

On the Sanctification of the Catholic Priesthood¹

THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE, O.P.

Angelicum

Rome, Italy

THE PRIESTHOOD is traditionally understood to entail descending dimensions of mediation by which the priest conveys spiritual goods to us, and ascending dimensions, by which the priest helps lead us to God by his example and love of God. I would like to speak in this essay about each of these, internal to a historical narrative. The first part of the narrative begins in the Reformation and the second in our own time. Each is about crisis in the priesthood, and they come together in the consideration of the sanctification of the priesthood, for our own historical moment.

I

“To say this is to construct a new [and different] Church, [distinct from the Church of Jesus Christ]” (“Hoc enim est novam ecclesiam construere”). These words were spoken by Thomas de Vio Cajetan in October of 1518, in the course of public debate with the young Martin Luther, at a time when the Augustinian monk was still in communion with the Catholic Church. Earlier that year Pope Leo X had sent Cajetan as his representative from Rome to the Diet of Augburg, from which he was dispatched for theological dispute with the aspiring Reformer. Cajetan at the time was the Master of the Dominican Order, a Cardinal of the Catholic Church, and archbishop of Palermo. He was a vocal promoter of reform within with the clergy and the curia, advocating for clerical asceticism and learning, himself pioneering early-modern commentary on Aquinas, while also favoring the emergence of Renaissance biblical

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studies. He and Luther shared a common concern for the reform of the Church.

The debate took place on October 12–15, approximately one year after Luther's promulgation of ninety-five theses, and two years before the publication of the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, which was to mark a more definitive break with Rome. The subject under discussion was the so-called power of the keys. How is it that the forgiveness of God is commuted to a penitent through the sacrament of confession? Does this depend upon the apostolic authority of the pope and the episcopacy as well as the juridical delegation of a priest who grants absolution? It was no accident that Luther raised radical questions on this front. Behind this specifically sacramental question stands a more fundamental issue of authority and the Church. Does God give grace to us through the descending mediations of the Church, and if so, how? As Cajetan saw at the time, the treatment of apostolic authority in one domain carries over logically into others. How one treats the sacrament of reconciliation touches immediately in turn upon such topics as the perennial truth of Catholic dogma (defined by the authority of the Church), the nature and number of the sacraments, and the nature of apostolic succession. In their debate with one another, Luther and Cajetan elaborated two vastly divergent visions of Christianity which anticipated developments in early modernity. Christendom stood in the balance.

Luther for his part is finding his way in this early text toward the notion that justification occurs by faith alone, apart from works of the law or any mediations of sacramental agency. He claims against Cajetan that the classical tripartite of sacramental confession of sins, contrition, and ensuing satisfaction are not sufficient to procure forgiveness in Christ except insofar as they are accompanied by the penitent's inward act of faith in Christ, as well as—significantly—the subjective certitude that the sins which are being confessed have been definitively forgiven. He goes so far as to say that in the absence of certitude in my particular salvation by Christ for these sins, the sacrament leads not to salvation but condemnation. What is noteworthy about this, in context, is that there is no priestly mediation of the forgiveness of sins. The subject's interior judgment of his own righteousness before God by grace is the determining condition for the reception of grace, prior to and in a sense apart from any external rites and ecclesial measures of evaluation. Furthermore the individual sincerity of the subject in the act of faith is sufficient proof of the spiritual authenticity of the person before God. Luther would later stipulate: A penitent's confession of sins to another person serves merely as a cathartic external occasion to formulate an internal act of repentance and receive vocal confirmation

from another of the forgiveness that comes from Christ alone.

