

German Episcopal Conference
Episcopal Commission for Priestly Formation

**THE IDENTITY OF THE PRIESTHOOD IN THE
*RATIO FUNDAMENTALIS INSTITUTIONIS SACERDOTALIS***

**DISCIPLESHIP DERIVED FROM BAPTISM AND
THE CONFIGURATION WITH JESUS CHRIST
IN THE HEART OF PRIESTLY FORMATION**

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INTRODUCTION

On behalf of Cardinal Beniamino Stella, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, and on behalf of the community of priests with whom I work in that Dicastery, I thank the German Episcopal Conference for your kind invitation to be with you for this meeting of the Commission on Priestly Vocations. It is a joy to gather with this Commission who are dedicated to the formation of priests and future priests, and to reflect on a common concern: priestly formation in Christ Jesus for the world of today.

1. MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD AT THE SERVICE OF THE OF THE BAPTISMAL PRIESTHOOD

The *RFIS* explains the passage from *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 10: *The ministerial priesthood is understood both in its own specific nature and in its biblical and theological foundations, as a service to the glory of God and to the brothers and sisters in their baptismal priesthood* (no. 31). As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains so well in paragraph 1547: ***the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood***. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church.

I cannot emphasize enough those words: “as a **SERVICE.**” In a reflection I gave recently on *The Foundations of Priestly Formation*, I said:

The ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood of the faithful and is complemented by it in the harmony of a one-and-only priestly people. This is why

the Catholic priest is neither, firstly or mainly, a boss or an authority, but a brother among brothers in the common priesthood, called, like all the faithful, to donate his life as a spiritual offering pleasing to the Father. At the same time he is sent to exercise a fatherly function in the service of authority.

The Lord Jesus identified Himself with the figure of the **Servant** of the prophet Isaiah as well as with the image of the **Shepherd**, and declared that He did not come *to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:28). The priest, who is configured by the sacrament of Holy Orders as another Christ, must always act according to this spirit, making his ministerial exercise a path of humble service and personal self-giving for the good of the people of God. Therefore, any form of **authoritarianism** or of **clericalism** is totally illegitimate and profoundly contrary to the evangelical values that he proclaims. Consequently, seminarians must be educated in the giving of themselves, ridding their hearts of every type of desire for domination.

The *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests* says so beautifully, *all authority is exercised in a spirit of service as **amoris officium** and unpretentious dedication for the good of the flock* (25).

*That **amoris officium** which the Lord committed to the pastors of his people, is in the strict sense of the term a **service**. It is entirely related to Christ and to men. It depends entirely on Christ and on his unique priesthood; it has been instituted for the good of men and the communion of the Church. The Sacrament of Holy Orders communicates a “**sacred power**” which is none other than that of Christ. The exercise of this **authority** must therefore be measured against the **model of Christ**, who by love made himself the least and the servant of all. “The Lord said clearly that concern for his flock was proof of love for Him” (CCC 1551).*

Pope Saint John Paul II says in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*:

*The ministerial priesthood does not of itself signify a greater **degree of holiness** with regard to the common priesthood of the faithful; through it Christ gives to priests, in the Spirit, a particular gift so that they can help the People of God to exercise faithfully and fully the common priesthood which it has received* (17).

It seems fitting in these days, to quote number 1550 of the *Catechism*:

*This presence of Christ in the minister is not to be understood as if the latter were **preserved from all human weaknesses**, the spirit of domination, error, and even sin. The power of the Holy Spirit does not guarantee all acts of ministers in the same way. While this guarantee extends to the Sacraments, so that even the minister’s sin cannot impede the fruit of **grace**, in many other acts the minister leaves human traces that are not always signs of **fidelity** to the Gospel and consequently can harm the apostolic fruitfulness of the Church* (1550).

