

An Antidote for the Priest to Prevent Vainglory and Pride

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The Problem

A priest who ignores Trinitarian doctrine risks serious consequences in his life as a spiritual father, as well as a celebrant of the sacraments. Excessive love of self, exaggerating one's abilities to preach, teach, and administer a parish or any other ministry usually comes from a lack of humility. On the other hand, true self-knowledge accepts one's limitations and appraises one's talents moderately as a consequence of having a deep sense of the triune God. A persevering life of prayer, meditation, and contemplation of God leads to the discovery of talents and virtues of both the natural and spiritual orders and keeps priests aware of their dependence on God himself. Otherwise, serious problems affect one's personal ministry and relationship with God. The following problems may and often do occur in the lives of ministerial priests who lose the sense of their relationship with God as his servants, ministers, and instruments of grace.

Who Is the Priest on the Ground?

Since the priest is configured to Christ as head and bridegroom, then as with conjugal love, he must learn how to become one in mind and heart with the people to whom he ministers. What kind of work they do, how many are married, divorced, single, retired, ill, or in rest homes? Likewise, he has to keep abreast of his people's culture, their neighborhood, city,

and country, to know what is on their minds so that he can tailor his conferences or homilies and advice by tying into their worries, joys, or perplexities. He needs to know when and how to cajole, correct, inspire, and encourage. He may be a chaplain to a prison, an army base, and any number of apostolates besides being a parish priest. Still, he is a kind of bridegroom to those people, his bride, analogously speaking. However, he also needs to know his limits by taking his day off, relaxing with friends, reading, or enjoying the fine arts, lest daily tensions become excessive and lead him to be aggressive, ignore some important aspects of his ministry, or avoid decisions he needs to make.

Just as conjugal love has a certain totality about it, so the priest must learn to love his people for their sake and not to look upon them for what he can receive from them. He has to give his heart and soul without demanding or expecting a corresponding return for his efforts. In fact, he may feel unloved and even unwanted, but he is more interested in bringing his portion of the people of God to God, even if some or many reject his efforts. He is much like a lifeguard who tries to save people from drowning even as they do battle against him. This is a total giving of self, requiring many assisting graces when he feels unwanted or suffers push-back from segments of his people.

Responsible spiritual parenthood for the priest means that he learns to take into consideration his limitations as a human being—physical, economic, psychological and social. Since he is not God, he must recognize that he cannot solve all moral or spiritual problems of his people or compel them to do good and avoid moral evil. He has only intelligent speech to persuade those under his charge. He tries to do the best he can to inspire those under his care to fulfill their vocation to holiness and accomplish their mission even when he is not himself perfect.

Some Personal Obstacles Hindering Priestly Ministry¹

The more a priest focuses on himself, the more he seeks and demands attention, praise, and honor, the more he will be unable to take reasonable and often valuable criticism of his decisions in ministry from others, since his critics are felt to be beneath him in his estimation. Exaggerating his priestly talents for liturgy, preaching, and administration increases his

¹ I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Darren M. Slade, whose analysis of narcissism has enabled me to understand more deeply the problem of vainglory, even though narcissism is a mental illness (gcr.org/post/narcissism).

confidence to show why his collaborators are incompetent. He thinks he truly knows what is best for the common good of his collaborators in the ministry. Agreeing with his judgments is the ticket to gaining his confidence. Furthermore, he does all he can to avoid criticism, by either withdrawing from or harshly treating those with whom he works.

The priest full of himself becomes overly dogmatic about his policies, such that he does not listen to other perspectives from his lay or priestly associates. Disagreement with his policy is looked upon as an attack on his alleged brilliance, with the consequence of isolating his thinking, so that he becomes unable to treat opposing views on practical matters as worth listening to. This has the effect of isolating him from his partners, who seem not to give him personal loyalty when he is contradicted. By means of outbursts, or even controlled use of anger, the self-centered priest demands from his collaborators complete obedience to his decisions.²

In other words, some priests want praise and honor for all their good works, especially their homilies, writings, and advice given when hearing confessions. When an individual priest does not receive such affirmation, he tends to place his people or collaborators in black-and-white categories, or either-or pigeonholes, being unable to see nuances, shades of grey in practical matters and the virtues of his people.