In his mature period Luther would famously claim that justification by faith alone is the article on which the Church stands or falls. Indeed, as Yves Congar pointed out, significant ecclesiological consequences stem directly from Luther's powerful idea. For if Christ is related directly to each individual by the gift of righteousness mediated only through the subject's personal conscience, when reading Scripture, then the hierarchy of mediations is abolished in a twofold way. The believer does not depend on sacramental mediations to obtain justification by faith. Even baptism, for Luther, serves as the outward evidence and seal of election, but need not be understood as the instrumental cause of the grace of faith. And indeed there are no sacraments of ordination or penance as classically understood in the Catholic tradition. Secondly, there is no direct dependence on antecedent teaching tradition. It is Scripture alone that guarantees the believer's cognitive encounter with God. Councils of the Catholic Church are considered merely fallible reflections of preceding generations, of potentially varying worth. It follows from all this of course that there exists no apostolic, papal, or episcopal jurisdiction of the visible Church as a condition for one's integration into the spiritual communion of the body of Christ. The life of the Church is identified essentially with the invisible communion of the predestined, not the visible political society of the Catholic faithful.

Luther's theology was a response to what was widely perceived in his own era as a profound crisis in the Church, a crisis of faith in Catholic teaching and sacramental practice, and a crisis of priestly witness of life, affected by corruption of morals among the clergy, including in the episcopacy. Luther's response was simple, if radical: do away entirely with the priestly vocation as traditionally understood. In the face of priestly scandal one option is simply to reject the medieval structures of mediation that the Church has always claimed are of apostolic origin. Luther's brilliance as a theologian is matched by the consequential character of his thought, for in effect, along with Zwingli and Calvin, he created the conditions of a new age, one in which the individual, in his religious conscience, is the primary mediator of truth and grace. The modern era of the liberal subject who is free from dependence on the mediation of preexistent religious institutions is hard to envisage without the anticipation of the Reformation. Immanuel Kant was a self-consciously secular moralist who sought to renegotiate the sense of his Lutheran roots. He nonetheless maintained an essential emphasis on the immediate access of the internal conscience to the procurement of the conditions of ethical righteousness. For the procedural liberalism to which his thought has given rise, each individual

is responsible for the construal of his own evaluation of meaning and value, without dependence on preceding standards of nature, tradition, or any religious institution. Personal self-evaluation and inward moral sincerity are the primary means by which one attains genuine authenticity. Some today have argued that the primacy of the internal forum in Protestant life has given way to the secular culture of private judgment and the Lutheran option of a merely therapeutic confession of sins has given way to the culture of psychological therapies, no longer connected with traditional Christianity. Luther might abhor aspects of our secular liberal world, but his theology also helped inadvertently to create it. And indeed the cultural vitality of contemporary liberalism is quite powerful even today, especially in countries that were formerly Protestant.

Let us return to the debate of 1518 and its other interlocutor. For Cajetan, the essential mediations of the Church are of divine institution and apostolic origin. The episcopal authority of the Church has its source in the community of the New Testament. Christ instituted the seven sacraments. The visible Eucharistic communion of the Church is a perpetual source of grace for believers, not merely a sign of the invisible activity of God.²

Cajetan argues against Luther that faith alone is not sufficient for union with God. Theological hope and love are also necessary. The Church is a communion in the authentic love of God. Here we find an echo of Aquinas on justification, one that also prefigures the later teaching of the Council of Trent. Justification occurs by grace, not natural human works, but grace is at work in us by way of faith, hope, and love. At the same time, for Cajetan, private judgments of our subjective self-estimation are fallible. We cannot be certain that we effectively love God. We can only form a practical judgment of this based on prudence. Consequently, we need to

² In responding to Luther, Cajetan first seeks to mark out a clear distinction between the infused faith of the theological virtues and merely human psychological confidence in one's own personal integrity as a Christian. Supernatural faith provides us with the certitude that Christ forgives sins by means of the sacrament of reconciliation which he himself has instituted. Psychological confidence stems from the judgment we make as to whether we have approached the sacrament with requisite interior dispositions. The fact that I might doubt the quality of my contrition need not belie the presence of grace. We can after all have firm trust in the power of the sacrament while being uncertain about the perfection of our interior inclinations, or the quality of our subjective contrition. Or we could have sincere confidence in our own fiduciary righteousness while in fact standing in moral and theological error. Cajetan is identifying here a basic distinction between truth and sincerity. To transpose to a contemporary idiom: Modern liberal sincerity is not a reliable guide to moral authenticity.

refer ourselves to external references of the Church's teaching regarding the Christian life and the natural law. By consulting the teaching and practice of the Church we acquire practical certitude over time that we are living effectively with God, by recourse to the sacraments, and the disciplines of the spiritual life. Here the individual acquires moral authenticity by referring himself to the institutions and authorities of the preexisting Catholic community.

