

THE GLORY OF CHRIST

By PIET FRANSEN

THE position of the priest is not an easy one. By his calling he belongs to a specific human profession, which imposes on him a peculiar way of life and which separates him socially and even psychologically from other people. The singularity of his position is doubtless stressed by his celibate life, but no less by his specific assignment and duties in the Church as 'man of God', as the consecrated representative of Christ. History and eternity meet one another in his life. The priest is a living paradox. He suffers from it. There would be something wrong and questionable if he did not.

Precisely because his ministry has to be carried on in this world, it inevitably becomes a human profession, which, if it is to survive, has to be integrated into the social structure of any particular culture. The Church therefore throughout her history has known many different conceptions of priest or bishop. At the end of the roman empire, the bishops were equivalent to the senators, and locally to the prefects of the cities. In the middle ages, clerics were by social necessity admitted into the hierarchy of the feudal system. Even in our day the priest's standing varies according to his country. There is a great difference between being a priest in Italy or in England, in the United States or in Asia.¹

The image of the priest which presents itself to the mind in a particular age and country is always a mixture of eternal and very human elements, even if the image is an ideal one. Since the human mind as a general rule is always slow to conceive a situation different from its own, especially in relation to faith and religious practice, it frequently happens that what is considered as an immemorial and unassailable tradition of the faith is in fact nothing more than a very local, recent and rather parochial human tradition.

In our time, when God himself is forcing us to reconsider our whole conception of christianity in the light of history, it is our duty to look for the eternal and true roots of our faith. As Pope John XXIII told us at the opening of the first session of Vatican Coun-

¹ Cf Xavier de Chalendar, *Les prêtres*, (Paris, 1963).

cil II: 'The substance of the ancient doctrine, the deposit of faith, is one thing, its presentation is another. And it is this which must be taken very much into account – patiently, where there is need for patience – measuring everything by the forms and proportions of our episcopal office of teaching (*magisterium*), which is predominantly pastoral'.¹

The Fundamental Ideas of the New Testament

Regarding the origin, the evolution and the various forms of organisation of our christian ministry in the early Church, the New Testament leaves many problems unsolved. It is the task of the exegetes and the historians to delineate what the probable solutions are. But there are a few points which are so unanimously and strongly emphasized that one wonders why they are so easily forgotten or neglected.

First we meet *hoi dōdeka*, the twelve, the foundation-stones of the new people of God, as were the twelve patriarchs in the old covenant.² Very soon they appointed co-workers.³ Their names, functions and authority varied greatly, but they had at least this in common, that they helped the apostles in their ministry. Where the authority of the apostles was universal and corporate, theirs was local and subsidiary, though collegiate too in its own limited way. This hierarchical structure of apostles with full authority and their auxiliaries or representatives was maintained after the death of the apostles, when their successors, since then commonly called bishops, inherited their corporate and universal authority, though they never possessed the authority of the immediate witnesses of Christ,⁴ not being the 'foundation' of the Church.⁵ The task of the bishops is 'to keep that which is committed to their trust'.⁶ The priests, as they were now called, the deacons and others took the place of the various co-workers of the apostles.

The second point is fundamental: it is the focal idea of the ministry. This was most succinctly worded by St John at the end of his gospel: 'As the Father hath sent me, I also send you. When he had said this he breathed on them; and he said to them: Receive the Holy Spirit'.⁷ The synoptics expressed this fundamental truth in a semitic way: 'He that receiveth you, receiveth me: and he that

¹ *Osservatore Romano*, 12 October 1962.

² Apoc 21, 12–14.

³ Acts 6, 7–8.

⁴ Acts 1, 22.

⁵ Eph 2, 20.

⁶ I Tim 6, 20.