In that same reflection I gave recently on *The Foundations of Priestly Formation*, I said: *Priestly formation implies a **process of configuration to Christ the Head, Shepherd, Servant and Spouse*** (Cf. *RFIS*, 35), which consists in a mystical identification with the person of Jesus, just as it is presented in the Gospels. This mystical process is a gift from God that will reach fulfilment through priestly ordination and constitutes a formative journey that will remain valid throughout all the ongoing formation. Every mystical gift demands the counterpart of ascetical practice, which is the human effort that follows the gifts of grace.

2. SOME FEATURES OF THE CONCILIAR INTERPRETATION OF THE PRIESTLY MINISTRY

(a) *Belonging to the people of God*

The Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* begins by **linking the priestly ministry to the baptismal grace and the common priesthood of the faithful**. The conciliar text applies in all seriousness the priestly identity and the liturgical and prophetic actions of the priesthood to each one of the faithful:

*In [Jesus Christ] all the faithful are made a **holy and royal priesthood**; they offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, and they **proclaim** the perfections of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light. Therefore, there is no member who does not have a part in the mission of the whole Body; but each one ought to **hallow** Jesus in his heart, and in the spirit of prophecy bear witness to Jesus (PO, 2).*

Thus, the ministry of deacons, priests and bishops must be lived in a **deep sense of belonging to the people of God** and, in this context, to the Christian community. Before assuming functions for leadership, the ordained minister has to experience what it means to a part of the people of God. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraphs 268-274, Pope Francis has beautifully expressed this sense of being a people that is valid for all the faithful, and at this moment, it helps us to interpret the priestly ministry, first in its **identity**:

*To be evangelizers of souls, we need to **develop a spiritual taste for being close to people's lives** [...] Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and **a passion for his people** [...] He wants to make use of us to draw closer to his beloved people. He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people; **without this sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity** (268).*

***Jesus himself is the model** of this method of evangelization which brings us to the very heart of his people. How good it is for us to contemplate the closeness which he shows to everyone! [...] Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is nothing else than the culmination of the way he lived his entire life. Moved by his example, **we want to enter fully into the fabric of society**, [...] not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of **a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives** (269).*

*[...] Whenever we do so, **our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people** (270).*

Secondly, the Holy Father refers to the **existential modality**:

*In our dealings with the world, we are told to give reasons for our hope, but not as an enemy who critiques and condemns. We are told quite clearly: “do so with **gentleness and reverence**” (1 Pet 3:15) and “if possible, so far as it depends upon you, **live peaceably with all**” (Rom 12:18). We are also told to **overcome “evil with good”** (Rom 12:21) and to “**work for the good of all**” (Gal 6:10). Far from trying to appear better than others, we should “**in humility count others better**” than ourselves (Phil 2:3). The Lord's Apostles themselves enjoyed “favor with all the people” (Acts 2:47; 4:21, 33; 5:13). [...] **By so doing we will know the missionary joy of sharing life with God's faithful people as we strive to light a fire in the heart of the world** (271).*

*Loving others is a **spiritual force drawing us to union with God** [...] Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, **we must constantly be missionaries** (272).*

*If we are to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, **we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our giving** [...]. Appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love. Consequently, if I can help at least one person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life. It is a wonderful thing to be God's faithful people. We achieve fulfilment when we break down walls and our heart is filled with faces and names! (274).*

This reasoning, which Pope Francis applies to all evangelizers, has a particular validity for priests. For them, who give their whole lives to the building up of the People of God, it is necessary for the priest to feel a part of that people, to experience the joy of walking with them, to love each member of His holy people, and to use all the means necessary to respond to their vocation.

(b) *A collegial ministry*

In the title of the conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the word *ordinis* is in the plural, in order to signify **a mystery marked by collegiality**, in which relationships are fraternal, and always inspired by the Trinitarian communion. This theme of relationships – this participation in a single mission, this shared responsibility – is a central element for the credibility of the priestly ministry.