Cajetan's vision of confession of course also has implications for ecclesiology. The Scriptures are read and interpreted rightly within the context of sacred Tradition and infallible dogmatic pronouncements. The Church is able to identify the spiritual customs of the Gospel as objective standards of human sanctification (i.e., in the canonization of saints), and these are not determined by the private interpretations of individuals or sectarian movements. Grace is given to us through the objective mediations of the Church, notably her sacraments.

If Luther is indirectly making room for the conditions of modern life without dependency on Catholic mediations, Cajetan is articulating a modern Catholic vision of reform through the self-conscious, disciplined re-appropriation of Tradition, in an age of intense ideological conflict and cultural fracturing. The modern world has turned out to be one of secular contestation of the Catholic Tradition in many respects, but also of irremediable ideological pluralism. In that space, the Church and the priesthood have thrived where there has been a discernment of what is essential to the life of the Church, a preservation of this life in estuaries of sanctification and learning, and a coherent missionary witness to the mystery of Christ in the context of new circumstances.

One characteristic of priestly sanctification then, entails the taking of responsibility for the authentic transmission of the sacred mediations of the Church. In short, the priesthood is renewed in holiness when its members convey the integral teaching of the Church compassionately, eloquently, and effectively and celebrate the sacraments of the Church in a worthy and sublime way. Numerous major priestly initiatives would emerge in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that would seek to take renewed responsibility for the mediations of the Church, her sacramental life, and the teaching of sound doctrine in accord with a life of priestly holiness: the seminary of Charles Borromeo, the founding of the Oratorians, the vast and consequential work of the Society of Jesus, and the extraordinary work of the Vincentians and Sulpicians. This is only to name some of the sacerdotal organizations, without forgetting the contribution of the Ursulines, Carmelites and other major early modern religious orders of women both active and contemplative. The paradox of the counter-Reformation was

that there was a co-existence of death and fecundity. In a moment of crisis it is essential to create estuaries of sanctification, where the learned transmission of the faith is maintained as allied with authentic love of Christ, devoted service of God, a societal cultivation of virtue, and a missionary spirit. If the priesthood is in crisis in our time, it is in part because we have failed in some sectors of the Church to believe sufficiently in the objective mediations of the Church and the organic life of institutions required for the transmission of the priestly vocation. Cajetan himself was a person of profound cultural invention, writing modern commentaries on Scripture, engaging in controversies of the day, interpreting Aquinas to speak to his own epoch, so as to bring the riches of the past into the age of the Renaissance, and he did all this within his own religious order in an effective way. He also did so in such a way as to anticipate the later forward-thinking work of his Dominican colleague St. Pius V. Today we could do worse than to imitate their example.

II

The most significant secular and religious disputes of our own age are not about sacramental confession; in fact, they are about human sexuality. Luther saw that the forgiveness of sins constituted symbolically the neuralgic point of his medieval civilization and asked the key question of his age, "How can I find a gracious God?" However, for our contemporaries, the symbolic locus of controversy is the human body and the core question is: "How can I enact my freedom, and therefore achieve genuine autonomy, in and through my sexual life?" In our own age, it seems that sex has become the symbolic medium that both evokes and depicts our concept of individual autonomy and self-determination. Why is that the case?