Others have a keen mastery for creating a persona, giving off a false image of their holiness as spiritual models for others. Often, this leads to expressing false emotions to others. When phoniness becomes laced into his character, he can never be a real person who can admit he can be wrong, or make mistakes in judgment or admit his failures to himself because he fears he will give an impression of weakness to others: just a fallible leader rather than the superstar he wishes other to think of him.

Further, self-centered clerics can be too strict about small matters in ministry, where accidentals take on an undue importance. This can lead to shaming his collaborators if his wishes seem not to be complied with when disagreements emerge. If he requires excessive admiration, he will be extremely sensitive to criticism. Such criticism often leads to social withdrawal or an appearance of humility. Likewise, this attitude is associated with obvious attention-seeking behavior. These self-centered traits are frequently found in those who introduce and participate in liturgical innovations.

When these habits expand in the heart of a priest, then one or more

² See Paul Vitz, "Messing with the Mass: The problem of priestly narcissism today," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, November 2007.

of his collaborators whose opinions are not in sync with his may become severely abused verbally in front of others. This is his sign of projecting his authority with humiliating words. This can especially occur when the priest is experiencing minor or major dissent about his decisions, leading him to over-react as the Rule of St. Augustine expresses it: “Making a mountain out of a mole-hill.” Furthermore, there is a lack of empathy, an unwillingness to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others, resulting in humiliating others.³

The Antidote to Vainglory

In order to grow in the Christian life—that is, to become more aware of God’s presence and love, and to accomplish his plans in one’s particular mission within one’s vocation—it is helpful to know by faith what takes place when God gives someone sanctifying grace. The *Catechism* in various places teaches that sanctifying grace removes original and personal sin, whether grave or light, and infuses into the soul not only theological virtues and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, but also the cardinal virtues. The Holy Trinity resides in a person’s soul at the same time. All these ineffable gifts become intensified over a lifetime as a person receives the sacraments of the Church and accomplishes God’s manifest will.⁴

A problem occurs when vainglory or the excessive desire for honor and praise is not kept in check by a priest who is popular as a preacher or confessor or administrator. It is faith which keeps him realizing that all the good he does come from God as the primary cause and himself as the secondary cause. On the other hand, only he is the primary cause of his sins. To set up a counter-attack against this temptation to exult in himself when he is a success as a priest, it is necessary for him to have a grasp of the teaching of the Church on grace and the capital vices as taught by many doctors of the Church, including St. Thomas Aquinas, the common doctor of them all.

St. Thomas teaches that Christians in the state of sanctifying grace possess in the depths of their souls the three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. According to Sacred Scripture and Tradition, God the Son and Holy Spirit are sent to the human race with sanctifying grace by God the Father (who comes but is not sent). The Holy Spirit is sent by God the

³ For a more expansive discussion of vainglory and pride, see Basil Cole, O.P., *Angelic Virtues and Demonic Vices: Aquinas’s Practical Principles of Reaching Heaven and Avoiding Hell* (Charlotte, NC: Tan, 2023).

⁴ Denzinger-Hünermann [DH] (43rd ed., Ignatius Press, 2012) no. 1528.

Father together with the Son, as averred in the Nicene Creed, which professes faith in “the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” These two missions of the triune God are infused into the human soul in the state of grace. Since the two persons do not exist independently from God the Father, the whole Trinity indwells the human person divinized by grace. That they truly exist in the soul is known only by faith.⁵ St. Thomas expresses it in the following manner:

The soul is made like to God by grace. Hence for a divine person to be sent to anyone by grace, there must needs be a likening of the soul to the divine person Who is sent, by some gift of grace. Because the Holy Spirit is Love, the soul is assimilated to the Holy Spirit by the gift of charity: hence the mission of the Holy Spirit is according to the mode of charity. Whereas the Son is the Word, not any sort of word, but one Who breathes forth Love. Hence Augustine says (*De Trin.* 9.10): “The Word we speak of is knowledge with love.” Thus the Son is sent not in accordance with every and any kind of intellectual perfection, but according to the intellectual illumination, which breaks forth into the affection of love, as is said (John 6:45): “Everyone that hath heard from the Father and hath learned, cometh to Me,” and (Psalm 38:4): “In my meditation a fire shall flame forth.” Thus Augustine plainly says (*De Trin.* 4.20): “The Son is sent, whenever He is known and perceived by *anyone*.” Now perception implies a certain experimental knowledge; and this is properly called wisdom [*sapientia*], as it were a sweet knowledge [*sapida scientia*], according to Sirach 6:23: “The wisdom of doctrine is according to her name.”⁶

The reader will notice that Thomas relates the two missions as similitudes of the two processions within God, not changes within the unity of the Trinity. This means that neither procession is a change from potency to act, as if the godhead was a kind of material cause; these persons coming forth within God from all eternity are beyond and above human experience, since God is absolutely immutable.

The more the priest (deacon and bishop as well) lovingly ponders both the perfections of the divine essence and the properties of each divine

⁵ DH nos. 1678, 1915.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2 (trans. from newadvent.org).

person (limited as these concepts are), the more he understands that both he and the people he serves are mysteries of faith. Each person has a special relationship to the unity of the one God, having been created by God, and necessarily also to the three dynamic persons within this transcendent unity, because of the real outpouring of grace, but in differing degrees to individual persons. Therefore, priests are meant to awaken the people of God to the divine treasure they possess inwardly when in the state of grace, and which is lost only due to mortal sin.

The same does not apply to the characters of baptism and confirmation, or the marriage bond between the baptized. These truths about the one God and three persons point to realities here in this life that are above and beyond reason, though not against reason. The Trinity does not become incarnate in the baptized. Both priest and people are always in need of grace because they are sinners. Further, the Trinity is not composed of three gods.

Knowing something of the mysterious essence of God is negative knowledge, that is, knowledge of what God is not. This means that God is not finite, not in time, not changeable, not measurable, greater than we can think about. As for any perfection we know of this life, we can say that God, whose essence is to exist, is infinite truth, goodness, and beauty. But these characteristics are without limitations and so are beyond our minds to fully grasp and experience. Since God is without limitations, he is also omnipotent, omnipresent, transcendent, and immanent simultaneously to creatures. Being incomprehensible and immeasurable, no human concept can fully grasp God's knowledge, love, and providential decisions about human beings; our knowledge of the One God and three persons, based on revelation, still needs formulas, deficient but true, to be fully clarified only in the beatific vision, even though not completely comprehended even by anyone in heaven except God himself. He is triune in unity and one in the Trinity.

Knowing Something of the Divine Persons

All the divine attributes pertaining to God's intellect are referred to the Son, and those of his will to the Holy Spirit. This has to do with "appropriations." Appropriation of an attribute of the Trinity to one person in particular is asserted *as if* it belonged exclusively to one person. This is because, from our point of view, there is an affinity or similitude between an attribute of the godhead and a property of a divine person. The key is "as if," and appropriations are called "notions" of a particular person in the

Blessed Trinity. Prior to divine revelation, the divine personality of the triune God was hidden. Each person is really distinct from the others as persons, yet one with the other persons in essence. Further, the property of “being sent” does not imply subordination or dependency, nor is it the same as appropriations.⁷

Each divine person has its own exclusive personal property, since each person qua person is unique but possesses the same entire essence. Yet an attribute of the essence of the godhead may have an affinity to a particular person’s relationship to the other persons. Traditionally omnipotence is applied to God the Father, since he is the principle of the other two persons without a principle himself. Beauty and mediation are appropriated to the God the Son, who contains the forms of all created things as well as the being redeemer of the human race. The Holy Spirit is love because he is the love of the Father and the Son.⁸

What has this to do with being a deacon, priest, or bishop? All the ranks of holy orders are first of all configured to the humanity of Christ: priest, prophet, and king.⁹ They bring divine life to others according to the powers of their own rank, thereby elevating human beings to the tremendous mystery of God beyond their natural human selves. However, as differing ranks, the deacon represents Jesus as servant but the priest and a bishop possess the fullness of holy orders and represent the very person of Jesus as priest, prophet, and king, who pour out divine life in accordance with their rank through all the sacraments.¹⁰ These three ranks of holy orders together are thereby a sign of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of divine life.

