stake, and he cannot forsake this people that bears his name.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

(JESUS IS THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT)

Introduction

1. Let us start with the vision of the book of Revelation referring to the Lamb that appears as slain (this passage is used in the Breviary as a hymn of the New Testament and we are certainly familiar with it):

“... and with them the twenty-four elders; each one of them was holding a harp and had a golden bowl full of incense made of the prayers of the saints. They sang a new hymn:

*‘You are worthy to take the scroll
and break the seals of it,
because you were sacrificed, and with your blood
you bought men for God
of every race, language, people and nation
and made them a line of kings and priests,
to serve our God and to rule the world’.*

In my vision, I heard the sound of an immense number of angels gathered round the throne and the animals and the elders; there were ten thousand times ten thousand of them and thousands upon thousands, shouting, ‘The Lamb that was sacrificed is worthy to be given power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and blessing’.

(Revelation 5:9-13)

This passage helps us to focus on the center of the topic concerning the Baptismal Priesthood that appears as our association with the priesthood of Christ. It is therefore from the thorough consideration and study of the Priesthood of Christ that we must start.

2. *MEDIATION is the best term to describe or define the mission of the Priest: to bridge the infinite gap between God and Humanity.*

-This is how the letter to the *Hebrews* describes the Priesthood of Christ: the whole letter is a demonstration of the superiority of the worship, the sanctuary and the mediation of Christ, the supreme high priest of the New Testament:

“We have seen that he (Christ) has been given a ministry of a far higher order, and to the same degree it is a better covenant of which he is the MEDIATOR, founded on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

“He bring a new covenant as the mediator, only so that the people who were called to an eternal inheritance may actually receive what was promised: his death took place to cancel the sins that infringed the earlier covenant” (Hebrews 9:15)

“...You have come to God himself, the supreme Judge, and been place with the spirits of the saints who have been made perfect; and to Jesus, the mediator who brings a new covenant and a blood for purification which pleads more insistently than Abel’s” (Hebrews 12:24)

The words in Greek are: -mesites Theou kai anthropon
-Mesites tes kainesdiathekes

There is another famous passage where Jesus is called Mediator, and it comes from

1 Timothy 2: 1-8

My advice is that, first of all, there should be prayers offered for everyone – petitions, intercessions and thanksgiving – and especially for kings and others in authority, so that we may be able to live religious and reverent lives in peace and quiet. To do this is right, and will please God our savior:

he wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth. For there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between

God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus, who sacrificed himself as a ransom for them all. He is the evidence of this, sent at the appointed time, and I have been named a herald and apostle of it and – I am telling the truth and no lie- a teacher of the faith and the truth to the pagans.

In every place, then, I want the men to lift their hands up reverently in prayer, with no anger or argument.

3. This is how the same concept is neatly summarized and clearly expressed by the *Magisterium*:

“Jesus Christ has revealed in himself the perfect and definitive features of the priesthood of the new Covenant. He did this throughout his earthly life, but especially in the central event of his passion, Death and Resurrection.

As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, Jesus, being a man like us and at the same time the only begotten Son of God, is in his very being **the perfect mediator between the Father and Humanity** (Cf. Heb 8-9)”.

“The priesthood of Christ, the expression of his absolute “newness” in salvation history, constitutes the one source and essential model of the priesthood shared by all Christian and the priest in particular. Reference to Christ is thus the absolutely necessary key for understanding the reality of priesthood”.

PDV 12, 13

Technically Christ is the one and only true mediator: he is true man and true God, Col 2:9, and so the one and only intermediary, Rom 5:15-19; 1Tim 2:5; cf. 1 Co 3:22-23; 11:3, between God and the human race. He unites them and reconciles them, 2 Co 5:14-20. Through him come grace, Jo 1:16-17; Ep 1:7, and complete revelation, Heb 1:1-2. In heaven he continues to intercede for those who are faithful to him, 7:25.

Mediation describes the essence of the mission of the Priesthood and Priesthood on its turn embraces all the other theological categories that we find in the New Testament to describe Jesus Christ’s work and mission: Salvation/Redemption/Liberation.

It is the very purpose of these reflections to elaborate on the meaning of this mediation to which Jesus associate us, his Church, the priestly people, and to

see what it means in terms of spirituality: how we live up to the expectations of our priestly spirituality.

4. It is essential to penetrate the **originality of the priesthood of Jesus** as the High Priest of the New Testament.

Jesus Christ mediates:

1. **ontologically** because of the Incarnation: He is anointed as priest by the hypostatic union.
2. But he mediates also **dynamically** because he learned through obedience and suffering to be a compassionate mediator.
3. The **final and conclusive mediation** is accomplished by Jesus through his *Pascal Mystery: by the sacrifice of self*, accepted in obedience to the will of the Father, Jesus mediated our peace with God and the new and everlasting covenant/testament by which we find final and definite salvation in the name of Jesus. The concept of **sacrifice** according to Rene' Girard, French philosopher and anthropologist, is completely changed by Christ who really brings humanity to its maturity.

The originality of Christ's priesthood as the comprehensive category that embraces his entire work of salvation is theologically developed very early in the tradition by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.

FIRST POINT: CHRIST'S MEDIATION OF LIFE

Jesus Christ is mediator first of all by his life. The best passage that describe Christ's mediation of life is the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:6-11. There we find the way God the Son entered into our human nature by means of *kenosis* (emptying) and *synkatabasis* (condescendence). But we can understand this without using difficult words, only by considering the 3 movements that are exemplary of every insertion/incarnation:

- **Going out:** God the Son was happy in the eternal embrace of the Father, rich of the same immense and infinity divinity; but he came out of it, so to speak in order to save us by becoming one of as a man, a human being.

- **Going down:** Not happy of having become one of us, Jesus Christ wants to experience all the human condition/drama/tragedy and he accept to experience death, even death on the cross.
- **Going in:** the death on the Cross, that we will consider later as the peak of the mediating work of Jesus, the High Priest of the New Testament, is the conclusion of the Incarnation: going in, into the flesh/humanity/the human condition.

Here I am thinking of **the example of 2 confreres** who in an eminent way have implemented in their lives the 3 movements of the mediation of life: Going out, Going down and Going in:

- **Fr. Alessandro Zanotelli** in the slums of Nairobi: Korokocho has become famous because of him and the symbol of a place where circumstances of extreme poverty and abjection make us think and understand the needs of our present world in its contrasts and the challenges that that situation gives to the followers of Jesus who are called the priestly people that is the people of mediators.
- **Fr Ezechiele Ramin** in his effort to the descent into the world of the *campesinos* and their problems, especially the problem of the land, etc.....

