

## THE PRIEST and the UNIVERSAL BAPTISMAL CALL

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There is a popular reading of Catholic Church life of the last forty or so years which strongly suggests that ours is a troubled time for the ordained ministry. In particular, there is a common understanding that, since the second Vatican Council, there has been a developing 'crisis of identity' for the priest. This is not just a popular or journalistic view; John Paul II, writing in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, sets his comments on priestly formation in the context of such a crisis, linking it explicitly with developments since the second Vatican Council. So, in article 11 of this Apostolic Exhortation, the Holy Father suggests three things: that the crisis of priestly identity arose after the second Vatican Council; that it arose through a muddled taking up of the teaching of that Council; and that the way through this 'crisis' is by a deeper sense of 'the specific ontological bond which unites the priesthood to Christ the high priest and good shepherd.'

In this talk I want both to agree and disagree with this way of thinking about priesthood today. In particular, I want to suggest that the 'crisis of priestly identity' is only one facet of a much more fundamental contemporary 'crisis of identity' for the whole Church; for, in this same period, lay men and women, too, have suffered a variety of crises in relation to our vocation and place in the Church and world. The truth is, we are *all* struggling with what it is to be Christian in late modernity; and, in a particular way, we are struggling as Church together to discover ways of living as the People of God which Christ calls us to be in and for every age. If priests suffer from identity questions, they do so in communion with a people suffering similarly - though usually less articulately, and so with less attention given us.

I also believe that it is important, granted the truth of what John Paul II says, to recognise that this ecclesial identity crisis did not *begin* with Vatican II. This council is not to blame for what is going on. This is important, if we are to avoid simply harking back to

some earlier time which we fondly suppose can solve our problems, on the basis that it did not have the difficulties we have today. Be assured - such a time had problems all its own! In fact, roots of any crises in ordained and lay living - sociologically and theologically - can certainly be traced back to the first Vatican Council of 1870, and the various intellectual and political upheavals that surrounded it, and possibly have a longer story even than that. To tell that story would mean another talk! The significant point is that the position taken here rejects any simplistic attempt to originate the crisis of priestly identity in the second Vatican Council itself.

But if I differ slightly from that generally held view in these respects, I also want to urge, with John Paul II, a return to an understanding of who we are - baptised and ordained priests, and baptised laity - based on Jesus Christ. Only in this Person, and His loving mission for the world, can we understand afresh what we are called to in our own time.

## **1. Baptism, Ordination, and Priesthood.**

The title I have been asked to speak on is "The Priest and the Universal Baptismal Call." It is a title which leads us to a place which is often fraught and muddled, and which can be seen as having its part to play in the perceived priestly identity crisis: it is the place of relating, theologically and in pastoral practice, the ordained priesthood to the baptismal priesthood.

For many people it is precisely here that difficulties have arisen in recent years with regard to understanding the ordained priesthood. We all, I think, recognise that one of the major gifts of the second Vatican Council was the authoritative articulation of a theology of baptismal vocation, developed in ways profoundly related to the lay person's full participation in Christ through baptism. In the decades prior to the council the renewal of Catholic scriptural and patristic studies, combined with the pressures of late modern culture, had led to a rediscovery of the tradition of the baptismal priesthood - the recognition that, in baptism, we are all made into 'other Christs'. This is a timely theology

which enabled the extension of our sense of the Church beyond its institutional forms toward a baptismal living of Church 'in ordinary'.

This theology is not a novel introduction of Vatican II; it is deeply scriptural and traditional:

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (I Peter ii 9)

The genius of the council was to renew this tradition of baptismal call as a basis for Church renewal, as the Christian community strove afresh to understand what our calling was, in a secular, late modern context. The tragedy was that, in the event, this gift of baptismal theology often appeared, in the years following Vatican II, to be more of a difficulty for - even a threat to - the pastoral life and mission of the Church.