⁷ Jn 20, 21–22.

receiveth me, receiveth him that sent me',¹ which Matthew and Luke translated for the christians who spoke greek: 'And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words . . .'² Their mission has no other meaning at all than to continue and to re-present the salvific sending of Christ by his Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The third point is, if possible, even more important, at least from the point of view of living practice and attitude. It is frequently connected with the idea of the mission of Christ as the 'servant of the Lord' through the image of the child, that is, in rabbinic language, the disciple, but also the 'small one', the servant.³ This mission is therefore a *diakonia*, a ministry. There is no other more expressive and revealing word in the New Testament for the christian priesthood than *diakonia*. Christ himself, just before his passion, when he washed their feet, left his apostles and us with an unforgettable symbol, a living parable: 'Amen, amen I say to you', he concluded, 'the servant is not greater than his lord: neither is the apostle greater than he that sent him'.⁴

Any theological doctrine or synthesis which neglects or falsifies one of these three points, neglects or falsifies Christ himself. The bishop who refuses to see that it is the whole body of the episcopacy which is the successor of the college of apostles, or who usurps for himself any part of the authority which belongs only to Christ who sent him; the bishop or priest who considers himself as above those who are his brothers and sisters by baptism and confirmation, falsifies the clear doctrine of Christ. His religious authority is 'a service of authority' for the edification of the body of Christ, which is the Church. It is never his own possession, his own 'glory'.

The corporate nature of the priestly mission

The sacrament of ordination gives what is commonly called in theology a sacramental character. There are many differences of theological opinion concerning the general doctrine of the character. The Council of Trent refused to define that the sacramental char-

¹ Mt 10, 41-42; Mk 9, 35-36; Lk 9, 48.

² Mt 10, 14; Lk 10, 16.

³ Mk 9, 35; Lk 9, 48.

⁴ Jn 13, 14-17. For a further larger exposition of the doctrine of the New Testament, see P. Fransen, *Priestertum*, in *Handbuch Theologischer Grundbegriffe*, edited by Heinrich Fries, Munich, Kösel-Verlag, vol. II, 1963, pp 340-344. The *Editions du Cerf* at Paris are preparing a french translation.

acter persisted after death.¹ The word indelible, as used at Trent, meant nothing more than that the sacrament of orders, along with those of baptism and confirmation, ought not, in accordance with the ancient tradition of the Church, to be repeated. Nevertheless it was a common theological opinion of the last centuries that the sacrament of orders was given 'for ever'. This opinion gained weight from the fact that the Council of Trent considered only one aspect of the character: that it was a 'certain spiritual sign'. But all the great doctors from the time of St Augustine acknowledged that it was the earthly visibility of the character which constituted its symbolic nature. The character was not the *res tantum*, which is the invisible gift of God, but *sacramentum et res*: that is, this real internal gift which also retains something of the sacramental and material symbolism. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear that in heaven there will be no longer any need for a human priesthood. Christ himself is our eternal High Priest.² He alone is 'priest for ever, according to the order of Melchisedech'.³ The priestly ministry on earth is a *diakonia* of this unique High Priest in heaven 'in the meantime'; that is, between the first and the last manifestations of Christ.

In considering the priestly 'character', we need to avoid any line of thought which seems to endanger the purity of the gospel teaching. To consider the ordained priest as being on a higher level of existence, above his brothers and sisters in Christ, is to subscribe to a kind of metaphysical clericalism. Like the rest of the faithful, the priest belongs to the people of God by his baptism and confirmation. His 'glory', which means in biblical terms the visibility of God's majesty on earth, is to be 'the glory of Christ'.⁴ It was Augustine who told his flock in these wonderful words: 'I am a bishop for your sakes; but I am a christian like you'.⁵

Similarly, we must reject every description of the priestly character as a power or a dignity. As Père Congar has demonstrated, this idea took its origin during the wars of Investiture, when the ecclesiastical power had to assert itself against the power of the princes and the emperor.⁶ This notion of power, at least as a fundamental theological perspective, is nothing more than a relic of feudal times.

¹ Denzinger 852.

² Heb 4, 14.

³ Heb 5, 5; 10, 15; 21, 24-26.

⁴ 2 Cor 8, 23. ⁵ *Vobis sum episcopus, vobiscum christianus. Sermo 340, 1; PL 38, 1483.*

⁶ Cf Yves Congar, O.P., 'The Historical Development of Authority in the Church: Points for Christian Reflection', in *Problems of Authority*, edited by John M. Todd, (London, 1962), pp 128-136.