Knowledge About God Is Not Enough

These theological words concerning God’s attributes and the persons’ properties and appropriations are very helpful for the priest’s attitude regarding his relationship with the triune God and the people he serves, who are the Mystical Body of Christ. However, it is false to think that merely studying sacred truth will necessarily produce the divine love of charity. In addition to studying, he must lovingly ponder and pray over these truths about God, even though they are obscure. Nevertheless, acts of admiration and personal manifesting of a love of God, together with personal intimate prayer coupled with gratitude, strengthens the priest’s

⁷ *ST I*, q. 43, aa. 1–8.

⁸ *ST I*, q. 37, aa. 1–2.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] §1581.

¹⁰ CCC §309.

resolve to put aside vainglorious thoughts about his talents or successes. He slowly begins to realize that he is only a secondary and instrumental cause of doing God's work. With this in mind, his priestly ministry will be facilitated by humility. Likewise, when he feels a failure to move his penitents or parishioners to a deeper level of loving and serving God, this truth of the indwelling is consoling and enables him to accept his setbacks and learn patience from them. In his commentary on *The Divine Names*, St. Thomas makes the following observations concerning why this mystery of God's intelligibility is so:

For the evidence of which it must be considered that names, since they are imposed by us, so signify according as things fall in our knowledge. Since therefore this very what-God-is itself is above our knowledge, as has been shown, yet our knowledge is commensurate with created things; names imposed by us do not so signify according as they correspond to the divine excellence, but according as they apply to the existence of created things.¹¹

Further Aquinas teaches:

This therefore is the first mode of the namings of God, through the negation of all things, the reason being that he is above all things, and whatever is signified by whatever name is less than what God is, because he exceeds our knowledge, which we express through names imposed by us.¹²

This obscurity of God's nature is due to an excess of intelligibility of divine attributes and properties, which go beyond human sense knowledge and human reason. The negative knowledge of the priest knows more of what God is not than what he is, and this prevents him from thinking that the triune God is limited. Human concepts about divine realities are sense-based and signified in human concepts; but as applied to God, they are transcendent and absolutely one. Pondering reason finds similitudes for understanding God. Notwithstanding the obscurity of faith, still these contents of faith are absolutely certain, since the truth revealed by God does not deceive. Moreover, making acts of faith may lead to a greater

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In Dionysii se divinis nominibus*, chap. 1, lec. 1, no. 29 (trans. Aquinas Institute at aquinas.cc).

¹² Aquinas, *In Dionysii se divinis nominibus*, chap. 1, lec. 3, no. 84.

intensity of grace; or as Aquinas related, they can “break forth into the affection of love.” As he explains in this commentary on *The Divine Names*:

There is not in the present speech the intention that the very supersubstantial substance of God, according as he exists supersubstantially in his own self, should be manifested, that is, in order that the essence of God should be known, for this cannot be explicated by speech nor grasped by our knowledge: for whatever our intellect apprehends is less than the essence of God, and whatever our tongue speaks is less than the divine being, nor can the divine essence be manifested perfectly to each created intellect such that it should comprehend it; but it exceeds the union itself of the intellects of the blessed, who see the essence of God through the union of their intellects to the very essence of God: for although they see this very what-God-is, nevertheless the perfection of vision is not as great as is the perfection of divine being itself and as is the perfection of the vision by which God sees himself.¹³

Since a divine mission to the human person implies the origin of the person who is sent, and God’s indwelling by grace, and if we speak of mission according to origin, then in this sense the Son’s mission is distinguished from the mission of the Holy Spirit, as generation (God from God, begotten not made) is distinguished from passive procession, the property of the Holy Spirit who is not generated by the Father but is breathed from the Father together with the Son (who proceeds from the Father and the Son). St. Thomas further distinguishes:

Since mission implies the origin of the person Who is sent, and His indwelling by grace if we speak of mission according to origin, in this sense the Son’s mission is distinguished from the mission of the Holy Ghost, as generation is distinguished from procession. If we consider mission as regards the effect of grace, in this sense the two missions are united in the root which is grace, but are distinguished in the effects of grace, which consist in the illumination of the intellect and the kindling of the affection. Thus it is manifest that one mission cannot be without the other, because neither takes

¹³ Aquinas, *In Dionysii se divinis nominibus*, chap. 5, lec. 1, no. 6094.

place without sanctifying grace, nor is one (divine) person separated from the other.¹⁴

Intensification of One's Intimacy with God

Now a question must necessarily be: how can study of these truths concerning the triune God break forth into the theological virtue of charity? St. Thomas teaches that this effect, and even growing in this intimacy with God, must first, but not exclusively, come from meditation and contemplation, by which one truly understands and savors the meaning of the many truths about the mystery of God. Even though this knowledge of God is only partial and incomplete, it can inspire the priest to manifest his love for God and to realize his role of dependence on God, who is transcendent. Hence, it becomes clearer why there was a need for God to become incarnate, namely, to help humans think about God in a more human manner, since not everyone can ponder in an abstract way. For, as Aquinas teaches in the *Summa theologiae*:

“Devotion” comes from “vowing” or “devoting” [devotio dicitur a devovendo], and so the ones who are called “devout” are those who devote themselves to God so as to submit themselves totally to Him. For this reason, in times past among the Gentiles the ones who were called “devout” were those who devoted themselves to their idols unto death for the sake of saving their army, as Titus Livius reports about the two Decii.

Hence, devotion seems to be nothing other than a sort of willing [voluntas] to hand oneself over promptly to whatever has to do with the service of God. Hence, Exodus 35:20–21 says, “The multitude of the children of Israel offered their first fruits to the Lord with a prompt and devout mind.”

Now it is obvious that willing to do promptly whatever pertains to serving God is a certain specific act. Hence, devotion is a specific act of the will.¹⁵

¹⁴ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 43, a. 5, ad 3.

¹⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 1 (trans. Alfred J. Freddoso; available at www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC-part2-2.htm, and forthcoming in print from the Aquinas Institute).

Further, another question emerges: how does one acquire this infused virtue in the practical order? Again, Aquinas replies:

The extrinsic and principal cause of devotion is God, of whom Ambrose says in *Super Lucam*, “God calls those whom He deigns to call, and He renders religious those whom He wants to, and if He had willed it, He would have made devout Samaritans out of those who were not devout.” However, on our part the intrinsic cause has to be meditation, or contemplation. For it has been explained (a. 1) that devotion is a certain act of the will directed toward a man’s handing himself over promptly to the service of God. But every act of the will proceeds from some sort of thought [consideratio], because the object of the will is an understood good [bonum intellectum]. This is why in *De Trinitate* Augustine says that the will arises from intelligence. And so it must be the case that meditation is a cause of devotion, viz., insofar as it is through meditating that a man conceives of handing himself over to the service of God.¹⁶

Even though devotion is an act of the will, it is the pondering mind which in turn motivates the will to surrender one’s self to the service of God not only in worship but in one’s daily grind. St. Thomas explains:

There are two kinds of thoughts about the Triune God that lead one to hand himself or herself over to the service of God: The first has to do with God’s goodness and His gifts [est ex parte divinae bonitatis et beneficiorum ipsius]—this according to Ps 72:28 (“It is good for me to adhere to God, to place my hope in the Lord God”). And this thought excites love [excitat dilectionem], which is a proximate cause of devotion. The second, having to do with the man, is his thinking about his own defects, because of which he needs to rely on God—this according to Ps 120:1–2 (“I have lifted my eyes to the mountains, from whence help will come to me. My help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth”). And this sort of thought drives out presumption, by which one is prevented from subjecting himself to God as he relies on his own strength [dum suae virtuti innititur].¹⁷

¹⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 2.