We cannot here fully explore the fascinating and complex question of the (imperfect) reception - of Vatican II's teaching on the baptismal call. However, we can usefully identify one particular cultural factor which seems to have shaped the way we read Vatican II's account of ordained and baptismal priestliness: the hermeneutic of suspicion of authority, based on the pervasiveness of the question of *power*. It is almost as if, in our liberal capitalist democracies, with their rhetoric of freedom, and egalitarianism, and their deep suspicion of the politicisation of truth, we are unable to hear the language of difference without immediately understanding it in terms of superiority and inferiority, of the power of one over the other. The traditional theological sense of hierarchy as the proper ordering of communion toward that which is holy, has been hijacked by secular notions of bureaucratic and managerial 'hierarchies'.

One of the casualties of such a cultural reading of the texts has been the understanding of the relationship between baptismal and ordained priesthood (LG 10) - a relationship based on real difference, of essence, as well as of specific vocation. It is a relationship prone to politicisation in our own context. Yet the mystery of this differentiation of 'priest and people', and the 'sacred power' it involves, is only properly understood in the context given by the full council text: that of the Church as the Body of Christ, in which all the

baptised participate fully in Christ and his missionary offices of priest, prophet and king. Here it is *Christ's* Priesthood which is *the* concern - in keeping with the New Testament; what then becomes important is how that Priesthood is made real and effective in the Church which is His Body, through the priesthood of baptism, which is shared in by lay and ordained together, all be it in distinct ways. The power of the ordained here spoken of is 'sacred power': it is power *from* the Person of Jesus, and power *for* the actualisation of His mission in the baptismal community which is His Body. It is not a power which priests 'have'. It is, in short, power for the *service* of the baptismal call.

This brings me to the central question of this talk: *What might it mean to understand the ordained priesthood within a theology of Church fundamentally shaped by the baptismal call?* In asking this question I am, on the one hand, embracing heartily the vision of the baptismal vocation offered in the second Vatican Council; whilst at the same time strenuously rejecting any idea that this is a vision which is bad for, or undermining of, the ordained priesthood. Indeed, I want to suggest that it is precisely through exploring the nature of ordained life and ministry in the context of the vocation of all the baptised, that neuroses about identities and power relations (for lay and ordained folk) can be outgrown, as we return ourselves to the heart of the matter: our shared, and necessarily differentiated, participation in Christ's mission for the salvation of the world.

## **2. Ordained priesthood: a call to the service of the baptismal vocation.**

In order to give some content to this claim I will use the rest of the time left to me to demonstrate what the baptismal call can tell us about the specific vocation of the ordained priest. Working with the insight that the ordained ministry is *for* - at the service of - the baptismal call, I want to show how this implies a substantial vision of priesthood for today, in which the ordained ministry has its own integrity and indispensable particularity within the mission of Christ's Church.

*A preliminary point on the ordained priesthood in service to the baptismal priesthood*

Ahead of all we have to say about the ordained-baptised relation is the observation that it is fundamentally qualified by the Christian imperative to love; and that, in keeping with Christ's own self-sacrificing love, this love is practically lived out in terms of mutual service. It is in this context that we can hear what *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says about the sacrament of orders as one of the two sacraments 'at the service of communion':

"While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace - a life of faith, hope and charity, a life according to the Spirit, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians." (*Catechism* 1547)

A number of observations can be made about the *Catechism's* description of priestly ministry as at the service of the baptismal call. As is set out in a later paragraph (1551) the ordained ministry is a service which *is* properly a 'sacred power'. It is a particular and unique participation in Christ's mission with regard to the ecclesially needed vocations of leadership, shepherding, sanctifying, and teaching. It is a participation *in persona Christi capitis* - in the Person of Christ as Head. However, the Christ-centred account of this power or headship requires us to think of it *differently* from the contemporary 'normal' ways of thinking about power. For this is power *for* the enabling of others - the baptised - in their growth in holiness and response to their own call from Christ. It is *Christ's* own power, for His self-sacrificing service of His People, His Bride. It is in this 'sacred power' that the ordained man sacramentally participates.