Aquinas notes three significant and relevant things about human sexuality. First, it naturally leads to the generation and social education of children. Consequently, it inevitably has a political and a religious dimension. It is the family that procreates and educates children and that therefore replenishes society and builds up the common good. Likewise, God creates the human spiritual soul of each individual human being, which is the basic reason why we treat the life and death of human beings differently from those of other animals. Consequently, the use of the sexual powers inevitably borders upon the domain of the sacred. How we relate to our own human sexuality in its openness to life is always bound up with how we relate to the divine, and vice versa. Second, Aquinas notes that sexuality is the human activity that produces the greatest pleasure in the sensible domain. It provides a psychological catharsis, then, that can readily prove addictive and render human beings dependent. By this very

fact it also can create intense bonds of attachment between persons or lead persons to seriously mistreat one another or betray one another in the pursuit of pleasure. Consequently, there exists a perpetual challenge of the human community to orient the search for pleasure under, within, and for the rational pursuit of other human goods, including the life of the family and human justice, so that sexual activity contributes to the spiritual maturation of persons and the common life of society, in friendship with God. Third, and perhaps most mysteriously, Aquinas notes that the search for sexual pleasure apart from and independently of the goods of marriage leads almost immediately to alienation from God and sacred things, for individual persons and societies at large, as human beings seek solace from human companionship and sensible pleasures divorced from the religious and familial ends of sexuality. The human inclination toward reproductive coupling and parenthood remains ineradicably inscribed in each human person, but it is resistible. Consequently, our desire for reproduction and parenthood can become a neuralgic domain that evokes profound inner conflict with our own deepest desires for happiness, and social tensions can emerge from those frustrated desires, tensions that are in part about religion. When people seek the communion that sexuality portends or promises outside of the reproductive family unit, they tend to do so in ways that are cut off from the context in which those promises can actually be delivered. We might speak here of a frustrated search for transcendence, often undertaken in ways that lead to anti-religious antipathies.

Let us now add another consideration, one taken from our own era, not from Aquinas. We can readily observe that a unique relationship has developed in the wake of the sexual revolution between modern technology, human sexuality, and personal autonomy. The modern liberal person understands her or his own sexual identity especially in the wake of the technological innovation of modern contraception. My claim here is not so much a moral one as an anthropological one. Mainstream secular feminism, for example, takes it to be axiomatic that for women to be socially and politically free and self-determining, natural fertility must be rendered optional technologically. Philosophically speaking this is a claim that is significant, historically innovative, radical (in the etymological sense of the term), and entirely philosophically questionable. But it goes largely unstudied. Instead, the effective practice of separation of sexuality from reproduction is taken for granted and has given rise to a culture that is continuously seeking to renegotiate the boundaries of autonomy in relation to sexual identity. Why, for example, has active homosexuality become such a significant political symbol of secular self-determination for the denizens of contemporary liberal culture? Presumably because in

the wake of the sexual revolution all sexual activity has been redefined according to a new ethic as moral sexuality *just* to the extent that it is concerned with the freely agreed upon pursuit of pleasure and companionship between mutually consenting persons. In short, if there is consensual pursuit of pleasure, sexual activity is sufficiently morally justified. Perhaps more profoundly, it is ethical precisely to the extent that it serves to facilitate the exploration and therefore the augmentation of basic human freedom. It is good because it makes people freer. In other words, the culture in which previous taboos are transcended is also the culture in which human freedom is continually augmented. If we follow this line of thinking then the profound cultural shift on same-sex marriage in Western culture in so short an amount of time makes sense as a kind of wide-scale cultural conversion to a new moral calculus. Its widespread acceptance has come to function practically in our culture as a litmus test for the ethical terms of engagement in liberal society at large. To be in favor of it is to be in favor of this new ethics, and even in a sense a new and better way of being human, a new ontology of human liberal freedom.