¹⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 3.

These teachings of St. Thomas can be applied to any state in life and not merely the clerical or religious state because they have to do with stirring up one's will to accomplish one's responsibilities in conjunction with God's will for a particular person in his or her vocational state of life. Fulfilling one's manifest responsibilities is an essential part of one's vocation; thereby, when accomplished under grace, it can potentially intensify one's more conscious union with God. In the reply to the first objection of the same article, Thomas clarifies practically what is involved:

It is thinking about things that are apt to excite love for God that causes devotion. By contrast, thinking of anything which is irrelevant to this and which distracts one's mind prevents one from subjecting himself to God as he relies on his own strength [*dum suae virtuti innititur*].¹⁸

In the next objection of the same article, Thomas maintains that thinking about Christ's divinity excites divine love and devotion also, but due to human limitations, more often than not, thinking about his humanity will spur one to accomplish one's destiny as much as pondering his divinity. Again Aquinas explains:

Whatever pertains to [Christ's] divinity is such that in its own right it excites love to the highest degree and, as a result, excites devotion, since God is to be loved above all things. But because of the human mind's weakness, the mind is such that just as it needs to be led by the hand by certain sensible things known to us to the cognition of divine things, so too it needs to be led by the hand to the love of divine things. The most important of these sensible things is the humanity of Christ, since in a Preface [for Christmas time] it says, "... in order that when we know God visibly, we are thereby caught up in the love of what is invisible." And so things that belong to Christ's humanity especially excite devotion, in the manner of being led by the hand, even though devotion has to do principally with those things that belong to His divinity.¹⁹

Given the fact that true devotion to the triune God strengthens the theological virtues, which immediately unite one to God, it further helps

¹⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 3, ad 1.

¹⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 3, ad 2.

both priest and layperson as well to grow in the moral virtues associated with one's particular vocation. This is because such felt knowledge of divine realities, even though only inklings of the great mystery of the inner life of God, becomes a motivating factor for sacrificing oneself for the good of individual persons in family, work, or parish for the priest, as well for the common good of the Church herself.

God's substantial essence is absolute in being. But within the Deity are persons relative to each other and really distinct from one another because they are persons of the one God, the greatest mystery of faith regarding God's unity and triplicity. Therefore, it seems even more necessary that the priest become more attuned to this sacred doctrine about the triune God. Thomas reminds his readers that the principal cause of devotion is meditating on the triune God. This normally has consequences for the priest, since he knows how dependent he is on God rather than himself.

This action of meditation or contemplation by the priest enables him to keep a sense of reference to the mystery whom he represents, namely, the person of Christ Jesus, true God and true man. This divine person is not exclusively alone or apart from his Father or his Loving Holy Spirit, but is simultaneously united to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit because he is the Word incarnate. The Son of God is Son because of his special relationship to the Father as proceeding from the Father, the fount of divinity. Likewise, the Word has a special relationship with the Holy Spirit, since together with the Father, he spirates the Holy Spirit, the bond of love between himself and God the Father. At the same time, all three persons are one in essence while distinct as individual persons. The Father qua Father is not the Son qua Son, and together, they are not the Holy Spirit qua Holy Spirit. This triune-ness does not exist as something created, because each person subsists as the one God, not three gods. This real but true knowledge has practical consequences for a priest's spiritual life.

Practically speaking, this means that a priest's meditations and contemplations lead him to loving the Church by his senses, intellect, and will, as well as thinking about the mystery that he serves the sacrament of the Church, or the bride, and the Mystical Body, of Christ. This is not a philosophical theory, but a truth of his daily life. The gift of his body and soul in celibacy means giving his time and energy to prayer, counseling, and other social communications. Even taking care of his diet and the need for physical exercise is also part of his priestly work. He cannot shun or disregard his body without in some way insulting the value of his ministry.

Practical Considerations

The priest makes Christ present as head of the community he services in his person, since he does the work of assisting in the redeeming of sinners and raising them up to become potential saints as well as glorifying God as best as he is able.