To say this is also to make clear what ministerial service is not: it is clearly not about being 'the servant' of a particular congregation, doing what they want or think is best (though in a particular instance it might be...). More fundamentally, this is a divinely-empowered service of Christ's mission, as it is lived out (or not) by the baptised faithful. This is to suggest that to say that priestly identity is *service* is not enough; it is too vague and formless. In order to understand more deeply how substantial and remarkable a thing is being said here we need to look more closely at what, exactly, the ordained minister is called to serve in his specifically ministerial priesthood. It is only through a

profound appropriation of that which he is called to be of service *to*, that the ordained priest will grow in the practical living out of his vocation as one at the service of the baptismal call, in the ways Christ seeks to be. In order to explore this we will, briefly, name five key aspects of the baptismal call, and ask, in each case: what does it mean to say that the ordained priesthood is ordered towards service of this baptismal call?

The ordained priest as at the service of:

- the spiritual giftedness of the baptised;
- the priestly vocation of the baptised
- the prophetic vocation of the baptised
- the sovereign vocation of the baptised
- the 'secular' vocation of the baptised

*i) in service to the spiritual giftedness of the baptised*

The second Vatican Council roots the mission and vocation of the baptised faithful both in the sacraments of baptism, eucharist and confirmation, and in the *charismata* - the gifts of the Holy Spirit. (AA 3) In both cases, the heart of the baptismal calling is understood as divinely given - fundamentally dependent on Christ and his Spirit. This empowering of the baptised through the gifts of the Spirit - who, we must remember, blows where he wills (and not always where we think most appropriate!) - has the potential, theologically and in practice, to set up that classic tension in church life through the ages: the tension between institution and Spirit. It is a tension visible in the way in which the council's theology relates lay and ordained in relation to the discernment and exercise of charismata; laity have the 'right and duty' to exercise their spiritual gifts, whilst the pastors 'must make a judgement about the true nature and proper use of these gifts'. Such communal discernment is sometimes painful, even conflictual, in its working out.

What does this say about the characteristics of that ordained priesthood whose call it is to serve this charismatic baptismal call?

Above all what is suggested is the importance of a spirit of humble and loving *discernment* in the ordained man, with regard to those he pastors. To believe that you serve such a charismatically gifted people, surely evokes a sense of wonder, expectation and humility, and a readiness to be delightfully surprised by what the Spirit is doing (even before you come along! even *despite* what you're trying to do?) in the hearts and lives of Christ's people. But a spirit of discernment is also a tutored thing - a thing which embodies certain disciplines and skills, of attentiveness to complex situations, and of that self-knowledge, without which a man can fall prey to the prejudices and simple human likes and dislikes to which we are all prone. Prayer - and especially contemplative prayer - would seem fundamentally necessary; as would some form of on-going spiritual direction or conversation. How can any of us discern the Spirit when we are not ourselves striving always to drink of that same Spirit?

Of course, not everyone who believes they are charismatically gifted *are*. The pastor, with all the above qualities, must in addition have the security in Christ (rather than in his own authority) to say 'no' to a proffered gift or idea. Conversely (and more commonly), many lay women and men do not even recognise that the Spirit is gifting them: knowing his people, and attentive and expectant of the work of the Spirit in them, the ordained priest is called to recognise and nurture these hidden gifts.