The priest is simply a vehicle of Christ's power and dignity; this manifests itself most truly in the liturgy, because there the priest acts in the name of Christ. His words and gestures are the words and the gestures of Christ. *Agit in persona Christi*, said the old theologians: he im-personates the person of Christ. No father of the Church expressed this truth more forcefully than Augustine: 'those whom a drunkard baptizes, whom a murderer baptizes, whom an adulterer baptizes, if the baptism is of Christ, Christ himself baptizes'.¹

We opt, then, for the old theological tradition according to which the sacramental character partakes of the nature of the sacramental symbolism. As a matter of fact, a purely spiritual sign or symbol has no meaning at all, unless we imagine that we can see with the eyes of the angels who have no need for symbolic activity! There is no better way to integrate this theological view into our synthesis of the priesthood than to relate every sacramental character, and especially that of orders, to the Church as a visible and spiritual reality.² The most fundamental aspect of the priestly character is the visible mission received from God through ordination in the visible Church. Through this mission the priest participates in the salvific mission of the Church, the priestly body of Christ. Every sacrament gives us a peculiar mission inside the Church, by means of which all christians participate in the salvific mission of the Church in this world, according to the nature of each sacramental symbol and grace. Therefore through ordination the priest is made to share in the mission of Christ as head of the mystical body, and hence in a mission of authority. When we speak of participation, we must never think of it as 'getting some part of it for ourselves'. We share in Christ's authority, because his authority is truly entrusted to us, and remains actively present in the exercise of this priestly authority. In the same way, when we participate, in grace, in the liberty of God, we are truly free, but in virtue of the ever-present and ever-active freedom of God in us.³

The priestly mission is indeed founded in a free act of God's love and choice, expressed through the sacramental laying on of hands of the Church. Because every act of God is creative, the priest is in a new situation, one which affects the very depths of his personal

¹ *In Ioannis evang. tract. V, 18*; PL 35, 1424. See other similar expressions of St Augustine in Congar, *loc. cit.*, p 133, note 2.

² Cf P. Fransen, 'The idea of the Church and the Holy Trinity', in *Eastern Churches Quarterly* 14 (1962) pp 315-335.

³ Cf P. Fransen, *Divine Grace and Man* (New York, 1961), pp 62-73.

existence. This is the internal and spiritual aspect of the sacramental character: to be newly situated before God, and therefore before all men, in the Church and together with the Church, for the service of all men. But since the Church is visible, this new situation of spiritual existence finds its normal symbolic expression, first in the act of sacramental ordination, and secondly in the ecclesial duties and offices which accrue to the ordained, in virtue of this public act in the Church. This is a second aspect of the character: a real consecration to the service of God in the Church, and consequently to the service of all men together with the Church. Every consecration separates a man from the reality of sin and dedicates him to the cult of God. As the character is not only a visible symbol of God's choice, but also a new situation which affects the depths of the priest's existence in Christ (*sacramentum et res*), it becomes clear why this mission and consecration normally produce what is the final fruit of any sacrament, the new life in grace. Ordination provides a sacramental basis for a true priestly spirituality.

Here, in outline, is a more dynamic and existential theology of the sacramental character, and especially of the christian priesthood; but it has yet another aspect: its corporate nature, its collegiality. The corporate nature of christian orders is linked immediately with the corporate nature of the act of salvation, of grace and redemption, with the corporate nature of the Church as the mystical body of Christ and the people of God.¹ Neither priests nor deacons are excluded from it. Vatican Council II has concerned itself with the collegiality of the bishops alone for two reasons. First, historically, this Council has to complete the work of Vatican Council I, which met with untimely interruption after the definition of the primacy of the pope. The primacy of the pope cannot be rightly conceived as a separate entity, outside or above the *collegium* of the bishops, as successors of the apostles. The second reason is that the episcopacy is the fullness of sacramental orders. The priesthood is a limited participation in the episcopal mission; and the priest is a subsidiary collaborator of the bishop. Therefore it is in the episcopacy, in living communion with the pope, that the corporate nature of the order manifests itself primarily and more clearly.