He uses his eyes and ears and so becomes able to sense the feelings of his parishioners and associates, and judge their readiness or lack thereof for apostolic action. Careful celebration of the sacraments requires many sensual realities: gesture, light, color, vocal pronunciation and music. He must touch others through anointings when he baptizes, confirms or gives the sacrament of the sick to those in danger of death. He must be comfortable doing this, and his meditations should motivate him such that his failures, fears, and anxieties are put to rest and he can continue being a spiritual father.

He uses his intellect and will, and so, must learn how to know and love the Church he serves as the Mystical Body of Christ. In order to serve his particular church and the universal Church, he must learn about her universality, while keeping up his study of sacred teaching. While knowledge is not love, it can motivate and give a sense of direction and service whether he experiences joys or sorrows or anxieties dealing with the people he serves. He is always Christ's and the Church's priest even though he may be tempted to think he were not—being a spouse when his parish or ministry may not please him, or a father when his children seem to demand too much of him. However, fidelity to his contemplative prayer will steady him.

Growing in perfection of the virtues involves growing in love with the Church as it is in the concrete, with all its sinful members. He is called to a greater perfection than others, since he is an instrument of Christ and his special representative in a new way by ordination. The Church and the Eucharistic Christ in the tabernacle are inseparably united.

The theology of the triune God cannot be fully comprehended even in the next life of heaven because, being infinite, only God can comprehend himself. Over the course of time, fuller glimpses of understanding all the mysteries of faith are obtained together with actualizing the virtues of prayer and study. But, the mystery remains hidden from him until the beatific vision. However, in heaven not even the Blessed Virgin Mary completely comprehends the eternal and infinite being of the godhead. The analogies used in this life to understand God in his oneness and threeness are true but do not go far enough to completely penetrate the infinite being

of God. Or, as St. Thomas reminds us, the similarity we discover in God with our earthbound concepts, the more our knowledge is dissimilar and obscure though true.

There should be an ever-growing intensity of union with God, both in the heart and in mind throughout the life of the priest. Thus, revealed truth of the triune God should be developing in his doctrinal understanding. Trinitarian Truth itself does not change, but a priest's further understanding of his faith should develop both conceptually and affectionately, thereby advancing, deepening and strengthening his apostolic outreach. When this happens, then his priesthood, like conjugal love in the married state, tends toward a totality. This means, when he prostrated himself before the bishop, he made a total gift of himself to God and the Church. His is a full-time work without undue reservations or selfish calculations. His celibate love is not only an echo calling to a deeper relationship with Christ but also a special personal friendship with the Church realized in the concrete together with other imperfect priests, his bishop (or religious superior), and the faithful he serves.

The priest's relationship with the bishop or superiors is not to a peer, because it is hierarchical; yet he is also bound by friendship (*Lumen Gentium* §28). Being in a sacramental brotherhood, he must cooperate with others in his ministry, intellectual life and spiritual life, helping his fellow workers in their difficulties; practicing hospitality, and sharing goods and praying for those who may have failed; these are further earmarks of his priesthood. He is also a brother to the laity while being a father, distinct properties yet united, because he is completely consecrated to sacred things: his tasks are chosen for him by God ordinarily through his legitimate superiors, including opportunities to serve the needs of others, both spiritual and sometimes even physical, that go with his particular ministry. At other times, he receives inspirations from the Holy Spirit to serve the needs of others beyond those of his current assignment but not in contradiction thereto.

Once the bishop lays hands on a seminarian and confers holy orders, the man becomes configured to Christ—priest, prophet, and king—as an icon of Christ with radiating sacramental powers that have a certain fullness in cooperation with the bishop of a diocese. As a person endowed with any one of the three degrees of holy orders, he represents both the Lord Jesus and the triune God who forgives sin, brings many sacramental graces to others, strengthening their relationship to the Lord Jesus during the many phases of their lives in the world or in the cloisters of religious. Since the priest is ordained for others, his divine powers and other charisms are

outward reaching. By vocation, all priests are called to develop a personal intimacy with each person of the Trinity based on the specific divine properties of each person in the depths of their unity in being.

