

Aquinas on the Priest: Sacramental Realism and the Indispensable and Irreplaceable Vocation of the Priest

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The Priest as Head, Shepherd, and Bridegroom

THE CHURCH today uses biblical language to describe the unique identity of the Catholic priest. Aquinas uses another biblical term to define the priest: mediator. He finds warrant for this usage in the New Testament book that offers the most explicit instruction on the priest and on which Aquinas was one of the few medieval theologians to comment: The Letter to the Hebrews. Aquinas explores the grace to be a priest through the prism of the place that the priest occupies within the ecclesial community: Christ brings divine gifts to men, and he reconciles the human race to God.¹ Aquinas identifies mediation with the special *character* that the sacrament of Holy Orders confers on the priest.² Thus the subtitle for this essay: Sacramental Realism. To understand what is real about the sacraments, we first need to recall why we need sacraments.

“Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause.”³ More than 35 years ago, these words were written by the American author, Flannery O’Connor. Were she alive today, Miss O’Connor no doubt would have dropped the qualifier “secular.” For she would have discovered that not a few

¹ See *Summa theologiae* IIIa q. 22, art. 1.

² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1582.

³ Quotations from Flannery O’Connor are taken from her collection of letters published under the title, *Habits of the Heart*.

Catholic theologians spread the belief that there is no cause “in the actual life we live” for Redemption.

This realization of our present circumstances should especially concern the priest and the seminarian. The priest discovers his *raison d'être*, his very cause for being, in the Redemption. Everything that he does is meant either to draw men to the Redemption or to strengthen the Redeemed in their grace. Were Jesus Christ not the sole Redeemer of the world, the priesthood would represent a heartless joke. Men giving everything up in order to sustain an illusion.

It is true that even widespread beliefs, whoever sows them, about the absence of a cause for Redemption can not eliminate the Redemption won by Christ. Nor can it eliminate the need for priests. The “cause” remains whether we recognize it as a cause or not. What is more important, the Redemption won by the Blood of Christ remains whether one receives it or not. In like manner, the priesthood abides whether people recognize the need for it or not. It has been held that God will never allow the priesthood to disappear. There will always be someone on the face of the earth to hand on to a next generation what he himself has received from the Apostles.

In God's providence, the Church in the United States has not reached the point where one has to search for an authentic bearer of the apostolic tradition. Most dioceses and clerical religious institutes still celebrate priestly ordinations annually. Indeed, recent reports indicate a very small increase in the number of priests and seminarians. Those, however, who today present themselves for priestly ordination must confront the general circumstance that Flannery O'Connor has observed, even as they display by their willingness to become priests her buoyant optimism founded on a key truth of Catholic and divine faith. She expresses this conviction with the clarity that poets achieve: “I think that the Church is the only thing that makes the terrible world we are coming to endurable.”

It belongs especially to the priest to ensure that the people of each generation recognize that the Church is the only thing that makes this terrible world endurable and that they proceed to embrace her rule, her teachings, and her sacraments. The priest accomplishes this sacred mission when, as Head, he governs effectively that portion of the Church confided to his care. He realizes this objective when, as Shepherd, he teaches clearly the full truth about the moral life. He completes this vocation when, as Bridegroom, he loves those for whose eternal well being he has been given responsibility. Without the legitimate exercise of divine governance prefigured in the “dominion” over creation that God confided to Adam, the world would not be a better place, as the secular

myth suggests, it would return to the original chaos. Without sound instruction in the moral life, the world would not discover greater freedom, as the secular myth suggests, it would, as another poet puts it, become a place of internecine warfare. Without priests who love people as Christ loves them, the world would just plain fall apart. Aquinas links the stability of the Christian religion and therefore of the world to the hypostatic union: "If," he says, "the human nature is not united to the Word in person, it would not be united at all. To hold this would be to abolish belief in the Incarnation and to undermine ("subruere") the entire Christian faith."⁴