The source of the collegiality of the priesthood is the oneness of the salvific mission of Christ, in which the historic plurality of or-

¹ Cf 'The Authority of the Councils', in *Problems of Authority*, ed. cit., pp 43-72, especially pp 44-48.

dained ministers share. There is one source of this mission: the sending of Christ by his Father. It has one substance: the continuation of the salvific mission of Christ. The ordained ministry is the earthly visibility of Christ who is our unique high priest, prophet and king. This mission has been made present or re-presented actively in our human history, in a human way, that is, in human gestures and words, through the power of the unique Spirit of Christ. There is one end of this mission: the full establishment of the people of God in the kingdom to come.

Ecclesial orders are primarily, continuously and actively rooted in the unique mission of Christ. Here is the innermost essence of orders, which affects our very existence in Christ, either as individuals or in the community of priests, the *presbyterion*. All our personal activity, since it flows from this fundamental relationship with God in his Church, essentially demands, on the level of our actual life and existential commitment, *koinonia*, the living communion of bishops with the pope and their *presbyterion* in faith and charity. A bishop is not infallible as teacher of the divine truth or as a religious leader of the Church unless he lives in communion with the episcopate all over the world in every age, and with the pope as the living symbol of episcopal unity in Christ.

When we consider this communion in the light of the Church as a visible historical structure, we shall find that its expression will vary according to time, place and culture. Such variation manifests itself in the historical changes which have taken place in canon law and ecclesial custom. The actual relation between the pope, the bishops and their *presbyterion* was not always the same in the course of history. Even now Vatican Council II is looking for new structures and a new church order. But the substance of the ecclesial hierarchy, their deeper and mutual hierarchic and organic unity in Christ through the power of his Spirit, has remained unchanged.

It should be equally clear then that the sacramental order needs not only a vertical dimension, but also a horizontal dimension, which finds its expression in an open and confident dialogue between the members of this corporate body, through the power of the Spirit who works in all of them. Every kind of separation and isolationism hinders the work of the Spirit. A bishop or a priest who imagines himself to be in personal and exclusive contact with the Holy Spirit denies the very nature of the collegiate ministry.

It would also be wrong to separate the collegiality of the priest-

hood from the corporate nature of the 'priestly and kingly'¹ people of God. The foundation of both is the same: the living presence in the Church of the risen Lord, through the unique power of the Spirit. Not only is the ministry ordained to be at the service of the Church, but also to re-present, on behalf of the priestly community of the faithful, Christ as the head of the body and the Spirit as the soul of this body. This special mission explains the real difference between the sacral priesthood and the universal priesthood of all the baptized and confirmed members of the Church. Again, the true Catholic doctrine maintains the *complexio oppositorum*, the organic coherence and fulness of seemingly opposite elements. This fulness every heresy destroys by separating one truth from the rich complexity of the divine reality.

Therefore the sacral priesthood remains at the service of the universal Church, even where a bishop or a priest receives a more limited and circumscribed jurisdiction over only a part of the Church, over his territory. Every priest, and even more so, every bishop as collegiate successor of the twelve, is responsible for the whole Church. In the case of the bishops, this responsibility is most clearly demonstrated in an ecumenical council and in the other forms of collegiate activity, as for instance the continental or national episcopal conferences.² As regards the priests, the religious orders of clerics work for the whole Church under the jurisdiction of the papacy; and this universal mission is the theological source of religious 'exemption', that is, a limited independence from the local jurisdiction of a diocesan bishop. But even diocesan priests, who normally form the *presbyterion* of the local bishop, are to be ready to accept any charge which goes beyond the limits of the particular diocese in which they are 'incardinated'. By their ordination, their concern is the whole Church as people of God.

Not even the pope is outside this collegiality; he also is dependent on this communion with his 'brothers in the episcopate', and his brothers and sisters in the same baptism. He is 'the servant of the servants of God'. When Vatican Council I defined the infallibility of the pope, *ex sese et sine consensu Ecclesiae*, 'of himself and independently of the approbation of the Church',³ this awkward and not very happy formulation was intended as a final condemnation of

¹ Apoc 1, 6; I Pet 2, 9.