The words “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” signify more than we humans can understand, but given the teachings of the Church about them, what has been asserted about the distinction of persons is sufficient. Both clerics and laypersons can nestle in each divine person during prayer and contemplation, while at the same time not fall into tritheism as if each person were a god really distinct from one another, or three gods. Why is this faith knowledge so important?

Since those in holy orders, like the tri-personal God the creator and redeemer, as humble instruments pour out divine life and assisting grace to others for their growth in the theological and moral virtues. Some persons are more open to God’s gifts while others less so, hence a share. More often clerics may also transmit assisting or actual graces by their preaching, lectures, counseling, and writing.

Conclusions

Just as conjugal love is faithful and exclusive by reason of the marital bond, so the priest has a special bond with his superiors who also represent Christ and the whole Church by his promise of obedience to the bishop (proportionally to abbots or provincials), who has the fullness of holy orders. A priest’s exclusive relationship to the Church is an image of Christ’s fidelity to his Church. It allows him to trust the Church and the Church to trust him as well, in so far as it is humanly possible.

Likewise, as conjugal love is fruitful with children, so the priest is to bring forth the spiritual fruit of conversions, to bring back those who have lapsed, and to channel an increase of grace to the more fervent members of his flock. These witness to the fruitfulness of Christ. In Christ, priests know that each is a kind of father and even mother of his communities. His offspring, like that of any parent, is not his own. He cannot and must not dominate the parish or other ministries as if he were the primary cause of the health of the parish.

The priest is to make available the sacrament of reconciliation and aid those seriously ill with the sacrament of the sick. He also prepares couples to receive the sacrament of marriage. He needs to remind people that they have a vocation to holiness as he does, but have differing missions within their vocation. Encouraging the special vocation to the priesthood, to the

permanent diaconate, and to the consecrated life is also a high priority for increasing the fruitfulness of his people.

Finally, if conjugal love is faithful and exclusive until death, then the priest as bridegroom and father must be faithful to his calling despite temptations to give up or cease explaining and defending the full teaching of the faith. The temptation to simply compliment his people or to water down or ignore both the moral teachings and the “last things” of the Catholic faith undermines his fidelity to Christ and the Church. Being part of a diocese and deanery, he has to learn to think with his bishop and fellow priests in important practical matters requiring cooperation and obedience. He belongs to something deeper than his own parish, and being there at diocesan meetings to contribute manifests his fidelity.

Then, the priest may realize more profoundly in principle that the divine life of which he is the minister makes him similar to the outpouring of the three-personed Divine Life that is God. Whereas the Father communicates totally his deity to the Son, and together with the Son totally communicates their godhead to the Holy Spirit, the priest, according to his rank, is an instrument who gives people a share in God’s inner life. This shared divine life first given in baptism and restored when lost by mortal sin by the sacrament of reconciliation, simultaneously brings the presence of the Holy Trinity to their souls, given the right intentions or desires in the receivers. Sanctifying grace makes a person god-like on a transcendent level, more than simply being a created image and likeness of God.

If the priest is to become humble so as not to exaggerate his talents and capacities, he also has to take into account his own abilities, capacities, and resources together with his limitations, as well as those of the people to whom he ministers. Therefore, he cannot have too many projects not immediately related to his ministry. What his people may need may not be possible to be given because of his lack of talent or a low intensity of desire among the people he serves. This is called responsible supernatural parenthood, which implies a respect and awareness of God’s design for the priest and those whom he serves. This means that he recognizes his duties toward God, the Church, his spiritual children, and society itself in a correct hierarchy of values.

Furthermore, a priest is not a free agent, but a member of the hierarchical Church, and must act according to the Church’s design. He has a certain freedom to act, but always in harmony with his bishop and the pope. This harmony is in part caused by obedience to those in authority and to God himself. In his teaching and discipline, he is directed by the

Church's own teaching and discipline. At the same time, he is bound to be available to the creative movements of God who prompts priests to seek his guidance. N.V.