What does this analysis inspired by Aquinas and Flannery O'Connor say about priestly formation and those who are involved immediately in enabling it? Miss O'Connor provides a clue to answer this question. She wrote in one of her letters, "If you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time you struggle to endure it." I don't know whether Flannery O'Connor had been exposed to the teachings of Saint Josemaria Escrivá. But the phrase "to cherish the world" reminds me of one of his better known essays, "On passionately loving the world." In any event, the message is clear: the priest must proceed with an eye to cherishing the world that he wants to redeem. He cannot lament the world. This axiom holds true however much the cause for Redemption in the actual lives that people live comes startlingly to his attention. Warrant for this posture is found at the end of the creation narrative: "And so it happened, God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good" (Gen 1:31). This goodness remains in the consummation of Christ's priesthood: for Christ, observes Aquinas who quotes Hebrews, "is a high priest of the good things that have come to be."⁵

Once the seminarian and priest begin to cherish the world, then they will discover the freedom to redeem the world. He will find the cause for Redemption in the lives that people live, that is, their sins, an invitation to preach to them the Good News of Jesus Christ. Above all, the priest will find new satisfaction in his vocation inasmuch as he will come to appreciate the indispensability of his Headship, his Shepherding, and his Bridal love in a world that mistakes power for authority, relativism for moral truth, and egoism for love. This noble vocation imposes grave responsibilities on those who aspire to it and who exercise what they have already received. Each must examine his conscience: does the responsible exercise of priestly authority suffer from my lack of fortitude? Does the charge to instruct in the moral life provide me with an excuse to tinker with moral

⁴ *Summa theologiae* III, q. 2, a. 2.

⁵ See *Summa theologiae* III, q. 22, a. 5, quoting Hebrews 9:11.

truth? Finally, the tough one. Does my pledge to love as Christ loves suffer diminishment when I find myself unloved? We will be helped in this particular examen on priestly virtue by a final instruction from Flannery O'Connor: "There is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism." Thomists surely may say the same about "Sacramental Realism."

The priest stands as a prophet of Christian realism. Indeed, O'Connor's phrase "nothing harder or less sentimental" affords, in my view, a glimpse into the reason that only the male of the species—"male and female he created them"—are admitted to priestly ordination. Women of course also must stand as witnesses to Christian realism. But they do it differently. Saint Scholastica wanted the consolation of her saintly brother for a little longer than he wanted to provide it. She prayed and God took her side. A down-pour came, and Saint Benedict and his monks could not return back up the hill to Monte Cassino. Gregory the Great records this incident in his *Dialogues*, his life of Benedict. He presents Scholastica as a bearer of the feminine genius *ante nomen*. Women also hold an indispensable and irreplaceable vocation in the world and in the Church. Their vocation, however, does not extend to the priesthood. Still, priest and seminarian can learn from Saints Benedict and Scholastica. We can imitate their measured, patient approach to the construction of the good. Europe was not tamed over night. But monasteries of men and women have left their mark on our civilization. After all, without Benedictine monasteries, it would be difficult to imagine what form the Church that priests are called to serve would take. We also would not today enjoy the same Thomas Aquinas that the Dominicans received. He came to them away from Monte Cassino.

The Priest and Preaching in the Church

The Church charges her bishops to preach the truth of the Gospel.⁶ Preaching therefore stands at the summit of the priest's daily activities inasmuch as the preaching of the Gospel precedes the confession of faith and the enactment of the sacraments. Preaching, faith, and sacraments establish the pattern of priestly life and devotion. Because diocesan priests form firstly and foremostly the collaborators with the local Bishop, the diocesan priest bears the responsibility of communicating to the world, especially to those in his parish, divine Truth. Within the limits established for him, no one else enjoys the authority to discharge this saving activity. The Church describes the task of the priest to preach divinely revealed truths about God and man as a *munus*—gift and burden. Aquinas observes that one etymology of the Latin word for priest, *sacerdos*, comes

⁶ See the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, §25.

from the two Latin words “sacra” and “dans.” The priest communicates sacred things, God’s things, divine gifts to the people. The background for this exegesis is found in Malachi 2:7: “The lips of the priest are to keep knowledge, and instruction is to be sought from his mouth.”