There is coherence here with the aims of the transgender movement. Its advocates readily concede that human beings are truly biologically male or female, organically speaking, and are not naïve about this. But this is only a physiological “given” inherited at birth. Human beings retain the freedom to consign their biological condition to new purposes based on their psychological wishes or needs and in view of the realization of their own greater moral autonomy and theoretical view of the world. The respect of another to redefine his or her sexual identity is the sign of an ascendant freedom that is prophetic in character, indicative of a forward march of history. And so, logically, the freedom to redefine one’s bodily identity is essential to the very social contract of liberal political culture. You can choose your own sex as an expression of your own freedom. But then those who deem this act of self-redefinition contrary to the common good and the natural law are themselves opponents of the very principles of political life under modern conditions. They are, in short, enemies of the common good because they are the enemies of freedom. Analogous things can be said about artificial reproduction technologies, genetic manipulation of human embryos, and abortion. These are all litmus-test areas of symbolic import, because they are frontiers of human autonomy with regard to sexuality that modern technology affords.

If we refer back to Aquinas’s analysis, we might say that the de-sacralization of sexuality and the denial of natural finalities lead, by a kind of inexorable logic, toward the framing of human reproduction in artificial terms, literally as a subject of artistic creativity, meant to expand the range

of human options in confrontation with our nature's physical limitations. Basically the body is given as a kind of material substructure we can and indeed must refashion in accord with our own desires.

III

The symbolic cases of controversy regarding sexuality and human liberation are not external to the culture of the Catholic Church. Today Cajetan would find himself debating not so much with Martin Luther as with Michel Foucault or Jacques Lacan. The controversies of our age obviously affect the laity directly, with regard to neuralgic areas of marriage, cohabitation, and contraception, but clerical culture is affected in particular by the scandals of sexual abuse of minors or adults. The Church's great difficulty in responding justly to poignant cases of priestly misconduct appears to her secular critics to belie her insistence on social justice and chaste temperance in other domains. A kind of performative contradiction results. An analogy exists to the misuse of indulgences in the sixteenth century. We have moved from clerical power and money to clerical power and sexual abuse. Luther claimed that under such circumstance the Church could not convey an effective witness to the mercy of God. Today we could ask: Can the Church convey a plausible witness to the clerical love of God and of justice toward one's neighbor? But also behind this, does the Church truly have a plausible vision of human sexual freedom, or in fact, is the secular liberal model of sexual ethics more realistic, precisely because it is so modest? After all it requires nothing more than the mutual consent of adults and need not have any reference to the common good of society or the family. From this issues the question not of "how can I find a gracious God?," but "what are the authentic conditions in which human freedom flourishes, particularly with regard to human sexuality?" And here we touch upon a more fundamental question that is neuralgic to our liberal epoch, and that the priesthood has to help us answer today if it is to address secular persons of our own age and help resolve our age's own internal crisis, which can be stated in this question: "What is our human autonomy for?"

It is not an accident that the culture of autonomy so characteristic of our secular age is marked by an ambient materialism that appeals to the natural sciences, so as to argue that human consciousness evolved as a mere accident of evolution. This contemporary ontology of "original purposelessness" proclaims the primal vanity of human freedom as a mere metaphysical aberration that emerged by chance. Deep down what we call freedom is nothing but a space that opens up within the interaction of atomic forces. It has no real significance. But paradoxically this nihilistic intuition assures the primacy of autonomy, unhindered by any reference to

necessary purposes or ends, especially those that would correspond with a divine wisdom. After all, in a meaningless universe, no one should be able to tell me what to do.

So what does a Catholic reformation look like in our own era, after the revolutions of the 1960s? Modern Catholic sexuality is going to be different from pre-modern Catholic sexuality, but perhaps not in the way some might think. It is going to be different not because of a fundamental change in the Church's teaching regarding human nature, but because the modern Catholic choice of the natural and of the human body is now going to exist in the face of contestation and in the midst of differentiated social ideologies. Paradoxically, the Catholic couple who today follow the teachings of the Church signal an autonomy of freedom, in fact, not a conformity to conventions, and in that sense are characteristically modern while being deeply Catholic witnesses to the nature of marriage, the human body, and its ethical purposes. The couple that chooses freely to act chastely before and within marriage, or wed in sacramental matrimony, do so not due to the force of social pressures restraining their freedom, but by a free assimilation of the natural ends of marriage in view of a counter-cultural choice. Their choice is natural but also a decision marked by very profound autonomy in the face of alternative options.