Such discernments - as anyone who has had experience of parish ministry will know - are not only hugely important; they are tremendously difficult and sensitive matters. Perhaps this is too much of a burden for one man - however learned, wise and prayerful. His security in Christ, to whom he is bonded in an ontology of love and service, can - and perhaps should - enable him to share misgivings, thoughts and instincts in the process of the discernment of gifts with trusted others in the community.

ii) *in service to the priestly vocation of the baptised*

The fathers of the second Vatican Council spoke of the baptismal call to share in Christ's Priesthood in terms of a call to *consecratio mundi* - the consecration of the world to Christ. (eg LG 34) Lay people are called to offer everything in their lives, to the Father, through Jesus, in the Spirit, as an exercise of baptismal priesthood, which recognises 'graces in ordinary'. These daily 'spiritual sacrifices' are brought to the Eucharist, from which, in turn, the baptised are sent out into the world which they are called to consecrate. The priestly baptismal people are a properly sacrificing and eucharistic people in their non-liturgical, as well as liturgical, lives - a people of thanksgiving through whom the world is transformed.

It is to service of such a people that the specifically sanctifying call of the ordained minister is orientated.

What this means in practice will always be particular to a given context in its detail. Fundamentally what seems to be called for is such a good, prayerful and thoughtful celebration of the sacraments - especially the Eucharist - that space is allowed for lay people to discover and realise the living links between what goes on at Mass, and what is going on in their lives between masses. I don't believe there is one way of doing this: it *may* be that, in given situation, increased lay involvement in the celebration and planning of the Eucharist can facilitate a making of connections between liturgy and 'the liturgy after the liturgy' of daily life, as a clearer understanding of the Mass grows up in our hearts and minds; in another situation, it *may* be that the sheer mundanity and ordinary suffering of people's lives cry out for a celebration of Eucharist characterised by 'otherness', in order that we may return to the ordinary with our imaginations ablaze with the mystery we have glimpsed. For the priest who is servant of this mysterious priesthood-in-ordinary of the baptised, what is important is that the celebration of the Eucharist enables and feeds Christ's people for their consecration of His world.

I suspect that many priest pastors would be helped in this admittedly difficult liturgical discernment through a deeper exploration of the 'eucharistic' and 'baptismal', reconciling' and 'healing' graces that their people do experience in the ordinariness of their lives.

What we are taught, and what we experience, makes clear that these quasi-sacramental moments of grace surely do exist in the hidden places of people's lives - our work and domestic lives, our friendships and relationship struggles. For the pastor to be in touch with these seems essential if he is properly to serve this great call of baptismal priesthood. This may mean exploring possibilities for hearing from lay people about these things; it may simply mean a parish priest's knowing his people well. It may be nothing at all to do with any parish project, but rather find its fundamental and fruitful expression in the spirituality of the ordained man himself, as he ponders in his heart (Luke ii 51) the glimpses of graces-in-ordinary that are granted him through his people. As a man especially formed by the Eucharist the priest brings a gift of sight to the more hidden graces of lay living, which, when exercised wisely, can be a profound service to the baptismal priestly call in making connections between the sacraments and the 'ordinary sacramental'. Such a service, we might note, seems to presume a level of Christian friendship as its context.

*iii) in service to the prophetic vocation of the baptised*

The baptismal call is one to participate ever more deeply in Christ's prophetic office - His mission to speak the Father's word to the world, to proclaim the Good News, with its call to repentance. (LG 35) Repeatedly over the last forty years lay men and women have been called to this prophetic mission afresh, as our place in church-and-world is recognised as one of fruitful evangelisation. And, as Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* makes clear, the prophetic call is one of witness by works *and words* together. Furthermore, this prophetic vocation calls all the baptised into a deep and intimate relationship with Revelation - with Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching of the Church - so that we may, through prayer and action, contribute to that 'progress of revelation' of which the second Vatican Council speaks. (DV 8)

It is in understanding and serving this baptismal prophetic call that the ordained man may rediscover his own call to teach and preach.

Knowing his people, he will soon come to realise the real depth of need - and often felt hunger - for good and substantial teaching, which can properly feed our difficult call to witness in our lives, giving an answer to the hope that is within us (I Pet. iii 15).