The Benedictine abbot, Blessed Columba Marmion (1858–1923), wrote once of the priesthood of Jesus Christ that it remains the case that the “privilege of this priesthood is to ensure the return of creation in its entirety to the Master of all things.”⁷ The thought is daunting. To return all that God made to him, the Master of all things. To restore. To transform. To elevate. These actions represent the privilege of Christ’s priesthood. “The return of creation in its entirety” occurs mystically each time that a priest celebrates the Eucharist. In a way that surpasses our understanding and which is generally ignored by contemporary theology and catechesis, each Mass (whether a congregation is present or not) effects a change in all that exists, the material world, the spiritual world, and the composite creature, man. At the altar, the priest touches every part of creation. When he enacts the Eucharistic transformation of those material elements that come from both the earth and the work of human hands, he makes everything that God created holy. So we pray in the Third Eucharistic Prayer: “Haec Hostia nostrae reconciliationis proficiat, quaesumus Domine, ad totius mundi pacem atque salutem.” May this sacrifice of our reconciliation, we beg you, Lord, advance the peace and well being of the whole world.

There exists a duty incumbent on the priesthood that precedes logically if not ontologically the celebration of the Eucharist. St. Paul signals this obligation when he exclaims: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!” The text is found at Romans 10:15. St. Paul refers to the feet of the priest, whereas the prophet Malachi refers to his lips. Both evoke a priest who brings to his people divine truth. Preaching is not ordered firstly and foremostly to stirring up the sentiments of believers, making hearts strangely warmed. It is not ordered to supply ersatz psychological counseling on how to get along in life without too much chagrin. It certainly is not ordered to providing your hearers with an Everyman’s guide to the academic exegesis of the text assigned to be proclaimed on a given day in the Church of Christ. Preaching is ordered to return creation to the Master. In its entirety. This challenge is more than daunting. Just think of all the things that go wrong. Think of the mistakes people make. Think of the errors that men try to validate. No wonder the priest can never go it alone. To return everything to the

⁷ See his *Christ, The Ideal of the Priest* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), chap. 1, p. 17.

Master, the priest must remain united with the Church. When the priest remains a faithful collaborator with his bishop, the “return” that preaching effects is accomplished infallibly. Again, Blessed Marmion: It remains the case that the “privilege of this priesthood is to ensure the return of creation in its entirety to the Master of all things.”

Why is preaching indispensable for the return of creation in its entirety to the Master of all things? To answer this question, we need first to consider another: What else besides the acceptance of a common truth can ensure harmony in creation? Whence comes the model for this harmony, this reconciliation of all things in Christ? The answer is simple. The divine Wisdom. The Logos. That is why this reconciling work falls to the Catholic priest. Only he is configured to the eternal Word by reason of the ontological bond that he enjoys with the Incarnate Son. So we must conclude that the communication of divine wisdom belongs to the priest by divine right. He is, if you will, ordained to preach. Contemporary discussions about lay preaching tend to miss this quite important point. Strictly speaking, there is no lay preaching in the Church of Christ. Only those configured to Christ receive the divine wisdom so that they can announce the good news. No wonder the late Pope John Paul II directs that the priest “approach the word with a docile and prayerful heart.”⁸ It remains the case that the “privilege of this priesthood is to ensure the return of creation in its entirety to the Master of all things.”