But what about the priesthood and human freedom? How can Catholic priests today promote an understanding of the real purposes of human freedom, in a culture threatened by materialism, blind consumerism, and vague intuitions of cosmic purposelessness? They can do so precisely by bearing witness to the primacy of the love of God as the purpose of human freedom, in the celibate consecration of themselves to Christ. In doing so they also bear witness to the reality of God as the true horizon of human meaning, one that surpasses the domain of sensuality, entertainment, consumption, and politics.

Aquinas has an interesting theory for why priests fittingly should be celibate. He does not refer to the utility to the Church, or the selflessness the practice is meant to instill, or even the growth in charity that the sacrifice of a family might entail. Instead he refers to contemplation. The priest is celibate so that he can exist for the contemplation and study of the truth about God, for loving prayer to God, and for the communication of the truth about God to others. In short, the priest exists as a symbolic referent to God, to the fact that our human freedom exists ultimately for God. This theory, which has its remote origins in Western monastic views of the clergy, would be questioned by many today, including some within the episcopacy. But it has a suggestive relevance in our own historical moment. What if the human being can exist freely for something ultimate

that transcends the life of the senses as such? Then the materialist idea of a purposeless human existence is false. What if the drive toward human sexual exploration is relative to a deeper drive toward religious exploration and the discovery of God in his transcendence, as the deepest sense of liberation for the human person? In that case, our freedom to love is first and foremost a freedom for God, made possible by the grace of Christ. The witness of celibate consecration to the truth stands as a visible indication of the possibility of genuine hierarchical priorities, grounded in the real nature of things. If God alone is first, everything else is second, and only when it is understood as second does it acquire its genuine meaning and plenary innate value. This is true of our human sexuality as well, which in its domains—both sacred and profane—is rightly lived out as free human sexuality only when it is oriented toward and within the acceptance of God. We should note how all this ties in with the vindication of the sacramental mediations. If priestly consecration signals to the world that God is first, then it is also a fitting sign that the sacraments that the priest celebrates are true instruments of grace that derive from the invisible God, visible signs of the active presence of God, loci of holiness manifest in our world. The priest who celebrates the sacraments worthily does so in loving devotion to God. When the priest truly loves God in his own personal life, his celebration of the sacraments is a more effective manifestation of the presence and activity of Jesus Christ in our world.

When Aquinas talks about the essential features of priestly holiness, he notes at least four. First, the priest is ordained sacramentally by a bishop of the Catholic Church, and in doing so receives from God the grace of his state of life. The ordination stems from outside but in some way changes the being of the priest from within, by the character of ordination, so that the priest is made capable of serving the Church in his whole being. The principle way this occurs is through the celebration of the sacraments and the sacrifice of the Mass. If the priest does what the Church intends while being in a state of grace and friendship with God, then he is sanctified *qua* priest. It is precisely in this office and its works that he is invited to a life of sanctification. Second, then, to be holy, the priest must live in a state of grace and orient his own life freely and effectively toward God by means of faith, hope, and charity, as well as the moral virtues, including justice and temperance. It is in this second registry that we can locate the primacy of contemplation, a life oriented toward God where everything else is brought into perspective and integration, relative to the absolute. Third, the priest has to have prudence not only for himself, but also for others, so as to counsel others well, especially the laity but also religious and other priests, in view of their respective end in God. It is not enough

to be personally devoted to God. An effectively holy priest has to be able to give advice and make reasonable evangelical decisions with and for others, so that they progressively learn and are effectively encouraged to offer their lives to God with practical wisdom. Finally, the priest must be instructed in sacred doctrine and sound philosophical understanding about the human condition. He must not only know the truth and be able to live for it, but also be able to speak the truth and explain it to the faithful and to take some responsibility for the wider process of the transmission of divine revelation in the life of society.