² Cf P. Franssen, 'Problem for the Council: Episcopal Conferences', in *The Month* 30 (1963) pp 133-145 and pp 197-209.

³ Denzinger 1839.

the positions of gallicanism and every other form of conciliarism, and not to make the pope the unique and therefore separate depository of revelation. The pope too lives in communion with the whole Church, even whilst retaining his unique mission of witnessing for the unity of the Church and its sacramental hierarchy in interpreting the truth of revelation.

It is impossible to present the Church, as was often done after Vatican Council I, as a kind of pyramidal structure: pope, bishops, priests, clerics and finally, at the base of the pyramid, the faithful who possess no more than a passive and receptive infallibility. The Church is first of all the people of God, the mystical body of Christ. Inside this body its ministers, each according to his own ordination and mission, re-present the head of this body in administering God's grace and truth.¹ Without prejudice to their fundamental equality with all their brothers and sisters by baptism and confirmation, priests form a true community of 'ministers', servants of Christ, and therefore servants of their flock. The divine life and authority which they receive to this end never becomes their own private possession or glory. This corporate mission, however, which may be called a religious function² and is certainly a real consecration into the service of God, is the deepest reality which God confers on any man in the Church.

Further specifications of this sacramental mission

The ordination of a bishop, a priest or a deacon is one of the seven sacraments of the Church. We must, of course, avoid the sort of streamlined sacramental theology which would fit the 'means of grace' into a single over-rigid, over-static pattern. The sacraments have a few things in common, but they differ widely in many other respects. The sacrament of orders, which invests a man with a public commission in a religious community, can be divided into different and hierarchically dependent functions. Though order is only one sacrament, the ordination of a bishop, of a priest, of a dea-

¹ P. Fransen, 'The Theological Implications of the Discussions of the Liturgy at the Second Vatican Council', in *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963), pp 1-20, especially: 'A Different Conception of the Church,' pp 5-11.

² We feel that it is better to speak of the priesthood as a 'religious function' rather than as 'an instrument of grace' - a very mechanical term. It stresses the personal aspect of his free commitment in grace; though it may also tend to depreciate the irrevocability of his call. Every word that we use to express the divine reality carries its own limitations.

con, and finally minor orders (it depends on the Church whether she will accept them, implicitly or explicitly, as real sacraments and not only as sacramentals) are, each of them according to its own nature, a real sacramental rite. Some of these hierarchic divisions date from the times of the apostles, others were introduced in later times, and could be re-adapted to meet actual needs of the faithful.

Here we are confronted with a central notion in sacramental theology, which was, unhappily, often neglected in the West, especially after the Reformation: the notion of economy, sometimes called *potestas dispensationis*. The sacraments were entrusted to the care of the Church. She has the power to adapt and to change according to the spiritual and pastoral needs of the faithful, so long as 'the substance' of a sacrament remains untouched.¹

The sacraments have not a rigid pattern, but do possess a kind of life. This life belongs to 'the household care' of the Church. This is what *oikonomia* means in greek, and *dispensatio* meant in old latin.²

There is also a distinction to be made between the fundamental mission entrusted by sacramental ordination, and the various ways in which this sacramental function has been shaped and integrated into the historical situation of the Church as a religious society in this world. The fundamental mission is essentially given in the sacramental rite; its pastoral and historic shape is applied and enforced by the *potestas jurisdictionis*, that is, the authority of the Church as a visible religious society. In the ancient Church, and up to our times in the East, this was done by custom, tradition, and diocesan, patriarchal and conciliar law. In the West, since the sixteenth century, this authority over the actual shape, structure and exercise of the sacerdotal ministry was principally reserved to the pope and the roman congregations. Vatican Council II is seeking prudently for a less centralized co-ordination of ministerial functions, a return to the old idea of unity in living variety.

This distinction between the fundamental mission of the priesthood and its various forms in the Church partly belongs to the nature of the sacrament itself. The Church is first the invisible communion in grace made manifest through the visible people of God on earth; it is eternal and earthly at the same time, the image of the incarnate Lord. He is the first sacrament, and the Church, his body,

¹ Cf Denzinger 931 and 2301; and P. Fransen: 'Erwägungen über das Firmalter', in *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 84 (1962) pp 401-426.