Preaching constitutes a burden for the priest. Restoring Babel is not easy. The Genesis (11:1–9) account of the Tower of Babel graphically illustrates the need for the “return of creation to the Master of all things” that the priesthood of Jesus Christ makes possible. “Let us then go down and there confuse their language, so that one will not understand what another says” (Gen 11:7). The collapse of Babel, note well, represents a fracture of truth only not a division of languages. Because after Babel men did not each behold the same truth, Babel sets men one against the other. Friendship is thus destroyed. By definition, friends see the same truth. The preaching of the Gospel is not ordered to restore the human race to a common language, if one ever existed, but to restore all people to a common truth. Pastoral charity, the third burden of the priest after preaching and the sacraments, is ordered to unite the human race in one friendship. Aquinas takes pains to point out that the priesthood of Christ not only removes the “*macula culpae*,” that is, the stain of sin that turns hearts away from God, but also satisfies the “*reatus poenae*,” that is, the liability for punishment that Christ’s atonement expiates.

⁸ See *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, §26.

Babel also represents the hubris of the human spirit. The specific arrogance expresses itself in the assumption that making progress justifies whatsoever human activity, even when the progress constitutes a presumption against the Master of all things. Thus the word of the Lord: “nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do” (Gen 11:6). Put into the language of today, Babel reveals the penchant in the human race to relativize truth and to let political power guide the course of world events. Political power both threatens and cajoles. No one is immune from its pull. So the words in the Gospel of Mark that Christ addresses to every Christian believer take on a special meaning for the priest and seminarian: “Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” (Mk 8:38). No priest should aspire to make Christ ashamed of him. For it remains the case that the “privilege of this priesthood is to ensure the return of creation in its entirety to the Master of all things.”

The Priest, Moral Instruction, and Reconciliation

The truth about human living and the moral guidance that is required to ensure that one lives a happy and godly life comes infallibly from the Church of Christ. Priests are ordained to serve as communicators of sound moral instruction. Again, Aquinas develops his theology of the priesthood from the text of Malachi, “Legem requirunt ex ore eius.” “They shall seek the law at his’—that is, the priest’s—‘mouth.’”⁹ No wonder that the Church reminds her pastors and bishops: “It is our common duty, and even before that our common grace, as pastors and bishops of the Church, to teach the faithful the things which lead them to God, just as the Lord Jesus did with the young man in the Gospel.”¹⁰ Moral instruction provides more than ethical guidance for individuals. The Church instructs nations about the Law of the Lord. The priest takes on the challenge of speaking the full truth about important goods such as human life, sexual activity, and the establishment of just relations among peoples and nations. Law and reconciliation. These are the occupations of the priest that Aquinas identifies as constitutive of priestly identity, the specific mediation of the priest. We should reflect on the nature of the priestly office as one of reconciliation. For “only priests who have received the faculty of absolving from the authority of the Church can forgive sins in the name of Christ.”¹¹

⁹ *Summa theologiae* III, q. 22, a. 1.

¹⁰ *Veritatis Splendor*, §114.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1495.

From time to time, we discover perspectives on Christian living that expose what is difficult in Christian virtue. The reason for this exposure may be found in the Passion of Christ. The whole Christian tradition describes the Passion and death of Christ as the most difficult of those deaths suffered for the sake of righteousness. Even when it may appear that other martyrs endured harsher or more painful deaths, the saints point out that Christ's sufferings remain the most exquisite inasmuch as he is a divine person. In his human nature, Christ experiences the sufferings of the cross to a maximal degree because of the unique sensitivity to truth and goodness that his human soul enjoyed. In the end, we confront the reality that human reason controls even the felt experience of suffering. The more refined the person, the more acute the sufferings.