I hope my conclusion is clear. Priests today have to witness to the fact that human freedom has final purposes. In effect, the core error of our age is not about the sacramental mediation of grace, but about human freedom and the heresy of aimlessness. Our secular academic culture is increasingly merely pragmatic, transitioning from an era of the Enlightenment humanities to one of modern technological bureaucracy and international commerce. The speculative horizon of human wisdom is shrinking while the practical aims of modern technological culture are expanding. This dynamic only augments the drama of human freedom and intensifies the question of why we exist at all, a question our secular contemporaries are hard pressed to answer. In this context, even with all its contemporary miseries, the Catholic priesthood is of essential importance as a witness to the truth. By his ordination, the priest is a visible sign that the mediation of Christ is present and active in the world, in the sacramental economy of the Church and the visible society of the faithful. By the integrity of his life ordered toward God, the priest conveys the existential and concrete message that one can truly live for God alone above and before all else. By his counsel to others, the priest teaches people how to orient their lives effectively to God in the midst of a dizzying array of human complexities. By his teaching the mystery of Christ and the doctrine of the Church, the priest recalls the final destiny of the human person, created in view of the life of grace in this world and the vision of God in the next. In all these ways, the priest stands as a sign of contradiction against the dignitaries of secularism who promote the false notion that human freedom exists for merely temporal purposes or arbitrary ends. The freedom of the priest to exist for the truth and grace of Christ is itself a source of principal witness amidst the confusions of history, so that human beings may discover the absolute truth about God, and in that truth acquire safe passage toward God as the authentic homeland of their being, now and for eternity.

IV

For the Christian, of course, human freedom finds its most perfect expression in Christ himself, the Son of God, a human being who was most perfectly human and perfectly divine. The human desires and intentions of Christ are irradiated with transcendent significance, and expressive of his divine identity, in which he is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The original mediator between God and man is Jesus Christ. Mediation is in the DNA of the Catholic Church because she teaches that Christ himself merited our salvation as the great high priest, and freely instituted the apostolic hierarchy and the seven sacraments, so that we could live in union with him. He sent the Holy Spirit into the world to sanctify the Church and actively safeguard the apostolic deposit of faith that descends from the first era of the Church down to our own time. It follows from all this that, when the priesthood is on trial, in a derivative way, it is our acceptance of Christ himself that is at stake. It also follows that the Catholic priesthood can and cannot fail, each in important ways. It can fail because the image of Christ that is meant to be impressed on the soul of each priest can be obscured, in more minor or extremely serious ways, by the absence of justice, chastity, wisdom, holiness, or zeal in the life a given person. But by another measure it also cannot fail, since Christ sustains the mystery of the sacramental priesthood in being within the Church in every age, so as to remain the one true mediator of all grace, within, amidst, and despite the poverty of his human servants. By his preservation of the infallible truth of the Catholic faith, and by his action in sacramental mysteries over and above human failings, he is always alive, present, and active. The resplendence of Jesus cannot be completely concealed, as his excellence and holiness continue to shine forth in the midst of all things, and through all things, safeguarding our encounter with Christ.

Jesus continues to raise up holy priests. He calls poor human beings in every age to be conformed effectively to himself, despite their human weaknesses. Peter is archetypal, crucified upside down, a paradoxical inversion of Christ, unworthy to imitate him but still bearing witness to his Master, mediating truth to the world, drowning in his blood. The Cross is a living tree, putting out shoots and runners, moving men from within, in each age, to become priests. By its effect Christian freedom flowers in all its splendor and beauty, as the love of Christ crucified, and as the contemplation of the truth, even in our own era, and also here in this estuary of the truth. So that we in the Catholic Church may speak to Christ alone those words that Cajetan uttered in another context in 1518: "Herein *you* are constructing a new Church."