

---

# M. Edmund Hussey

---

## THE PRIESTHOOD

---

## AFTER THE COUNCIL

---

### Theological Reflections

---

Sister Ann Simeon was my seventh grade teacher. She died this past summer and our diocesan newspaper reported she was ninety-five years old, which surprised me quite a bit, since I had assumed she was ninety-five years old when I was in the seventh grade.

In fact, she was an excellent teacher, one of the very best, and a lovely person. She had an enormous influence on most of her students, myself included.

Sister Ann Simeon was a great promoter of vocations to the priesthood, as were most of the nuns of that era. She knew exactly what the priesthood meant and she was very clear about the identity of the priest. The priest was truly another Christ, an *alter Christus*, who spoke in the name of Christ. As Christ on earth, the priest said to infants: "I baptize you," and to sinners: "I absolve you." Above all, at Mass the priest stood in the person of Christ and said over the bread and the wine: "This is *my* body; this is the cup of *my* blood." I remember Sister Ann Simeon telling us that the priest could call God down from heaven to the altar, that only the priest could do this, that no one else in the world had the power to do this.

**M**any of us were naturally quite impressed and thought seriously about the possibility of becoming priests. But Sister Ann Simeon was a realist, not a starry-eyed visionary, and she told us plainly that there were also costs, great costs, if we were to enter the seminary. We had to be good students, willing to study for many years. We would have to live a very disciplined life. We should not expect to become wealthy. We would not even have a home of our own and would have to go to whatever parish the bishop sent us. Above all, we would have to give up marriage and a family of our own.

Sister Ann Simeon's vivid and dramatic presentation

---

Reverend M. Edmund Hussey is pastor of Saint Paul Church, Yellow Springs, Ohio. This talk was given to a group of priests.

of the priesthood was, in fact, a very sound, reasonable, and orthodox one. It was solidly based on the Tridentine theology of the priesthood that emphasized the priesthood as the principal ministry in the church, and whose starting point was the sacramental powers that belong to the priest alone and that set him apart from the laity. The principal sacramental power was, of course, the power to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. To quote a medieval Latin formula, the priest had the potestas in Corpus Christi eucharisticum.

---

#### Alter Episcopus

The Tridentine era of the church died in October of 1958, less than five months after my own ordination to the priesthood. On October 9 of that year, Eugenio Pacelli, known to the world as Pope Pius XII, died at Castel Gandolfo. On October 28, Angelo Guiseppe Roncalli was elected Pope John XXIII in the Sistine Chapel. John XXIII called a council that would take a new look and, as it turned out, a non-Tridentine look at the church and the world. 30  
11

This new council, the Second Vatican Council, did not emphasize the priesthood as the principal ordained ministry in the church. Instead the council documents clearly state that the priest participates in the ministry of the bishop, that the priest takes the place of the bishop in the parish, and that the priest depends on the bishop in the exercise of his ministry. The *alter Christus* has become the *alter Episcopus*. I suspect that not even many bishops would argue that this change should be considered a promotion. The priest as an *alter Episcopus* inevitably makes dramatically new demands on the relationship between the bishop and the priest. In the Tridentine church, when the priest was an *alter Christus*, the relationship between the priest and the bishop was not a crucial factor in the priest's happiness in his vocation. Even an unreasonable and erratic bishop could generally be avoided; he might even serve as a source of much amusement at clerical gatherings. After



all, an *alter Christus*, one who is another Christ, could rather easily survive estrangement from a mere bishop. But an *alter Episcopus* cannot.

**I**mportant as the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the bishop was, its emphasis on the whole church, on the people as the church, was even more important. Instead of beginning its discussion of the church with the hierarchy, *Lumen gentium* begins by emphasizing that the church is fundamentally and basically the entire community of believers. Although this emphasis seems almost trite when stated so baldly, its implications are enormous. I shall mention only two of those that have been of great importance for priests.

First, if the church was the entire community of believers, then the liturgy of the church could no longer be a spectator sport at which the people watched someone else do something for them. The liturgy had to become once again the public work of all the people. No longer could I be a priest so that others did not have to be priests; I had to be a priest in order to enable the entire community to be a priestly people, a worshipping church, a eucharistic community. No longer could I say Mass that others heard, or even celebrate Mass at which others assisted. Instead, the entire community must now celebrate a liturgy at which I would preside.