Why did God surrender his Son to the most acute sufferings? One could hypothetically expose the same question by asking, "Why did not God avail himself of someone of reduced capacity to experience sufferings?" This of course was the case with the sacrifices and holocausts of the Old Law. The paschal lambs offered throughout the period of the old law did not enjoy the capacity to regret or, for that matter, to fear their fate. To reply to an objection that Christ is identified with none of the animals—buck goat, she goat, or calf—used under the old law as sin offerings, Aquinas refers to Origen's Commentary on John 6:33: "although various species of animals were offered under the Old Law, the morning and evening sacrifice offered each day was a lamb. This signified that the sacrifice of the lamb, that is of Christ, was to be the consummation of all other sacrifices."¹² God sends his very own Son, "the lamb of God" (Jn 1:29). A Lenten weekday preface calls to mind the motive for this redemptive Incarnation: "As we recall [during the season of Lent] the great events that gave us new life in Christ, you [Loving Father] bring the image of your Son to perfection within us." The "great events" that this preface refers to include the most bitter passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The short answer to why Christ had to endure the maximal sufferings in order to restore and to perfect in us his very own image is simple to state: the sin of Adam, the sin of nature, the original sin. Put more precisely, the magnitude of this original sin requires the maximal satisfaction. As Flannery O'Connor has reminded us, people forget easily about original sin. The problem, however, is this: original sin is one problem that oblivion does not make go away. It is at this juncture of sin and redemption that I like to locate the vocation of the priest, especially the diocesan priest who is obliged to confront the effects of original sin in the people confided to

¹² *Summa theologiae* III, q. 22, a. 4, ad 3.

his care. The prophetic burden of the Catholic priest is foreshadowed in the words of the prophet Daniel when he reminds the people of the old law: "Justice, O Lord, is on your side" (Dan 9:7). Daniel's prayer for mercy should ring fresh in our ears. Especially since we have One greater than Daniel here. "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Mt 9:13). Both Testaments bear witness to the truth that God's justice does not pass away. Jesus had to suffer the most because of the widespreadness of sin in the world. He had to suffer most because of the attachment to sin that remains even in the baptized. He had to suffer the most because people like you and me needed the very Savior that God in his mercy sent.

There is good news in Christ's most bitter sufferings for our sins: St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622), one of the first outstanding diocesan priests of the modern period, urges that whatever the degree or nature of our sins and shortcomings, we should not judge even ourselves. "Our Saviour has bequeathed the Sacrament of Penitence and Confession to His Church, in order that therein we may be cleansed from all our sins, however and whenever we may have been soiled thereby. Therefore, my child, never allow your heart to abide heavy with sin, seeing that there is so sure and safe a remedy at hand."¹³ The priest can announce this spiritual maxim with great profit. In fact, one could argue that a young man would want to spend his life telling people about the consolation that only Christ brings to the world and to themselves.

We are discussing the indispensable and the "irreplaceable" vocation of the diocesan priest in the life of the Church, as Pope Benedict has expressed it.¹⁴ Moral instruction remains indispensable to the happy lives of individuals, as well as the good ordering of the societies that people form. We have reflected on what is required of the Savior of the world to

¹³ St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 2, chap. 19.

¹⁴ "The Role of Priests Is Irreplaceable." Vatican City, 17 Sep 2009 (VIS)—"This morning in Castelgandolfo the Holy Father received a group of prelates from the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (Northeast 2), who have just completed their 'ad limina' visit. Highlighting the functions of the various members of the Church, the Pope explained how 'the particular identity of priests and laity must be seen in the light of the essential difference between priestly ministry and the "common priesthood." Hence it is important to avoid the secularisation of clergy and the "clericalisation" of the laity.' 'In this perspective,' he went on, 'the lay faithful must undertake to give expression in real life—also through political commitment—to the Christian view of anthropology and the social doctrine of the Church. While priests must distance themselves from politics in order to favour the unity and communion of all the faithful, thus becoming a point of reference for everyone.' Benedict XVI indicated that 'the lack of priests does not justify a more active and abundant participation of the laity. The truth is that the greater