*Christ, through the apostles themselves, made their successors, the bishops, sharers in his consecration and mission. The office of their ministry has been handed down, in a lesser degree indeed, to the priests. **Established in the order of the priesthood they can be co-workers of the episcopal order for the proper fulfilment of the apostolic mission entrusted to priests by Christ (PO 2).***

The exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* has deepened particularly this point, affirming the radical communitarian form of the ordained ministry:

*By its very nature, the ordained ministry can be carried out only to the extent that the priest is united to Christ **through sacramental participation in the priestly order**, and thus to the extent that he is in **hierarchical communion with his own bishop**. The ordained ministry has a **radical “communitarian form”** and can only be carried out as **“a collective work.”** The Council dealt extensively with this communal aspect of the nature of the priesthood, examining in succession the relationship of the priest with his own bishop, with other priests and with the lay faithful.*

*The ministry of priests is above all **communion and a responsible and necessary cooperation with the bishop's ministry**, in concern for the universal Church and for the individual particular churches, for whose service they form with the bishop a single presbyterate.*

*Each priest, whether diocesan or religious, is **united to the other members of this presbyterate** on the basis of the Sacrament of Holy Orders and by particular bonds of apostolic charity, ministry and fraternity. All priests in fact, whether diocesan or religious, share in the one priesthood of Christ the head and shepherd; “they work for the same cause, namely, the building up of the body of Christ, which demands a variety*

of functions and new adaptations, especially at the present time,” and is enriched down the centuries by ever new charisms.

*Finally, because their role and task within the Church do not replace but promote the baptismal priesthood of the entire People of God, leading it to its full ecclesial realization, **priests have a positive and helping relationship to the laity.** Priests are there to serve the faith, hope and charity of the laity. They recognize and uphold, as brothers and friends, the dignity of the laity as children of God and help them to exercise fully their specific role in the overall context of the Church's mission (17).*

The priest is a man of communion and exercises his ministry in concrete aspects of collaboration, so that it is not conceivable in this context of an individual or isolated priesthood that had the pretension of sustaining himself.

c) *The configuration, a gift and a spiritual path*

Logically, the conciliar text refers to the **sacramental character** of the priestly ministry, but it is interesting that it interprets this objective fact as **a way of configuration** with the Lord. Configuration that is understood ontologically, but also spiritually; sacramentally, but also humanly; deeply personal, but destined for the good of the people of God, conferred through the Sacrament of Orders, but in continuous development towards priestly holiness.

*The priesthood of presbyters certainly presupposes **the Sacraments of Christian initiation**, but it is conferred by a particular Sacrament through which the priest, through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are marked with **a special character that configures them with Christ the Priest**, so that they can act in the name of Christ the Head (PO, 2).*

We see in the above citation the binary structure of the formation stages outlined in the *RFIS*: **the disciple is called to be a shepherd**. Consequently, the priest, by virtue of his vocation, must continually strive to **harmonise his life as a disciple with that of ministerial service**.

A combination of both of the above then **produces a significant psychological effect**, whereby the reception of the Sacrament of Holy Orders is understood in terms of a hermeneutic of continuity as opposed to one of discontinuity. Both of these also produce **a practical and organisational effect**, since it combines the evangelical action of the priest with that of the faithful. Thus understood, we gain a deeper appreciation for how a man-Christian-priest fulfils his ministry with men-Christian-laity and religious.

An appreciation of a variety of vocations and ministries allows the priest to enjoy the **fruits of ecclesial complementarity**. The configuration of the priest to Christ the Shepherd is correlative and complementary to the configuration of religious and laity to their respective states. To live his vocation in harmony with the ecclesial body is indispensable for the priest, reminding him and inspiring him in his **responsibility in building up this body** in configuration with Christ.