They were actually true sons of **Saint Daniel Comboni** who fulfilled in his life the triple movement of incarnation/insertion: he went out of his family/world and down to the heart of Africa:1857 (he was only 26)... He had to come away to save his life attacked by sickness, but he remained faithful to his passion for Africa and he came back and expressed this mediation of life in **his first speech as a bishop:**

“Unfortunate Africa was the first love of my youth. I left behind what was dearest to me in the world and came to these lands 16 years ago to offer my work for the relief of its century –old misfortunes. ...But my heart remained here among you...Today I come back to you at last and I regain my heart. Here before you I open it to the sublime and religious feeling of my spiritual fatherhood. I am already your father and you are my children and as such for the first time I embrace you and press you to my heart....I return among you , never again to cease to be yours and entirely consecrated to your greater good. Day and night, sun and rain will find me equally ready to help your spiritual needs. Rich and poor, healthy or sick, young and old, master and servant, shall always find admittance to my heart. Your good shall be mine, and your sufferings shall be mine too. I shall make common cause with everyone of you, and the happiest of my days will be the one when I shall be able to give my life for you”.

SECOND POINT:

CHRIST'S MEDIATION OF INTERCESSION

In the person of Jesus, God and Humanity meet. It is by the blessed humanity of Jesus that the actions of mediation are performed. Here we consider two aspects: his sharing our human drama and his priestly prayer of intercession. It is again the letter to the Hebrews that highlights the personality of the High Priest of the New Testament: one who learns through sufferings his role of obedience to the Father's will.

The letter to the Hebrews deals almost entirely with the priesthood of Jesus.

Jesus was not a member of the tribe of Levi and could not be a "priest" in the mind of the Jews. His priesthood is vindicated by the application to Him of the priesthood of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4; Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20). As a man without father, mother, and genealogy (not mentioned in Gn 14), he is a type of the timeless Son of God.

Jesus has a superior covenant, the new covenant mentioned by Jr 31:31 ff (8:6-13), the covenant which is a "testament" (a play upon the Gk word *diathēkē*) rendered effective by the death of the testator; this death is sacrificially effective, for it is a death by the shedding of blood (9:15-22).

The dignity of His priesthood rest ultimately upon His sonship (3:2 ff; 5:1-10), which is a far higher claim to mediation and union with God than Aaron possessed. The ancient sacrificial cult, which was imperfect, is fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus (9-10); its atonement is perfect because of the excellence of the victim, Himself.

He has the solidarity with men which the priest as mediator must have: He has experienced human weakness (4:14f; 5:2), He has suffered (5:7-10), He is like His brothers in every respect (2:17), although He is Himself sinless (7:26f, 2:18; 4:15) and therefore has no need of offering atonement for Himself.

He is the victim which He offers (7:27; 9:12; 14, 25; 10:5ff) not the animal victims of the old law. And therefore His one single offering need not be repeated and cannot be repeated, because it is **totally offered and totally effective** (7:27; 9:24-28; 10:10, 12, 14). So the ancient sacrificial cult is abolished (10:9; 7:18; 8:13).

The sacrifice of Christ effects redemption (9:12), salvation (10:18), forgiveness (9:15), purification (10:18; 9:14), sanctification (10:10, 22), perfection (10:14). It is the foundation of a new cult (9:14; 13:15 ff).

This is perhaps the most systematic theological exposition of the entire New Testament, and the effects of Hebrews on the formation of the Christian priesthood in the early Church are incalculable.

The Priestly Prayer of Jesus:

The evangelists have preserved **two examples of prayer** offered by Christ *during his public ministry*. Each begins with thanksgiving. In the first (Mt 11:25-30), Jesus confesses the Father, acknowledges and blesses him because he has hidden the mysteries of the Kingdom from those who think themselves learned and has revealed them to infants, the poor of the beatitudes. **His exclamation, ‘Yes, Father!’ expresses the depth of his heart, his adherence to the Father’s good pleasure’, echoing his mother’s *Fiat*** at the time of his conception and prefiguring what he will say to the Father in this loving adherence of his human heart to the mystery of the will of the Father.

The second prayer, before the raising of Lazarus (John 11:41-42), contains the words: ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me’, which implies that the Father always hears his petitions. Jesus immediately adds: ‘I know that you always hear me’, which implies that Jesus, on his part, constantly made such petitions.

When the hour has come for him to fulfill the Father’s plan of love, Jesus allows a glimpse of the boundless depth of his filial prayer, not only before he freely delivered himself up (‘Abba... not my will, but yours’), but even in his last words on the Cross, where prayer and the gift of self are but one: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do’, Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise’; ‘Woman, behold your son’-‘Behold your mother’; ‘I thirst’; ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’; ‘It is finished’; ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit! Until the ‘loud cry’ as he expires, giving up his spirit.

All the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history are summed up in this cry of the incarnate Word. Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son. Thus is fulfilled and brought to completion **the drama of prayer** in the economy of creation and salvation. The Psalter gives us the key to prayer in Christ. In the ‘today’ of the Resurrection, the Father says: ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possessions.

The Letter to the Hebrews expresses in dramatic terms how the prayer of Jesus accomplished the victory of salvation; ‘*In the day of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him*’.

The Prayer of the Hour of Jesus

When ‘his hour’ came, Jesus prayed to the Father. His prayer, the longest transmitted by the Gospel, embraces the whole economy of creation and salvation, as well as his death and Resurrection. The prayer of the Hour of Jesus always remains his own, just as his Passover ‘once for all’ remains ever present in the liturgy of his Church.

Christian tradition rightly calls this prayer the ‘priestly’ prayer of Jesus. It is the prayer of our high priest, inseparable from his sacrifice, from his passing over (Passover) to the Father to whom he is wholly “consecrated”

In this Paschal and sacrificial prayer, everything is recapitulated in Christ: God and the world; the Word and the flesh; eternal life and time; the love that hands itself over and the sin that betrays it; the disciples present and those who will believe in him by their word; humiliation and glory. It is the prayer of unity.

Jesus fulfilled the work of the Father completely; his prayer, like his sacrifice, extends until the end of time. The prayer of this hour fills the end-times and carries them towards their consummation. Jesus, the Son to whom the Father has given all things, has given himself wholly back to the Father; yet express himself with a sovereign freedom by virtue of the power the Father has given him over all flesh. The Son, who made himself Servant, is Lord, the Pantocrator. Our high priest who prays for us is also the one who prays in us and the God who hears our prayer.

By entering into the holy name of the Lord Jesus we can accept, from within, the prayer he teaches us: ‘Our Father!’ His priestly prayer fulfills, from within, the great petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: concern for the Father’s name; passionate zeal for his Kingdom (glory); the accomplishment of the will of the Father, of his plan of salvation; and deliverance from evil.

Finally, in this prayer Jesus reveals and gives to us the ‘knowledge’, inseparably one, of the Father and of the Son, which is the very mystery of the life of prayer.

In the history of the Church, we have **so many examples of the mediation of prayer** by the outstanding disciples of Jesus, the Saints. One of the most outstanding is the example of **St Therese of the Child Jesus** in her famous passage of her autobiography in which she understand her mission of intercession: “In the mystical body of the Church, I will be the heart” and again: “Deep down in the heart of Mother Church, I shall be love”.