Second, if the church was the entire community, then the work of the church was not my responsibility as a priest, but was the responsibility of the people of God, of all the baptized. No longer could I feel that I was entrusted with the mission of the church in a special way and that the people should support me in my work. I now had to realize that the mission of the church is the responsibility of all who are baptized, and that I have been ordained to support them in their work.

Therefore, Vatican II called priests, not as a priestly caste endowed with special powers, but primarily as

baptized Christians, and only then as those who have been ordained to serve the community of believers.

The Council of Trent summarized its teaching on the priesthood by characterizing it as the power of consecrating the true Body and Blood of Christ and of remitting or retaining sins. But Vatican II in the "Ministry and Life of Priests" (*Presbyterorum ordinis*) does not even mention the priestly power of consecrating the bread and wine. Instead, it begins with a discussion of the priesthood of the faithful and then speaks about all ministry in the church as a means of enabling the church to be the one body of Christ.

*Presbyterorum ordinis* affirms that the basic ministry in the church belongs to the bishop, whose "ministerial role has been handed down to priests in a limited degree." This document teaches that the bishop fully possesses the priesthood of Christ (in the sacramental order), while the priest participates in that priesthood in a derived and dependent manner. The bishop is the sign of Christ to his flock, while the priest is a sign of the bishop.

(9. Sacrament of Priest)

Where Priest?

**N**ow it is important to remember that *Presbyterorum ordinis* is not one of the more significant documents of Vatican II. In fact, the bishops of the council somewhat took the priesthood for granted and did not feel that there was much need to discuss the matter at great length. But indirectly and unwittingly, they severely undermined the traditional role and significance of the priest in the church. By insisting that the bishop is the primary minister in the church and that the priest is the helper of the bishop, the council demoted the priest from an *alter Christus* to an *alter Episcopus*. And by emphasizing the priesthood of the laity and deemphasizing the sacred power that set the priest apart from the laity, the council deprived the priest of his traditional identity and clear self-image.

In hindsight, and it is only in hindsight, the recent decline in the number of priests and their present

The council documents clearly state that the priest participates in the ministry of the bishop. The *alter Christus* has become the *alter Episcopus*.

straits is the natural and perhaps even inevitable result of the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

### In Transition

Now the Second Vatican Council's emphases on the church as the entire community, on the priesthood of all the baptized, and on the pastoral ministry of the bishop in the church are all theologically sound and are valuable corrections to some off-balance views that had prevailed for centuries. The fact that these new emphases have caused great turmoil in priestly ministry should in no way suggest that they are, therefore, unhealthy or unsound developments. In fact, I am convinced that they are positive and enormously valuable steps forward. But the fact also remains that they have raised important questions not only for priests but for the entire church, questions that I believe have not as yet been able to be addressed sufficiently and satisfactorily.

There is no question that the priestly office and the priest's own understanding of his office are in a period of great transition. The Tridentine image still survives, of course, but it is no longer taken for granted and indeed is even challenged by many. Yet no new image has acquired clear enough outlines to take its place. Karl Rahner has insisted that the priestly office in the church has been and continues to be an extremely complex reality. He cautions against any attempts to reduce this full reality to only one of its basic elements or characteristics.

And so, rather than make a futile attempt to present a neatly packaged theology of the priesthood, I would merely like to suggest two theological principles and five concrete characteristics of our priesthood as we actually live it. I will not, of course, develop them fully but only present them briefly.

### Two Principles

My first theological principle concerns the relationship between the ordained priesthood and the priesthood of the faithful. In order to avoid a simplistic identification of the priesthood of the baptized and the priesthood of the ordained, church documents, ordination homilies, and theological articles frequently appeal to *Lumen gentium* to affirm that they differ from one another not only in degree but also in essence. But I want to point out to you that the sentence from *Lumen gentium* that is cited to support this essential difference actually affirms a close connection between the two and merely presumes the essential difference.

In the Abbott edition of the council documents, the sentence reads: "Although they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated."