rectify the disorders that sin introduces into us and into our communities. One reason for the practice of clerical celibacy is that the man who will go forth to combat Satan and his wiles needs himself a special source of spiritual strength that chaste celibacy provides.¹⁵ Celibacy sets a man apart. Or should. The celibate priest takes the time to discover the depth of what the Gospel teaches about human happiness. He becomes an expert in beatitude. So he is able to teach with authority, an authority that comes from his priestly ordination, about the happy life. Not only is he able, but he is bound. "It is our common duty, and even before that our common grace, as Pastors and Bishops of the Church, to teach the faithful the things which lead them to God, just as the Lord Jesus did with the young man in the Gospel."¹⁶ But the Lord does not only teach the way to happiness, he shows us the way to happiness in his own person, as Saint Thomas Aquinas says at the start of the *tertia pars* of his *Summa*. For the priest, this showing takes on special significance in the sacrament of Reconciliation. Priests are indispensable and irreplaceable for forgiving sins in the name of God, which is the only real form of forgiveness. For "only priests who have received the faculty of absolving from the authority of the Church can forgive sins in the name of Christ."¹⁷ Without this forgiveness readily available in the world, there is no imagining what will overtake the People of God and, ultimately, the human race.

The Priest, Communion, and the Eucharist

It is at the Eucharist that priests exercise in a supreme degree their sacred office.¹⁸ Christ confides to his priests the most sacred of the gifts that he bestows on his Bride, the Church. There is no greater dignity on earth

the faithful's awareness of their own responsibilities within the Church, the clearer becomes the specific identity and inimitable role of the priest as pastor of the entire community, witness to the authenticity of the faith, and dispenser of the mysteries of salvation in the name of Christ the Head. The function of the clergy is essential and irreplaceable in announcing the Word and celebrating the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. . . . For this reason it is vital to ask the Lord to send workers for His harvest; and it is necessary that priests express joy in their faithfulness to their identity."VIS 090917 (480).

¹⁵ At the 150th anniversary of the death of the Cure of Ars, which the Church is currently (2009–2010) commemorating with the Year for Priests, Benedict XVI indicated that St. John Mary Vianney "continues even now to be a model for priests, especially in living a life of celibacy as a requirement for the total giving of self, expressed through that pastoral charity which Vatican Council II presents as the unifying centre of a priest's being and actions."VIS 090917 (480).

¹⁶ *Veritatis Splendor*, §114.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1495.

¹⁸ See *Lumen Gentium*, §28.

than the one that a man receives when he is ordained. This dignity originates not in the man's own human qualities or even in his legitimately recognized virtues, but in the ability, sacramentally established, to bring God down to earth. The priest acts in the person of Jesus Christ. This vicarious activity requires that God unites the priest to the very Person of Christ in a way that the Church describes as "ontological." That is, in his very being. "In this bond between the Lord Jesus and the priest, an ontological and psychological bond, a sacramental and moral bond, is the foundation and likewise the power for that 'life according to the Spirit' and that 'radicalism of the Gospel' to which every priest is called today and which is fostered by ongoing formation in its spiritual aspect."¹⁹ More than anything else, this ontological bond is required because of the words that the priest and he alone can pronounce, "This is my body," "This is my blood." Aquinas places the priest and the Eucharist within the context of the Resurrection. When he asks whether the priesthood of Christ will remain forever, he replies to the objection that the saints no longer require the sacraments as follows: "The saints in heaven will have no further need of Christ's priestly atonement; yet they still depend on Christ, cleansed of their sins though they are, for their glory derives from him."²⁰

The liturgical readings assigned to the Easter season introduce us into the grace to be a priest. The mystery unfolds on two levels. One is historical: The Acts of the Apostles recounts the beginning of the Church. Therein the priest discovers his pedigree, his genealogy, his heritage: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). So replied Peter to the Sanhedrin when the latter tried to persuade the Apostles to stop proclaiming the power of the Risen Christ. It is from this apostolic witness that the priest finds his bearings. Because he receives from bishops what they themselves receive from the Apostles, the priest recognizes that his vocation makes no sense outside of the historical continuity that the Church enjoys with those who were witnesses to Christ's resurrection: "The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30). As a result, the Catholic priest finds himself inserted into a sacred history. He exists because of a grace that exists outside of history. Call it Resurrection time.

To live in Resurrection time means that the priest can never fully explain himself in purely historical, horizontal, temporal categories. After all, what is time? Simply a measure of motion. We learn this from Aristotle: "*Tempus nihil aliud est quam numerus motus secundum prius et*

¹⁹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, §72.