But what I remember is the example of a sister whom I met when I was a young missionary before going to Africa: **Sr Mariangela Valentini** and another **sister Serena D. Drakaici**: they are outstanding examples of this mediation of intercession.

THIRD POINT: *CHRIST’S MEDIATION OF SACRIFICE*

This is the crucial mediation, the climax of Christ’s priestly mission and work and what constitute the object of the theological reflection of the letter to the Hebrews: the category of mediation through sacrifice. It is also the area in which the originality of Christ’s mediation shines.

1. Hebrews 10: 4-21

“Bull’s blood and goats’ blood are useless for taking away sins, and this is what he said, on coming into the world: *You who wanted no sacrifice or oblation, prepared a body for me. You took no pleasure in holocausts or sacrifices for sin; then I said, just as I was commanded in the scroll of the book, ‘God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will.’*”

Notice that he says first: You did not want the Law lays down as the things to be offered, that is: the sacrifices, the oblation, the holocausts and the sacrifices for sin, and you took no pleasure in them; and then he says: Here I am! I am coming to obey your will. He is abolishing the first sort to replace it with the second. And this *will* was for us to be made holy by the offering of his body made once and for all by Jesus Christ.

All the priest stand at their duties everyday, offering over and over again the same sacrifices which are quite incapable of taking sins away. He, on the other hand, has offered one single sacrifices for sins, and then taken his place for ever, at the right hand of God, where he is now waiting until his enemies are made into a footstool for him. By virtue of that once single offering, he has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying. The Holy Spirit assures us of this; for he says, first: *This is the covenant I will make with them when those days arrive*; and the Lord then goes on to say: *I will put my laws into their hearts and write them on their minds. I will never call their sins to mind, or their offenses*. When all sins have been forgiven, there can be no more sin offerings.

In other words, brothers, through the blood of Jesus we have the right to enter the sanctuary, by a new way which he has opened for us, a living opening through the curtain, that is to say, his body. And we have the supreme high priest over all the house of God. So as we go in let us be sincere in heart and filled with faith, our minds sprinkled and free from any trace of bad conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us keep firm in the hope we profess, because the one who made the promise is faithful. Let us be concerned for each other to stir a response in love and good works. Do not stay away from the meetings of the community, as some do, but encourage each other to go; the more so as you see the Day drawing near”.

2. **Sacrifice:** It should be noticed that it is *a universal phenomenon* and that scarcely any religion is known which does not have a sacrificial ritual. The nature of the symbolism of sacrifice and of the ideas from which it arises are the result of the belief in the deity and the desire to worship him.

Sacrifice can be descriptively defined in general *as a material oblation made to the deity by means of a consecration and consumption of the thing offered*. The purpose of this oblation is to establish or maintain communion with the deity.

These theories point out the following elements in sacrifice: (1) the gift of man to the deity; (2) the expiation of offenses; (3) communion with the deity in the sacrificial banquet; (4) life released from the victim, transmitted to the deity and conferred upon the worshippers.

The common meal among many people is the supreme symbol of fellowship, and the sacrificial banquet is a symbol of existing fellowship with the deity.

If there is a basic element, it is the gift; in the ancient world the subject was expected to bring a gift to the king to assure his benevolence if it was assumed to exist, or to restore it if the visitor was afraid that he was not in good standing. The element of the banquet is clear in the nature of the victims, which in the Old Testament are food and drink, even when these are not shared by the worshippers. The victim proper is an animal; cereal offerings and libations appear only as accompaniments of animal sacrifices; they make the sacrifice a complete meal.

The common symbolic element in all Old Testament sacrifices is the manipulation of the blood; and since it is universal, it very probably symbolizes the essential note of the sacrificial symbolism. The blood is sprinkled on the altar, or dashed at its base, or smeared on the horns. The altar symbolizes the deity. In Old Testament thought the blood is the precise symbolic act of oblation by which the life of the animal is transmitted to the deity. The mere slaughtering of the animal is not a ritually symbolic act. Another common ritual act is the imposition of hands upon the victim; this does not appear to support any theories of the ritual substitution of the victim for the offerer, but rather is an act by which the offerer declares that this is his offering.

Jesus repeats the prophetic criticism of sacrifice by quoting Ho 6:6 (Mt 9:13; 12:7); His insistence on the need of genuine interior piety is entirely in accord with the prophetic teaching (cf LAW; Pharisees). Sacrifice is metaphorically good deeds ("Spiritual Sacrifices," 1 Pt 2:5) or submission to God ("present your bodies as a living sacrifice," Rm 12:1)

There is no doubt that sacrificial terms are rare in the Gospels and the Pauline literature; but there are good reasons for believing that Hebrew makes explicit what was believed and taught in the primitive apostolic instruction. In Hebrews 9-10 the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus are contrasted with the priesthood and sacrifice of Israel and Judaism. **The atoning blood of the new covenant is the blood of Jesus** (9:12-14). A Covenant cannot be ratified without blood (9:15-21) and there is no forgiveness without the shedding of sacrificial blood (9:22). The atoning sacrifice of Jesus need be offered only once, since it is totally effective (9:25-28). The sacrifices of the law did not achieve true deliverance from sin (10:1-5); as we noticed above, there was no sacrificial remission for sins committed with a high hand. But Christ has offered a single perfect sacrifice which brings perfect forgiveness and holiness (10:5-18); and the Christian can approach the sanctuary with solid faith and hope that he is delivered from sin (10:19-25).

This conception is expressed in Eph 5:2; **Christ loved us and delivered Himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice. Both Hebrews and Ephesians here**

emphasize the voluntary offering of Jesus; it is essential to sacrifice that it be offered with the free consent of the worshiper.

3. The originality of the analysis by **anthropologist Rene' Girard** consists in having highlighted the different role of the victim within the ancient mythology (and even the present day traditional religions) on the one hand and Christianity on the other hand. It is Christianity that denounces the injustice of sacrifice and the guilt of the executioners. Whereas the myth accepts a-critically the outlook of the violent crowds, the Old and the New Testament denounce these very crowds and side with the victims. For Girard therefore the key to the understanding of mythology is the Bible.

The Gospel contains for the first time the story of an innocent victim, Jesus, betrayed by his very friends, persecuted, but triumphant over evil at the same time that he rejects it and prefers to be crucified instead. The sacrificial violence of men is openly denounced together with the unconscious covering up that contributes to its becoming unending. A new God of love, the God who defends the victims, is openly manifested in the person of his only begotten Son, overturning from within the violent structures in which human life has traditionally based itself.