As the seminarian embarks on this process of configuration with Christ, he will come to realise that it is **ongoing and involves other**, since it is an open spiritual process.

d) *His state in the world*

The first part of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* reaches its climax when it speaks about **the spiritual life of the priest** that can be summarised as follows: **in the world and yet not off the world**. His essence is like that of the Church that, whilst being a mystery of God, is yet deeply rooted in reality. In reference to priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* states:

*They cannot be ministers of Christ unless they be witnesses and dispensers of a life other than earthly life. But they cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of men. Their ministry itself, by a special title, forbids that they be conformed to this world; yet at the same time it requires that they **live in this world among men**. They are to live as good shepherds that **know their sheep**, and **they are to seek to lead those who are not of this sheepfold** that they, too, may hear the voice of Christ, so that there might be one fold and one shepherd (PO, 3).*

The idea of being in the world and yet not off the world, necessitates of the priest certain fundamental attitudes that favours **dialogue with the real world** by means of **a conducive language** that assures the effectiveness of this objective. He must embrace the challenge of making accessible to people the philosophical and theological concepts acquired during his formation, together with possessing a knowhow and wherewithal with respect to the use of social media for evangelisation. To achieve this end, it is imperative to have a comprehensive formation that is not solely theoretical but also practical and pedagogical.

The cultivation of the aforementioned attitudes must occur **during the course of Seminary formation**, where candidates are placed in **regular contact with the new generations**. How unfortunate would it be if a young seminarian were unable to relate to his peers in society? The danger is that he hides himself away in a theoretical world that gives him a false sense of superiority to the point of being embarrassing. The same applies for a formator who does not converse with the world.

Conversely, it is important for those in formation to **live their not being off the world, with serenity by living in evangelical simplicity and poverty**, while shunning a comfortable, consumerist and hedonistic lifestyle such as that which pervades society today. In this way, the seminarians will come to reflect the ideal of the priesthood.

e) *The triple ministry (PO, 4-6)*

We observe in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* the use of the **tripartite schema of priestly ministry** to explain the evangelical mandate of the priest: ministers of the Word (4); ministers of the Sacraments, the summit of which is the Eucharist (5); and of shepherding the People of God (6). The structure of this Decree clearly illustrates the **amplitude of priestly ministry**.

It is vitally important to resist the **temptation to reduce the priestly ministry to cultic actions**, worse still, turning them into a business venture. To ward against such temptations, it is necessary to inform seminarians of the requisite of a twofold balance:

The first of which, is that **every celebration and cultic action, would involve a dignified proclamation of the Word of God**, coupled with an adequate catechesis. Consequently, the seminarians will come to realise that daily meditation on the Word of God along with the conscientious preparation of the sermon, is an indispensable element in priestly ministry. This is true not only for the Celebration of Holy Mass but for all Sacraments, sacramentals and liturgical actions, such as with Benediction. The future priest must realise that the cultic action of the Church is always

evangelising in nature, reason for which it is necessary that the Word of God have a special place, and that seminarians be **adequately trained in this area**.

The second of which, has to do with the **guidance of the People of God**. The priest is not simply a dispenser of the cult, but also has the pastoral **responsibility for the guidance of the community** entrusted to his care. Since the Mass is the source and summit of the entire action of the Church, it is incumbent upon the priest to **lead his flock to green and safe pastures**. He must accompany them towards the good, the true and the just, all of which are signs of the Kingdom of God. Likewise, for the shepherd, the Eucharist is the source and summit of a **wider activity that seeks to increase the number of those entrusted to him**. In addition to shepherding the flock, it is also necessary to establish guidelines for the celebration of the Sacraments and sacramentals; these must highlight the spirit of the community and the gratuitousness of God's gift.

f) *Priests' relationships with others (PO, 7-9)*

The section in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* that outlines the triple ministerial function of the priest is similar to another section dedicated to **his relationships, of which there are three: hierarchical communion** with his Bishop; **intimate sacramental fraternity** within the presbyterate; and **apostolic fraternity** with respect to the lay faithful. Optimum importance must be given to these relationships since the priest is a being in relationship with the Church. The **correct use of terminology** can aid us in better understanding the importance of each of these relationships that help define the priestly paradigm.