²⁰ *Summa theologiae* III, q. 22, a. 5, ad 1.

posterius.”²¹ Many things that the priest is counseled to observe reflect his unique, sacred, graced relationship to the temporal.

Celibacy of course affords the best example. The priest removes himself from the rhythms of marriage, in all their complexity, so that Christ’s people can encounter a man whose heart and mind are set exclusively on God, his Truth, his mysteries. People today do not talk much about celibacy for contemplation. The fact of the matter is that the Christian tradition considers it the principal reason for the Bishop and priest and monk to forego marriage. Marriage is a thing of this earth. Very much of this earth. Indeed, even the most sanctified of marriages remains of this earth. Married life is pleasurable, but it is also distracting from pondering those revealed truths that can only be received in the purity of faith.

Clerical attire is another. The priest dresses differently. Black suits and collars. Cassocks. Sacred vestments. This apparel is not a uniform. What the priest wears provides external signs of his priestly consecration. Removing them without a clear and compelling reason creates ambiguity in the minds of the people and, in all likelihood, in the mind of the priest. Evangelical “simplicity” is another.²² The priest lives outside the ordinary attachments of the consumer society inasmuch as he knows that his real treasure resides in a place that only the Resurrection allows entry. Ecclesial obedience also reveals that the priest cherishes his privileged relationship with the local bishop.

Once we understand the message of the Acts of the Apostles, we find ourselves in a position to say some of the things that the priest is not. In a word, he is none of those things whose existence depends exclusively on the temporal, that is, on the measure of motion. The priest is not a sociologist. Sociology represents one large effort to measure the collective motion of peoples. Informative though it may be, the priest cannot operate in sociological categories. They limit him, and eventually reduce him. This is not a hypothesis, but unfortunately the sad experience of those priests who, after the Second Vatican Council, wrongly assumed that the call to sanctify the saeculum, the temporal order, meant embracing mainly those categories intelligible only to the temporal order. The priest is not a politician. Politics is the art of governing the temporal order. Well, canon law reminds us that the priest is not a politician.²³ The one who exercises spiritual governance and headship cannot at the same time exercise civil governance. In the modern world at least, this arrangement does not work. Historians debate whether it once worked in the

²¹ See Aquinas’s *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*, lectio 17, no. 10.

²² See CIC, can. 282 ¶1.

²³ See CIC, can. 285 ¶3.

periods of caesaropapism. Note that it is not the pragmatism of modern politics that alone prohibits the priest from being a politician. The reason lies in the stricture that politics puts on walking in Resurrection time. No political authority enjoys access to “the one who comes from above” (Jn 3:31). The priest is not a psychological social worker. Modern psychology acknowledges solutions that are time-bound. Freud is criticized for having an archeology of the human psyche but not a teleology, an eschatology, and so no openness to transcendence. Much confusion exists about the place that psychology holds in Catholic life. This is the case because many of the words that psychologists employ are those that come from the Gospels: love, unity, peace, joy, even forgiveness, although this quality of soul is difficult for even well-trained psychologists to engender in those patients whose only hope remains here below. “The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things” (Jn 3:31).

The second level of the Easter mystery unfolds in St John’s Gospel. John the Evangelist. John the Divine. John whose symbol is the eagle because the ancients recognized that his revelations soar to the heights like the proverbial bird of Jove. The Gospel of John informs the priest about his true identity. The priest who dwells in Resurrection time is sent to reveal the Trinity. This is the lesson that Nicodemus discovered when he asked about rebirth. No rebirth in the order of nature, nothing of the temporal, no coming twice out of the womb. The rebirth that the priest brings comes in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism. Grace. Virtues, gifts, beatitudes. All the supernatural things, the gifts, that come from above. So the priest keeps his eyes set upon the Paschal mystery. He looks at the things that are above where the risen Christ measures, if there exists a measure, Resurrection time. “. . . for their glory derives from him.”²⁴