Girard defends Christianity as **the coming of age of humanity**, a crucial transition stage from the violence of myth to the awareness of the Gospel that calls humanity to a radical choice between Satan and God, violence and peace. His fundamental thesis is the understanding of sacrifice as the rite that repeats the crises which exists in all the traditional societies: *from all against all* (as in the case of what he calls "mimetic desire"), *to all against one* as it is in the violent resolution of **the scapegoat**. Every culture, every myth is based on the scapegoat, there is only one text that in a complete manner reveals the violent mechanism of the traditional approach and proclaims the innocence of the victim: the Jewish-Christian scriptures.

The Christian God, the God of the victims, Jesus Christ, denies violence in the most radical fashion because he submits to it without

surrendering to it, without becoming violent. All those who react to violence with violence, they apparently do not submit to it but in reality they surrender to it in as much as they own it and perpetuate it while wanting to get rid of it. In this way, violence is continued, not overcome.

CELEBRATING OUR PRIESTHOOD

THE EUCHARIST

THE CHRISTIAN PASSOVER

Introduction

“Since in Jesus, the Son of God, we have Supreme High Priest who has gone through to the highest heaven, we must never let go of the faith that we have professed. For it is not as if we had a High Priest who was incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin. Let us be confident, then, in approaching the throne of grace, that we shall have mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help” (Heb 4:14-16).

**O SACRUM CONVIVIVM IN QUO CHRISTUS
SUMITUR, RECOLITUR MEMORIAM PASSIONIS
EIUS, MENS IMPLETUR GRATIA ET FUTURAE
GLORIAE NOBIS PIGNUS DATUR”**

(O sacred banquet in which Christ is eaten, the memory of his passion is recalled, the mind is filled with grace and a pledge of future glory is given to us!)

Speaking of our Baptismal Priesthood as the way we share the Priesthood of Christ, we necessarily encounter the Eucharist in which the Priesthood of Christ and of the Church together with Christ is celebrated. It is to this most beautiful topic that we must now direct our attention. Does the Eucharist represent the whole exercise of the priesthood of Christ and of the Church? Does the Eucharist, as it were, exhaust the priesthood of Christ?

If not, what is the position of the Eucharist as regard the larger view of the comprehensive character of the priesthood of Christ and of the Church as a whole, as priestly people? The Eucharist has a central position in

Christian/Catholic life, in the life of the Church: it is therefore vital to understand its depth and relevance together with its role, in order to develop a priestly spirituality, to have a priestly reading of our Christian life.

1.THE EUCHARIST IS THE CHRISTIAN PASSEOVER:

The Passover is both:

1. **The intervention of God to free His people**
2. **The ceremonial meal.**

Like the Passover meal is presented as having preceded the actual event of God's intervention to liberate his people and then remained as the ritual memorial of that event that was meant to continue in the life of the faithful Israelites of every generation;

in the same way, the Eucharist represents the way Jesus announced openly and celebrated his coming death on the Cross during the last supper, *before* the actual event of our salvation took place.

Afterwards, and up to now, it was and **is the ritual memorial of that event**, with the originality of Jesus' real, sacramental presence and it is meant to help the followers of Jesus to live out the mystery of their association to the Priesthood of Christ in their every day life.

The ministerial priesthood has a distinct role in making Christ present in his Church, his priestly people.

The Passover commemorated the great saving event, the deliverance of Israel from slavery and its constitution as the people of Yahweh. The first Passover supper takes place in Egypt as an anticipation of the saving event which occurred that night.

The new Passover is likewise anticipated by a dinner; and at this dinner the new Passover lamb is consumed by the disciples, the little core of the New Israel. The Lamb is consumed sacramentally.

The real Passover takes place on Calvary: the death of Jesus followed by the Resurrection.

Then the Eucharist becomes the “**proclamation**” of the atoning death (1 Co 11:26). It is a “**memorial**” (Lk 22:19; 1 Co 11:24f) in the sense of *cultic recital and reenactment* of the saving event, by which each participant experiences the event and is personally integrated into the death and the resurrection of Jesus, in terms of which Paul often describes the new life of the Christian.

The Jewish Passover lamb is not clearly a sacrificial animal. But the motif of sacrifice and atonement is explicit in the Eucharist: the body and blood are “for many”, “for you,” and the atoning character of the death is stated as clearly in these formulae as anywhere in the New Testament. In these phrases we perceive an echo of the description of the Servant of Yahweh (Is 53). But this we will see better presently.

2. TERMINOLOGY & SOURCES

The name Eucharist (Gk *eucharistia*, “thanksgiving”, also *eulogia*, “praise”) to designate the sacramental rite of the offering and consumption of bread and wine does not appear in the New Testament; it is first employed in the *Didache* (late 1st century) and is used by Ignatius of Antioch and Justin.

In the New Testament it is called “*the Lord’s Supper*”(1 Co 11:20), the *Agape* (Jude 12), and possibly “*the breaking of the bread*” (AA 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11).

- **There can be no doubt that the rite existed from the very beginning of the Church** (AA 2:42; the witness of 1 Co is the earliest witness to the rite).
- **Nor can there be any doubt that the Eucharist was the cult of the primitive community.**
- **It was celebrated on the day after Sabbath**, very probably because this was the day of the resurrection, the day that initiated the new week and the new age of salvation.

The choice of the day of the resurrection was not without its symbolism also; the Eucharist, while it commemorates the death of Jesus, commemorates not the death simply **but the death as a phase in the saving process, which is fulfilled in the glorification of Jesus**. The Eucharist was celebrated as a supper, and very probably at the usual Roman hour of dinner, the late afternoon.

- **The Eucharist clearly appears to be the Christian Passover.**

The biblical sources of the Eucharist: The most *ancient* text is 1 Corinthians; the most *complete* account is in Luke and the eucharistic sermon in John 6 is remarkable especially for the *realism* of the flesh of Christ being real food.

1 Corinthians 11:23-27

For this is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you: that on the same night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it and broke it, and he said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me’. In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me. ‘Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death, and so anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be behaving unworthily towards the body and blood of the Lord.

Luke 22:14-20

When the hour came he took his place at table, and the apostle with him. And he said to them, ‘I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; because, I tell you, I shall not eat again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’

Then, taking a cup, he gave thanks and said, ‘Take this and share it among you, because from now on, I Tell you, I shall not drink wine until the kingdom of God comes’.

Then he took some bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body which will be given for you; do this as a memorial of me. He did the same with the cup after supper, and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood which will be poured out for you.’

3. MYSTERIUM PASCHALE & MYSTERIUM EUCHARISTICUM

The setting of the last supper and the institution of the Eucharist is strictly linked with the happenings of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of

Jesus, as it is clearly and suggestively put by John Paul II in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*:

“At every celebration of the Eucharist, we are spiritually brought back to the *paschal Triduum*: to the events of the evening of Holy Thursday, to the Last Supper and to what followed it. Those days embrace the *Mysterium Paschale*, they also embrace the *Mysterium Eucharisticum*, **The institution of the Eucharist sacramentally anticipated the events that were about to take place**, beginning with the agony in Gethsemane.