Consequently, although we must not deny the essential difference between the two, it may be that the difference ought not to be overemphasized and used as the starting point for developing a theology of the priesthood. In fact, I believe that a search for the essential difference between the two as a starting point for understanding the ordained priesthood may complicate the issue unnecessarily. I would suggest that the principal affirmation of that sentence in *Lumen gentium*, the interrelatedness of the priesthood of the faithful and the hierarchical priesthood, might be a better starting point. It might then be easier to see that the ordained priesthood does not intrude between God and the priesthood common to all the faithful, but instead enables the priesthood of the faithful to be fulfilled and effective.

My second theological principle concerns the relationship between the priest and the bishop, and it is somewhat similar to my first principle. Just as an over-emphasis on the essential difference between the



priesthood of the faithful and the priesthood of the ordained creates unnecessary difficulties, so also I believe that an overstated attempt to separate the bishop and the priest will create other unnecessary difficulties.

In fact, throughout much of our history the exact relationship between the episcopacy and the priesthood has been a matter of some dispute. In the immediate past, in the Tridentine era, the bishop was seen essentially as a priest, but with two additional sacramental powers, the power to ordain and the power to confirm. The post-Vatican II church no longer tends to see the bishop in terms of the priest, but tends to see the priest in terms of the bishop. In the Tridentine church the bishop was a "priest plus." In the post-Vatican II church, the priest is a "bishop minus."

#### Five Characteristics

While leaving aside right now a complete development of this point, I do want to state the fairly generally accepted theological principle that the priesthood is not radically separate from the episcopacy. My next points confirm that principle, for I now wish to list five concrete characteristics of our priesthood as we actually live it. These characteristics, which also have application to the episcopacy, are absolutely essential for an understanding of the priesthood.

First of all, by virtue of our ordination, we priests have a presidential role in the church. We preside at the assemblies of the church, and we are presidents of local churches in a very real sense, especially if we are pastors of parishes. The bishop, too, is the president of a local church, a local church that we call a diocese rather than a parish.

It is important to remember that in the early church there was no distinction between a parish and a diocese. Most cities of the ancient world were small towns

by our standards. Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Corinth were more akin to our small Midwestern county seats than to our major cities. The Christians in these cities belonged to one ecclesial community, to one local church presided over by an *episcopus*, assisted by a council of *presbyteroi*, and served by one or more *diakono*i. The gradual development of parishes and the consequent distinction between parishes and dioceses may be one of the most important and least studied developments in our ecclesial structures.

At any rate, the local church of the New Testament and the subapostolic era has no exact correspondence in today's church. Legally or canonically the local church today is the diocese, and only the bishop is empowered to ordain and thus provide for the continuing life of the church. However, the parish is the real local church for most Catholics, for the parish is where they gather to celebrate the Eucharist, where they are baptized and married, and where their funeral liturgies are celebrated. It is in the parish that they learn the tradition of Christianity, and it is from the parish that they derive spiritual nourishment for their lives and their work.

Second, by virtue of our ordination we priests have an important sacramental and cultic role in the church. In the past there has been a tendency to suggest that the full significance of priesthood could be found in its cultic function. The post-Vatican II church has rightly insisted that the priesthood also includes very important prophetic, educational, social, and counseling tasks.

Nevertheless, the cultic function of the priest must not be belittled. The symbols, the rituals, the sacraments, and the liturgy of the church are entrusted to us in a very special way. When I preside at the eucharistic liturgy, when I baptize, when I anoint the sick, when I bless marriages, when I place ashes on the foreheads of the people at the beginning of Lent, on these and simi-

No longer could I be a priest so that others did not have to be priests; I had to be a priest in order to enable the entire community to be a priestly people.

---

lar occasions I exercise the priesthood most visibly and most profoundly.

③ Third, by virtue of ordination priests are ecclesial persons, that is, we are authorized to act in the name of the church. There are, of course, other ecclesial persons. Among them are bishops, deacons, religious sisters, professed brothers, and monks.

**B**ut within this group the priest's place is especially visible and recognizable, for he is the one who is authorized and delegated by the church, by the community of believers, to preside at ecclesial liturgical gatherings, and to administer ecclesial sacraments, and to preach the ecclesial tradition. Although some other persons are authorized to do some of these same things, except for the bishop, the priest has the most comprehensive and unqualified authorization and delegation to act in the name of the church. And our exercise of this delegation is more familiar and frequent than the bishop's in the daily life of the church.