Hierarchical communion: The relationship between the priest and the Bishop is one of communion, of honesty and of fidelity in faith, which takes cognisance of the fact that he is a collaborator with the Bishop, from whom he takes direction. Hierarchical communion requires that respect and obedience – which is not a servile subjugation – be shown to the Ordinary, and his Successors, as promised on ordination day. The role of the Bishop involves a power that must only be understood in terms of service and communion. The relationship of communion with the Bishop demands obedience and sincere loyalty to him, irrespective of his strengths and shortcomings. The Decree also underlines the need for a **trusting transparency of parties** that when necessary is respectful of **fraternal correction**.

Intimate sacramental fraternity: The relationship among men in the priesthood is fraternal, each one of whom received the gift of the priestly vocation. The reason for this fraternal relationship is based on a **shared ordination and a shared mission**, for which they are **grateful**. This fraternal relationship constitutes the fundamental condition for the ongoing formation of priests, especially in the area of spiritual direction and sacramental confession. It is therefore necessary to give the utmost priority to development of fraternal relationships during the course of initial formation in Seminary.

Appreciation of the priestly gift is **apparent in two ways**: On the one hand, by **nurturing the human, spiritual, pastoral and intellectual dimensions one's vocation**; and on the other hand, by having concern for the **welfare of brother priests**. The Lord has placed us on this common path for our **mutual edification and sanctification**. For this reason, the term *intimate* is particularly apt, as it touches upon the heart, the motivation and the deepest desires of the priest.

The shared responsibility for the mission entrusted to the priest finds concrete expression in **mutual support** along with the docility to receive and offer **fraternal correction**. Our common concern must be to **fulfil the mission** entrusted to us to **the very best of our ability**, which forgoes individual comforts. We must assist each other to reflect the image of Christ the Servant and Shepherd, in the fulfilment of our common mission.

Apostolic fraternity: By virtue of his apostolic mission, the priest is also called to establish a fraternal relationship with the lay faithful. The priest must embrace the community to which he is sent and **collaborate** with them. The conciliar understanding of the priest does not view him as a solitary figure but rather as one who helps the laity to **recognise their charisms and place them** at the service of all. There are two aspects to apostolic fraternity: on the one hand, **the shepherd cares for his flock**, while on the other hand, **the flock cares for their shepherd**. The ability to **give and take** within this apostolic dynamic is key to the survival and wellbeing of the priest. The priest must be able to relate to his people in a spirit of joy. Equally, the priest as father, must assume responsibility for the leadership of the community entrusted to his care. Evidently, the priest must be humanly mature in order to undertake such an onerous task.

3 CONCLUSION

The configuration to Christ the Servant and Shepherd, is itself **a gift received** by virtue of our priestly ordination, one that is **spiritually prepared for** during the course of Seminary formation and that is sustained throughout our priesthood (*RFIS*, 35). The reception of this gift necessitates an **educative process** in order that one is properly disposed to receive it on the day of his ordination to the priesthood and to be **lived out faithfully**. We are speaking here therefore, of an ontological gift, one that is sacramental in nature that must be carefully prepared for and renewed daily. We observe this spiritual dynamic in St. Paul's *Second Letter to Timothy*, that reads as follows: *That is why I am reminding you now to fan into a flame the gift of God that you possess through the laying on of my hands* (2 Tm: 1,6).

The priestly paradigm is marked by a **Christian anthropology** that finds its fulfilment in man's collaboration with the supernatural action of grace. We are speaking then about **a gift received and not owned**. By virtue of his priestly ordination, the priest is objectively and ontologically configured to Christ, which must not be viewed as an accomplishment. It is precisely the constant **awareness of the sublimity of such a gift** that invites the priest to **never loose sight of his weakness**. He must constantly remind himself of the importance of initial and ongoing formation, while standing in charity with his Bishop, fellow priests and laity. Aware of the gravity of infidelity to this precious gift, priests must do their utmost to serve the community in the spirit of **a diocesan priest**.