Once again we see Jesus as he leaves the Upper Room, descends with his disciples to the Kidron valley and goes to the Garden of Olives. Even today that garden shelters some **very ancient olive trees**. Perhaps they witness what happened beneath their shade that evening, when Christ in prayer was filled with anguish and his sweat became like drops of blood falling down upon the ground (Lk 22:44).

The blood which shortly before He had given to the Church as the drink of salvation in the sacrament of the Eucharist, began to be shed; its outpouring would then be completed on Golgotha to become the means of our redemption: **Christ, as High Priest of the good things to come, entered once and for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption** (Heb 9:11-12)” (EDE 3).

The Church was born of the Paschal Mystery. For this very reason **the Eucharist**, which is in an outstanding way the sacrament of the Paschal Mystery, **stands at the center of the Church’s life**. This is already clear from the earliest images of the Church found in the Acts of the Apostles: they devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42). The breaking of the bread refers to the Eucharist. Two thousand years later, we continue to relive that primordial image of the Church. At every celebration of the Eucharist, we are spiritually brought back to the Paschal Mystery.” (EDE 3).

Mysterium Paschale is different from Mysterium Eucharisticum. On Holy Friday, no Eucharist is celebrated to make us realize that difference. But the Eucharist is the sacrament of the Paschal Mystery.

4. THE GIFT OF THE EUCHARIST

“*Mysterium Fidei!* – The Mystery of Faith! When the priest recites or chants these words, all present acclaim: **We announce your death, o Lord, and we proclaim your resurrection, until you come in glory.**

In these and similar words the Church, while pointing to Christ in the mystery of his passion, also reveals her own mystery: **Ecclesia de Eucharistia**. By the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Church was born and set out upon the pathways of the world, yet a decisive moment in her taking shape was certainly the institution of the Eucharist in the Upper Room. **Her foundation and wellspring is the whole Triduum Paschale, but this is as it were gathered up, foreshadow and concentrated for ever in the gift of the Eucharist.**

In this gift, Jesus Christ entrusted to his Church the perennial making present of the Paschal Mystery. With it he brought about a mysterious oneness in time between the *Triduum* and the passing of the centuries” (EDE 5).

“The Eucharist is indelibly marked by the event of the Lord’s passion and death, of which it is not only a reminder but the sacramental representation. **It is the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages**” (EDE 11)

“The Church has received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord as the gift par excellence for it is **the gift of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as well as the gift of his saving work.** Nor does it remain confined in the past, since all that Christ is, all that he did and suffered for all men, participate in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times” (EDE 11)

5. THE EUCHARIST AS SACRIFICE

“The Mass is at the same time and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord’s body and blood” (EDE 12)

1. In the institution narratives, the **sacrificial character** appears explicitly in the allusions to the covenant and the covenant sacrifice (cf Ex 24). The covenant is sealed by sacrifice which symbolizes the bond; Jesus, as the bond of the new covenant through His death, is the victim of the covenant sacrifice.

2. The sacrificial motif is likewise explicit in the conception of the Eucharist as a **sacrificial banquet**; this is clearly stated by Paul (1 Co 10:14-22). There the consumption of the Eucharist is a decisive motif for the prohibition of any participation in pagan sacrifices by Christians.

“This is the reason, my dear brothers, why you must keep clear of idolatry. I say to you as sensible people: judge for yourself what I am saying. **The blessing-cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of Christ.** The fact that there is only one loaf means that, though there are many of us, we form a single body because we all have a share in this one loaf. Look at the other Israel, the race, where those who eat the sacrifices are in communion with the altar. Does that mean that the food sacrificed to idols has real value, or that the idol itself is real? Not at all! It simply means that the sacrifices that they offer they sacrifice to demons that are not God. I have no desire to see you in communion with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot take your share at the table of the Lord and at the table of demons. Do we want to make the Lord angry; are we stronger than he is?”

3. “The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice. St John Chrysostom puts it well: We always offer the same Lamb, not one today and another tomorrow, but always the same one. For this reason the sacrifice is always only one... Even now we offer that victim that was once offered and who will never be consumed” (EDE 12) (whose love will never be consumed)

4. “The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it. What is repeated is the *memorial celebratio*, its commemorative representation (*memoralis demonstratio*), which makes Christ’s one, definitive, redemptive sacrifice always present in time. The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery cannot therefore be understood as something separate, independent of the Cross or only indirectly referring to the sacrifice on Calvary” (EDE 13)

5. “In giving his sacrifice to the Church, Christ has also made his own the spiritual sacrifice of the Church, which is called to offer herself in union with the sacrifice of Christ. This is the teaching of Second Vatican Council concerning all the faithful: Taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, **they offer the divine victim to God, and offer themselves along with it.**” (EDE 13)

6. O SACRUM CONVIVIVM: THE EUCHARIST AS COMMUNION

1. The sacrificial element, prominent in the passage of I Co 10:14-22 and implicit in the formulae of institution, is communion with the deity in the sacrificial banquet.

THE REAL PRESENCE. Through the Eucharist the deity is rendered present in a striking and unique fashion: Communion is achieved only through Jesus Christ, who is man, and as man is body. The body is therefore rendered really present; the language of the four sources and of John leaves no room for mere symbolism in this respect. The manner in which the bread and wine are the body **is a mystery of faith**, the term which the Church herself has consecrated; theological speculation, necessary and useful as it is to protect the belief against misunderstanding, has not achieved and will not achieve an understanding of the reality of the sacramental presence of Jesus. The body which is present is the glorified body. But this is the body “which was delivered for you”, one and the same Lord Jesus who died, rose, and sits at the right hand of the Father. Communion is achieved through the participation of the body and the blood of the victim. The salvation of the New Testament is not directed to the soul, but to the man, and man in Hebrew thought is body; if salvation is to reach man, his communion with the Savior must be a communion of body.

2. “The saving efficacy of the sacrifice is fully realized when the Lord’s body and blood are received in communion. The Eucharistic Sacrifice is intrinsically directed to the inward union of the faithful with Christ through communion. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me (Jn 6:57). Jesus himself reassures us that this union, which he compares to that of the life of the Trinity, is truly realized.” (EDE 16)

3. “Through our communion in his body and blood, Christ also grants us his Spirit. He who eats it with faith, eats Fire and Spirit... Take and eat this, all of you, and eat with it the Holy Spirit. For it is truly my body and whoever eats it will have eternal life. The Church implores this divine Gift, the source of every other gift, in the Eucharistic epiclesis.” (EDE 17)

4. “For in the Eucharist we also receive **the pledge of our bodily resurrection** at the end of the world: He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (Jn 6:54). This pledge of the future resurrection comes from the fact that the flesh of the Son of Man, given as food, is his body in its glorious state after the resurrection. With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the secret of the resurrection. For this reason Saint Ignatius of Antioch rightly defined the Eucharistic Bread as a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death.” (EDE 18)