④ Fourth, by virtue of ordination priests are established in an especially close and publicly recognized relationship with other members of the church. Whether we like it or not, because we are priests, other members of the church feel that we belong to them in a special way, that we have a commitment to be interested in them and care for them. They feel that they have a claim on our time and energy, and if they are harshly rebuffed, they feel hurt and even betrayed.

⑤ **F**ifth and finally, by virtue of ordination priests are symbolic centers of the church, icons of the church, a sort of embodiment of the faith and the values and the traditions of the church. Certainly, the bishop is an even stronger symbolic center or icon of the church than the priest, and without doubt the president of the

college of bishops, the bishop of Rome, is a still stronger symbolic center and more sacred icon of the church.

**T**he fact remains, however, that when people meet a priest they feel that they meet the church and all that it stands for in a very special way. This is a precious and valuable asset, because it enables priests to have greater influence and effectiveness than they would on their own merits. It also carries a great risk, for it will inevitably magnify the opprobrium and stigma of their sins and failures.

These five closely related characteristics of the actual lives of priests are certainly necessary elements in any comprehensive treatment of the priesthood. But they are only five aspects of a very complex reality and I have not treated them in any depth. I know that I have left far more unsaid, unexplored, and undeveloped than I have actually expressed, but I am confident that further reflection on these five points can help us understand the priesthood better and exercise it more effectively in these changing times.

---

#### Unaddressed Issues

I would like to indicate very briefly two other items that affect the lives of priests quite powerfully and that I believe need to be addressed by the church in a new and creative way.

The first is the process of the selection of bishops. I do not hold a brief for a particular method of choosing bishops and definitely not for a popular election of bishops. But I do believe that the local church should have an open, clear, and effective role in the selection of its bishop. I also strongly believe that American bishops should be chosen by the American church in a well-defined manner and then confirmed by Rome, instead of chosen by Rome in a mysterious manner and only then accepted by an American diocese.



My suggestion is not prompted by an illusion that we will get better bishops in this way. In fact, my impression is that our bishops are generally above average in intelligence and talents, in integrity and dedication. My suggestion is prompted by a recognition of the increased importance today of the relationship between the bishop and priests.

**M**y second item is the process of the recruitment and education of priests. I believe that we need to search for other ways of enabling persons to become priests, which would be alternatives to the present system. I do not argue for the abolishment of the process in which men make application to study for the priesthood and then, in the seminary, are given the theological, pastoral, and spiritual formation necessary for their future work. All of us were trained in that system, which has served the church fairly well since the Council of Trent. And I believe that our seminaries still give very good training to those who study in them.

But the present method of recruiting and training priests is obviously no longer meeting all of our needs. The continuing decline in the number of priests in the United States is reaching alarming levels. On the other hand, a continually increasing number of certified or commissioned lay pastoral ministers and of ordained deacons indicates that there is an ample supply of generous and dedicated leaders willing to serve the community in a variety of ways.

**I**t seems to me that we ought to explore the possibility that dedicated and talented Christians who are already recognized as effective leaders within the church might be called to ordination so that we do not, in the words of Reverend Frank J. McNulty to John Paul II last Sep-

tember, "become only a church of the Word and lose our sacramental tradition."

Of course, many of the proven leaders in our church today are women and married men. Consequently, the questions of clerical celibacy and of the ordination of women come to the fore again. Although premature and abrupt changes in those areas would probably cause more division and turmoil than improvement and advantage, it also seems quite clear, at least to me, that both of these issues will continue to haunt us until they are confronted realistically.

### Conclusion

Now I realize that I have packed many undeveloped and controversial assertions into my reflection. But in essence, I have suggested two theological principles that I feel should govern the development of a contemporary theology of the priesthood: first, that the ordained priesthood should be seen as the servant of the priesthood of the faithful; and second, that there is not a radical separation between the priesthood and the episcopacy.

**I** have further suggested five concrete characteristics of our priesthood as necessary ingredients of a theological reflection on the priesthood, namely, our presidential role, our cultic role, our role as ecclesial persons, our special relationship with other members of the church, and our role as symbolic centers or icons of the church. And finally, I have suggested two processes that I feel need to be addressed in a new and creative way: the process of the selection of bishops, and the process of recruiting and training future priests. Although I know that not everyone will find all of my reflections on these points sound or realistic, I do hope that they are at least thought-provoking. □