John the Divine is also John the Celibate. That’s why he receives Mary. That’s why he is the one to administer the sacraments to Mary. There exist representations of St. John the Evangelist giving holy communion to Mary. The privilege of the priest that surpasses all other considerations is the holy Eucharist. What psychologists seek to help people find, the Eucharist bestows through the hands of the priest. This is what the Church teaches: The Eucharist remains in this world the inalienable source of charity and unity. It is not a ritual act in which certain persons so inclined choose to participate. When the Mass is offered, the first beneficiary is God. He receives again the pleasing interior sacrifice of his only Son. From this sacrifice, flows the graces that the world needs to

²⁴ *Summa theologiae* III, q. 22, a. 5, ad 1.

survive. Peace and joy follow upon love and unity. Without one or the other, there is not a chance of any individual finding the tranquility of order or the permanent exhilaration that true joy produces in the human spirit. If there is a reason for why the diocesan priest is both indispensable and irreplaceable the foundation for this reason will be disclosed in the celebration of the Eucharist. Without the priest, there is no Eucharist. Without the Eucharist, the world cannot survive.

The Eucharist of course exists in time. The priest receives from the bishops the power to consecrate that Christ confided to his Apostles on the night before he died. But the Eucharist belongs to both levels of the Paschal mystery, that is, the one represented by the Acts of the Apostles as well as that represented by the Gospel of John. The Eucharist provides a pledge of eternal life. This pledge is more of a down payment than a promissory note. The more that the priest shapes the Christian people with his Eucharistic caring, the more the Christian community begins to look like a group ready for heaven. The more the human community soars, if you will. Like an eagle.

Celebrating the Eucharist reveals what is unique about the Catholic priest. Eucharistizing, sacrificing, celebrating the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood defines the man who wants to be a priest. So those who aspire to the priesthood must start by learning to love the Eucharist. Better to put oneself in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament for thirty minutes than to mull in your head, alone in your room for hours, whether one should be a priest or not. This pondering is also served by taking up the life of chaste celibacy now. Chastity in relationships to be sure. Purity, also, in conduct with one's person. Easter makes the thought that a young man can live without procuring sexual pleasure bearable. When the Lord, at night, undertakes his celebrated exchange with Nicodemus, he consoles him with the news that God's grace is both true and sufficient: "For the one whom God sent speaks the words of God. He does not ration his gifts of the Spirit" (Jn 3:34). Celibate love opens the heart of a man so that he remains as receptive as possible to the unrationed Spirit, so that a man once ordained abides in Resurrection time, so that the priest will announce to the world the one Truth that makes it endurable.

Unchastity and impurity becloud one's vision and sully one's hands. Neither circumstance renders a man well disposed to receive the Eucharist. Mortal sins prohibit receiving the Eucharist. In this discipline that the Church establishes for Eucharistic communion, we catch a glimpse of the profound sacramentality that the Eucharist exercises in the world. In a word, the Eucharist changes us. Unlike ordinary food that we assimilate,

the Eucharist is meant to assimilate us into its substance. When this happens, we find ourselves conformed to the Risen Lord. When this conformity that the sacraments of Easter, especially baptism, make possible reaches the whole world, we achieve the consummation of all things. It is worth more than one lifetime to become an irreplaceable instrument of a grace that is so indispensable. To forego wife and family is nothing compared to the supreme value that the spiritual man recognizes each time that he celebrates the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The Mass gives sacramental expression, as long as the Church remains a pilgrim, to the interior sacrifice of all those who belong to Christ. It is this interior sacrifice that abides for ever among the saints: "Now Christ, by his passion, won the glory of resurrection, not in virtue of the sacrifice of the victim, since this was done to make reparation for sin, but in virtue of the act of worship of his by which, under the influence of his love, he submitted with humility to his passion."²⁵ Aquinas could have given no better description of what the Roman Catholic priest is about. **N V**

²⁵ *Summa theologiae* III, q. 22, a. 4, ad 2.