5. “A significant consequence of the eschatological tension inherent in the Eucharist is also the fact that it spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope in our daily commitment to the work before us. Certainly the Christian vision leads to the expectation of the new heavens and a new earth (Rev 21:1), but this increases, rather than lessens, **our sense of responsibility for the world today.**” (EDE 20)

“Proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes (1 Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely Eucharistic. It is this fruit of a transfigured existence and a commitment to transforming the world in accordance with the Gospel which splendidly illustrates the eschatological tension inherent in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the Christian life as a whole: Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20)” (EDE 20)

7. THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

“Eucharist is apostolic, for it is celebrated in conformity with the faith of the Apostles.” (EDE 27)

“The Eucharist also expresses this sense of apostolicity. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, **the faithful join in the offering of the Eucharist by virtue of their royal priesthood, yet it is the ordained priest who, acting in the person of Christ, brings about the Eucharistic Sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people.** For this reason , the Roman Missal prescribes that only the priest should recite the Eucharistic Prayer, while the people participate in faith and in silence.” (EDE 28)

“The expression repeatedly employed by the Second Vatican Council, according to which the ministerial priest, acting in the person of Christ,

brings about the Eucharistic Sacrifice, was already firmly rooted in papal teaching. As I have pointed out on other occasions, the phrase **in persona Christi** means more than offering ‘in the name of ‘ or ‘ in the place of ‘ Christ. In persona means in specific sacramental identification with the eternal High Priest who is the author and principal subject of this sacrifice of his, a sacrifice in which, in truth, nobody can take his place.

The ministry of priests who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders, in the economy of salvation chosen by Christ, makes clear that the Eucharist which they celebrates is **a gift which radically transcends the power of the assembly** and is in any event essential for validly linking the Eucharistic consecration to the sacrifice of the Cross and to the Last Supper. The assembly gathered together for the celebration of the Eucharist, if it is to be a truly Eucharistic assembly, absolutely requires the presence of an ordained priest as its president.

On the other hand, **the community is by itself incapable of providing an ordained minister. This minister is a gift that the assembly receives through Episcopal succession going back to the Apostles.** It is the Bishop who, through the Sacrament of the Holy Orders, makes a new presbyter by conferring upon him the power to consecrate the Eucharist. Consequently, the Eucharistic mystery cannot be celebrated in any community except by an ordained priest, as the Fourth Lateran Council expressly taught.” (EDE 29)

“ The fact that the power of consecrating the Eucharist has been entrusted only to Bishops and priest does not represent any kind of belittlement of the rest of the People of God, for in the communion of the one body of Christ which is the Church this gift redounds to the benefit of all.” (EDE 30)

“If the Eucharist is the centre and summit of the Church’s life , it is likewise the centre and summit of priestly ministry. For this reason, with the heart filled with gratitude to our Lord Jesus Christ, I repeat that the Eucharist is the principal and central *raison d’être* of the sacrament of priesthood, which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist.” (EDE 31)

[illegible]

**We remember how you loved us to your death
And still we celebrate for You are with us here.
And we believe that we shall see you when you come
In your glory Lord. We remember, we celebrate, we believe.**

**Here a million wounded souls are yearning
Just to touch You and be healed.
Gather all your people and hold them to your heart.**

**Now we recreate your love
We bring the bread and wine to share a meal.
Sign of grace and mercy and presence of the Lord.**

**Christ, the Father's great AMEN
To all the hopes and fears of every heart,
Peace beyond all telling and freedom from all fear.**

**See the face of Christ revealed
In every person standing by your side
Gift to one another, and temples of your love.**

OUR PRIESTLY LIFE AND MINISTRY

INTRODUCTION

We are a priestly people because Christ associates us to his priesthood. Our mediation with Jesus is first of all, a mediation of life. The universal vocation to holiness finds its place in this priestly perspective. Then there is the mediation of witness by which we are a prophetic people. The missionary mandate flows from our being a prophetic people. Hence there comes the universal responsibility for the spreading of the Gospel.

Lastly, there is the mediation of the secular character of our Christian vocation. By this we fulfill our call to be a kingly people and it is expressed by the universal task to bring all created realities to God. The prophetic and kingly dimensions are like subordinate functions of the priestly nature of the people of God.

These are the guidelines for the development of a spirituality of our baptismal priesthood.

1. The Priesthood of the Church:

The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, that through all the works of Christian men and women, they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the perfection of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:4-10).

Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God (Acts 2:42-47), should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1).

They should everywhere on earth bear witness to Christ and give an answer to everyone who ask a reason for the hope of an eternal life which is theirs (3 Pet :15)".

The teaching of Vatican II about the common priesthood of the faithful is summed up and developed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. The sharing of the Priesthood of Christ is described in its implications for the life of the faithful and becomes a participation in the very Mission of Christ.

“Thus with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, the baptized share in the same mission of Jesus as the Christ, the Saviour-Messiah”.

N. 13: CL

“He who was born of the Virgin Mary, the carpenter’s Son- as he was thought to be – Son of the living God (confessed by Peter), has come to make us ‘a kingdom of priests’. The Second Vatican Council has reminded us of the mystery of this power and of the fact that the mission continues in the Church. Everyone, the whole People of God, shares in this threefold mission”.

The lay faithful are sharers in the priestly mission, for which Jesus offered himself on the cross and continues to be offered in the celebration of the Eucharist for the glory of God and the salvation of humanity.

Incorporated in Jesus Christ, the baptized are united to him and to his sacrifice in the offering they make of themselves and their daily activities (cf. Rom 12:1,2). Speaking of the lay faithful the Council says: “For their work, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily labor, their mental and physical relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life if patiently borne- all of these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Pt 2:5).

During the celebration of the Eucharist these sacrifices are most lovingly offered to the Father along with the Lord’s body. Thus worshipers whose every deed is holy, the lay faithful consecrate the world itself to God”.

The participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King finds its source in the anointing of Baptism, its further development in Confirmation and its realization and dynamic sustenance in the Holy Eucharist.

It is a participation given to each member of the lay faithful individually, in as much as each is one of the many who form the one Body of the Lord: in fact Jesus showers his gifts upon the Church which is his

Body and his Spouse. In such a way individuals are sharers in the threefold mission of Christ in virtue of their being members of the Church, as St. Peter clearly teaches, when he defines the baptized as “ a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pt 2:9).

Precisely because it derives from Church communion the sharing of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ requires that it be lived and realized in communion and for the increase of communion itself.

Saint Augustine writes: “As we call everyone ‘Christians’ in virtue of a mystical anointing, so we call everyone ‘priests’ because all are members of the only one priesthood”.

N. 14 CL

2. A Traditional view and understanding: the Fathers of the Church.

It is amazing to see how the concept of Baptismal Priesthood in its implications for the life of the faithful is already developed in the tradition as we can see, not only in the sentence of Saint Augustine quoted above, but in the following passages taken from Origen and Saint Leo the Great.