² Cf THE WAY (Spiritual Vocabulary) vol II (April 1962) p 313.

is the fundamental sacrament from which the seven sacraments spring. We can recognize this tension of opposites more clearly in the episcopacy. The episcopacy, the fullness of the priesthood, possesses the fullness of the *ministerium*, that is, the capacity of representing the risen Lord in the administration of all the sacraments. At the same time the episcopacy is invested with the plenitude of ecclesiastical authority, in unity with the pope. This is called *potestas jurisdictionis*.

As we have said, the mission of authority is received in the episcopal consecration, which is a sacrament; but the further determination of the limits, either territorial or canonical, of this authority is specified by conciliar, pontifical or canonical law, the expressions of this visible authority of the Church as a religious human society. Every priest, by virtue of his ordination, receives his sacerdotal mission of authority and ministry, but the exercise of those functions is regulated by the authority of the residential bishop in whose territory he works. This *potestas jurisdictionis* extends itself so far as to be able to make invalid an act of sacramental dispensation, as for instance in the case of absolution in confession.

We have said nothing yet of a third function, the *potestas magisterii*, which is the mission of witnessing to the truth of God with authority. If we are to understand this function correctly, we must again relate it to the nature of the Church. Here we discover another distinction and tension: between the visibility of the sacramental rite and the 'audibility' of the preaching of the Word. Christ, as God Incarnate, acted and spoke to us with ambivalent words and gestures. These two aspects of the mission are not to be separated from one another, even if they are not identical, as was commonly done after the tragedy of the Reformation. Catholic theologians over-emphasized ritual symbolism in a rather too mechanical view of the sacraments; whilst the reform theologians over-stressed the preaching of the Word and neglected the deep reality of the sacramental rites.¹

We believe that it is better not to treat this mission of witnessing or *magisterium* as a third and separate function of the priesthood, but to see it as belonging both to ministry and jurisdiction. The priest, especially the bishop, is the ordinary minister of the sacraments. As such he is also sent to preach the word of God. No sacramental

¹ P. Fransen, 'Grace and Sacraments, Reflections on the Conditions and Possibility of an Ecumenical Dialogue', *Eastern Churches Quarterly*, vol XVI, No. 4, 1964.

dispensation can be separated from the preaching of the word, any more than grace can be separated from faith, or *opus operatum* from *opus operantis*.¹ This mission of preaching, embedded in the function of the liturgical minister, is of a prophetic nature and invested with authority. Every baptized and confirmed member of the Church is called to witness to the truth of God; but the ordained priest, formally as a minister of the sacraments, is re-presenting the authority of Christ not only when he correctly performs the rites of the Church, but also because at the same time he witnesses with authority to the truth of the sacramental grace, calling those who receive the sacraments to faith in the word of God, as expressed in the liturgical prayers and homily.

This mission of witnessing has another aspect which belongs, not so much to ministry as to 'jurisdiction', that is to the authoritative mission of the Church as a visible and ordered religious society. This is commonly called the *potestas magisterii*, as for instance in canon law. Thus the pope and the bishops have a duty to supervise the correct and orthodox formulation of the faith, the public teaching of theologians, the writings of books on faith and morals; they have a duty to condemn false doctrines or to warn against dangerous errors.

To conclude, then:

The sacrament of order cannot be correctly or fully interpreted in theology without continuous reference to the fundamental structure of the Church. The principal ministers of our salvation are Christ and his Spirit, sent by the Father. Neither order nor the priest has any value or meaning except in this Trinitarian relationship.

¹ Cf P. Fransen, 'Faith and Sacraments', *Aquinas Paper* No. 31 (London 1958); or, 'Sacraments, Signs of Faith', in *Worship* 37 (1962/63) pp 31-50, both summarizing the important study of H. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *De Sacramentele Heilseconomie* (The Sacramental Economy of Grace) (Antwerp 1952), which will be published in translation in 1965 in the United States.