We see in them well developed **a priestly spirituality of the faithful**. The emphasis on the ordained minister is not yet there. It will appear especially after the Reformation has denied the Ministerial Priesthood and, consequently, the Council of Trent was obliged to concentrate on it, not only in the affirmations of principle but in the practical deliberations.

It is in that time (the XVI century) that the seminary for the training and formation of the ordained ministers (the Clergy) are started. The consequence is a clergy better formed, but also an emphasis put on the ministerial priesthood. The Baptismal Priesthood goes into the shadows almost to the point of oblivion only to be rediscovered by the modern emergence of the laity and the teaching of Vatican II.

It is therefore most interesting to see that what we consider a modern conquest, was already present so beautifully in the tradition as the two passages from the Fathers of the Church show.

*“When I give what I own, when I carry my cross and follow Christ, then **I offer a sacrifice on the altar of God**. When I burn my body in the fire of love and gain the glory of martyrdom, then I offer myself as holocaust on the altar of God. When I love my brothers and sisters to the point of offering my life for them, when I fight to death for justice and truth, when I mortify my flesh abstaining from carnal concupiscence, when I am crucified to the*

world and the world is crucified to me, I then offer again a sacrifice of holocaust on the altar of God....then I become a priest that offers his own sacrifice” (Origen)

“Although the Church is ordered in various ranks so that the whole is made up of different members, yet (as Paul says) we are all one in Christ. Office does not constitute between members a division such that the insignificance of any part affects its union with the head.

And so we say that **in the unity of our faith and baptism we enjoy an undivided fellowship and a dignity common to us all**; which the most blessed apostle Peter expressed in his inspired words: “like living stones be yourselves built up into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”. And further on he says: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”.

In baptism, the sign of the cross makes kings of all who are reborn in Christ, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit consecrates them as priests. So, apart from the particular obligations of our ministry, any Christian who has the gift of rational and spiritual understanding knows he is a member of a kingly race and shares in the priestly office.

For what could be more royal than a soul which by subjecting itself to God becomes ruler of his own body? Or **what more priestly when he consecrates a pure conscience to God and offers the spotless sacrifice of his devotion on the altar of his heart? By the grace of God this is common to all.**

But it is also a gracious and religious thing to you that on the day of my consecration you rejoice as for an honor that is your own. Thus the one sacrament which confers the High Priesthood is celebrated in the whole body of the Church. **When the oil of consecration is poured, the grace flows more abundantly over the higher orders indeed, but it flows unsparingly too over the lower.”** (Leo, the Great)

3. The Mediation of life:

The essence of Christ's priesthood is mediation. The first aspect of this mediation is the mediation of life. This presents different elements that we are going to illustrate with passages from the Bible, the NT. It is based on faith because it belongs to the realm of supernatural life.

It therefore implies a conversion, a radical change of perspective; it centers mainly on love: it is in loving that we offer the sacrifice of self. It is first of all a peaceful sacrifice, consisting in the gift of self. Very soon it becomes a painful gift, therefore a sacrifice which resembles the one of the Cross.

We are priests because we offer spiritual sacrifices, i. e. sacrifices embraced in the power and with the grace of the Holy Spirit. The shedding of blood is no longer requested, it was abolished once and for all by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. But it can become part of our sharing the priesthood of Christ in the case of martyrdom.

This mediation of life is embodied in the universal call to holiness: a traditional principle that has been rediscovered by the spirituality and theology of the modern times (starting with St. Francis De Sales in his classic book: *Introduction to Devout Life*) and made official by Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*, ch.5).

“We come to a full sense of the dignity of the lay faithful if we consider the prime and fundamental vocation that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ.

N.16: CL

I. Based on Faith:

Heb 11:1-4

“Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen. It was for faith that our ancestors were commended.

It is by faith that we understand that the world was created by one word from God, so that no apparent cause can account for the things we can see.

It was because of his faith that Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain, and for that he was declared to be righteous when God made

acknowledgement of his offerings. Though he is dead, he still speaks by faith”.

Hebrews 12:1-4

“With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us, we too, then, should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race we have started. **Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which was still in the future, he endured the cross**, disregarding the shamefulness of it, and from now on has taken his place at the right of God’s throne. Think of the way he stood such opposition from sinners and then you will not give up for want of courage. In the fight against sin, you have not yet had to keep fighting to the point of death”.

II. Call to Conversion:

Romans 12:2

“Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do”.

1 Peter 1:13-16

“Free your minds, then, of encumbrances, control them, and put your trust in nothing but the grace that will be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. Do not behave in the way that you liked to before you learn the truth; make a habit of obedience: be holy in all you do, since it is the Holy One who has called you, and scripture says: Be holy, for I am holy”.

III. Call to Love:

Roman 12:3-13

“Do not let your love be a pretence, but sincerely prefer good to evil. Love each other as much as brothers should, and have a profound respect for each other. Work for the Lord with untiring effort and with great earnestness of spirit. If you have hope, this will make you cheerful. Do not give up if trials come; and keep on praying. If any of the saints are in need you must share with them; and you should make hospitality your special care”.

1 Peter 1:22-25

“You have been obedient to the truth and purified your souls until you can love like brothers, in sincerity; let your love for each other be real and from the heart- your new birth was not from any mortal seed but from the everlasting word of the living and eternal God. All flesh is grass and its glory like the wild flower’s. The grass withers, the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. What is this word? It is the Good News that has been brought to you.

IV. Offer Yourself in Sacrifice:

Rom 12:1

‘Think of God’s mercy, my brothers, and worship him, I beg you, in a way that is worthy of thinking beings, by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God’.

1 Peter 1:18-21

“Remember, the ransom that was paid to free you from the useless way of life your ancestors handed down was not paid in anything corruptible, neither in silver nor gold, but in the precious blood of a lamb without spot or stain, namely Christ; who, though known since before the world was made, has been revealed only in our time, the end of the ages, for your sake. Through him you now have faith in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory for that very reason-so that you would have faith and hope in God”.

Ephesians 5:1-2

“Try, then, to imitate God, as children of his that he loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in our place as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God”.

4. Mediation of witness:

Operari sequitur esse (Our actions follow our nature/being). Our living in a priestly attitude soon becomes expressed in the way we act, speak and relate. It is first of all the witness of life itself: like Saint Francis of Assisi who considered the silent being in the midst of the world, in the modesty and humility of the imitation of Christ, already a form of preaching.

But of course we are bound by Jesus' great commission: Go to the whole world and announce the good news to all peoples. The mystery of Jesus, his salvific death and resurrection by which he is the High Priest of the New Testament is the object of our proclamation (**Kerigma**). We are witnesses of all that has taken place through the Incarnation and Redemption in order to call all the peoples to the obedience of faith.

This is the prophetic and missionary aspect of our priesthood. The missionary dimension of our baptismal faith has also emerged from the theology and spirituality of the modern times and is reflected powerfully in Vatican II: **the universal responsibility for the spreading of the Gospel** (*Ad Gentes*).

5. The mediation of the “secular realities” or secularity.

“The newness of the Christian life is the foundation and title for equality among all the baptized in Christ, for all the members of the People of God: “As members, they share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ, they have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity”.

Because of the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church's mission.

But among the lay faithful this one baptismal dignity takes on a **manner of life** which sets a person apart without, however, bringing about a

separation from the ministerial priesthood or from men and women religious. The Second Vatican Council has described **this manner of life as the “secular character”**: **The secular character is properly that of the lay faithful**”.

N. 15: CL

Pius XII once stated: “The Faithful, more precisely the lay faithful, find themselves on the front lines of the Church’s life; for them the Church is the animating principle for human society. Therefore, they in particular, ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the head of all, and the Bishops in communion with him. These are the Church...”

Precisely with this in mind the Synod Fathers said: **“The secular character of the lay faithful** is not therefore to be defined only in a sociological sense, but most **especially in a theological sense**. The term secular must be understood in light of the act of God the creator and redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free creation from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession and in the various activities of society”.

N. 15: CL

CONCLUSION:

1. THE STARTING POINT: THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST:

Neither the baptismal nor the ministerial priesthood is **the starting point** for a right comprehension of the priesthood. The reason is because the only true and proper priest of the New Testament is **Christ, because unique and unrepeatable is the mediation between God and humankind that only he can offer**. Jesus is at the same time priest and victim, the one who offers the sacrifice and the one who is offered and his sacrifice like his priesthood is not at all ritual, but it is so much vital that it constitutes a *unicum* so singular that doesn’t need any addition to complete it.

2. THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD:

The priesthood of Christ is radically different from the priesthood of the OT. Jesus did not belong to the priestly tribe (Levi) but he was a member of the tribe of Judas. Jesus was a layman, a pious Israelite. But we must recognize him as priest because he has accomplished a work of mediation between Humanity and God and occupies now the position of mediator. His mediation has a new content because it happened not in ritual terms (a sacrifice/victim is distinct from the priest), but in personal terms (the sacrifice/victim is the same as the priest) as an act of perfect obedience to the Father (Heb 5:8-9; 10:4-10) and perfect solidarity with us, Humankind (Heb 2:4-18).

3. THE SPIRITUAL SACRIFICE:

Jesus is High Priest of the NT non because of the blood of bulls and goats, but because of the sacrifice of his life offered once and for all. Because of this, after him, we do not need any other sacrificial worship. This is the reason why in the Christian community, **the spiritual sacrifice**, i.e. done under the influence of the Holy Spirit, takes the place of the **sacrificial worship** (il sacrificio cultuale). The spiritual sacrifice, as imitation of Christ, following the example of Christ, consists in mutual love (Eph 5:2), in the gift of one's life as "sacrifice holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1; Phil 2:17; 2Tim 4:6). Such a sacrifice belongs to all the believers, and cannot be delegated to some cult officials. The participation in Christ's priesthood does not come from imitating Christ's example (moral commitment does not in itself make of our life a priestly act, "a sacrifice pleasing to God"); but especially our union with Christ, in whom human nature is forever assumed into the person of the Son "always active in interceding for us" (Hebr 7:25) with the Father. Only by our union with the Son of God made man we are all given the possibility of entering into a new relationship with God and become, according to the expression of the Church Fathers: **Sons in the Son**.

4. PARTAKERS OF CHRIST'S PRIESTLY DYNAMISM IN THE SPIRIT:

United to Christ, the faithful are partakers of the dynamism of Christ's sacrificial offering: because of being one body with Him, the faithful are united to Christ's sacrifice by means of the offering of themselves and their activities. All this is possible because of the gift of the Spirit. The paschal event becomes ours by means of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism the faithful enter into the paschal dynamism of the offering of self so that in Christ, by means of the Holy Spirit, they become a fully priestly people. From this point of view, we cannot identify the Baptismal Priesthood with the priesthood of only the lay faithful, even the ministerial priest are first of all faithful and consequently members of the priestly people and the very ministerial priesthood is meant to be at the service of the Baptismal Priesthood of all and from within it.

5. THE SPECIFICITY OF THE ORDAINED MINISTRY:

The faithful, in order to exercise their priesthood towards the world for which they have **to be transparency of Christ**, every day on their turn have the need of meeting their Lord in his authentic word, in the breaking of the bread of His presence and in the fraternal love of a community in which the different gifts coming from the one Spirit may be discerned and orderly put at the service of the common good.

The ministerial priesthood or the priesthood of the pastors is a real and true **service of sacramental representation of Christ on behalf of the community and in front of it**. Assuming the figure of Christ, the supreme and eternal priest (*In persona Christi*), the ministerial priests bring to perfection the spiritual sacrifice of all the faithful, as they celebrate, together with them, as presiders, the memorial of Christ's sacrifice.

We find therefore the essential difference between the two forms of priesthood in the specific service to the life of faith of the faithful that the ministerial priesthood renders to the Baptismal One by means of the word, the sacraments and the pastoral guidance, so that the people of God may keep their unity with their Head and Lord.

It is interesting, in this context, to consider the terms by which the letter to the Ephesians characterizes the specific function of the ordained ministry: "To enable (make able, fit, capable, prepared –*idonei*–) the saints to fulfill their ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). This the ordained ministers do by assuring and symbolizing the vital link with the apostolic succession and especially by enabling the faithful to be

united with Christ, the High Priest of the NT, especially by their “sacramental representation” *in persona Christi*.

6. AN OUTWARD LOOKING PRIESTHOOD:

The Church shares Christ’s priesthood, since her characteristic is to be a **visible and tangible sign and instrument of the mystery** that has taken place in the Son of God. Baptism makes all Christians priests in as much as it unites them and grafts them, as it were, into Christ’s body, it consecrates them so that with their presence in the world they may assure **the continuous manifestation of the communion between God and humanity**.

We may say that Christians are sent by Christ in order to prolong his priestly action throughout history: in this action the Church lives out her being the sacrament of the communion that unites God to humanity and humanity to God, communicating to the world that divine life that she herself enjoys.

It is therefore an **outward looking priesthood**, to the service of the world, and in this sense realizing a worship or cult which is exercised **not in the temple but along the roads, in the meeting places, work places, in the places of joy and suffering**.

From the Baptismal Priesthood there flows therefore a consequent **Baptismal Ministry** which brings together all the faithful and precedes the differences from specific charisms or ministries proper of each one. This is the basic ministeriality that flows from the responsibility of all faithful for the common mission (Cfr Lumen gentium 10).

The Word of God, the Sacraments and the Liturgy must be understood and lived out not as activities closed within themselves, but open to the world, so that we may be able to fulfill our “Spiritual Priesthood” in our concrete life situations, there where the Lord calls us to live and to witness the truth of his Gospel.

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