However, we must also remember that the Vatican II teaching envisages that, under the tutelage of the Spirit, the baptised are *already* exercising that Christ-like prophetic office, already glimpsing the 'spiritual realities' of revelation (DV 8), and as such are not empty vessels to be filled with the learning of the priest-expert (or even the theologian-expert), but are also, potentially, people who themselves have learning and wisdom to share.

What this suggests is that the Church's fulfillment of Christ's prophetic call in baptism involves a dynamic of teaching and learning in which the ordained and non-ordained are necessarily involved together. Within this dynamic there is an important sense that we are *all* disciples (or learners) before Christ who - as the Gospel tells us - is our *only* Teacher. (Matt. xxiii 8-10) As Aquinas points out in relation to this text, this means that the human teacher - in this case the priest - is only ever, and at best, enabling that divine act of teaching and learning which is to do with the Spirit's work within each person's heart and intellect. (*De Veritate* q. 11). The ordained man has had the privilege, in his training, of studying more deeply the riches of our Tradition; and this his own prophetic calling demands he shares with Christ's people. But this privilege should not blind him to the operation of Christ's teaching, in ways beyond his own expertise, in the hearts of the baptised. He, too - even as teacher and preacher - is disciple and listener.

*iv) in service to the sovereign vocation of the baptised*

Baptism calls us to Christ's priestly and prophetic mission, and also to his sovereign or kingly office. (LG 36) In a particular way, the second Vatican Council teaches, the lay faithful are called to carry out this mission through service of the Kingdom in the world, serving creation and human society in ways which anticipate God's coming Kingdom. Such a mission is characterised by a call to justice, and a living of ordinary life in ways which make ever clearer the dignity of all men and women in Christ, and the reality of

creation and especially human life as gifts from God. This especially lay calling is a difficult work.

There is a sense in which the ordained ministry's call to serve this vocation of the baptised is characterised necessarily by a certain caution. Here the practical living out of Church *in the world* moves into areas of specifically lay expertise, and of cultural complexities, about which any one pastor cannot be assuredly expert. Indeed, the Council envisages that there will be occasions where lay people, in their mission to the world, will encounter questions and difficulties to which their pastors will have no answer; these may even be 'grave difficulties'. (GS 43) Here the service of the ordained priest is one of guidance and spiritual strengthening - and, it is implied, of *keeping quiet*. The priest is a man who needs to be at home with saying, "I don't know", and so leaving room for others to take up their responsibilities in building the Kingdom in ways which are, sometimes, necessarily tentative - even risky. Sometimes being there, and not (apparently) 'doing' anything at all, can be the Christ-like way of pastoring.

*v) in service to the 'secular identity' of the baptised*

There remains one other aspect of the baptismal call which I want to mention, as it seems to me too easily lost sight of in our Church today; and it has particular implications for the exercise of the presbyterate as a Christly power for service of this call. That is, the 'secular' identity of the baptised lay person. (LG 31) This is a piece of conciliar theology which seeks to characterise lay living as that baptismal participation in Christ which expresses His priestly, prophetic and sovereign mission specifically 'in the world' - in the realm of the ordinary, the 'secular'. The great genius of this teaching is that it makes clear that the ontological bond to Christ which is baptism is not simply a 'religious' thing; it doesn't simply mean that we have to do certain churchy things. Rather, it deeply affects the whole of a person's living and loving; the reach of the baptismal call is as great as the scope of human life.

It occurs to me, at the end of this talk, that may be one of the ways in which the ordained might serve this baptismal call is by re-orientating Church - and especially parish - life

toward 'the world'. It may be that we have fallen into a habit of thinking that being a committed lay Catholic means doing lots of parish things, 'helping father', going to meetings; whereas the baptismal calling is about taking the graces of sacrament and Christian fellowship to the world beyond the visible church community. (And, from what we've explored here, 'father's' job is to help *me!*) Might a less busy parish actually be a more active parish - at least in terms of baptismal vocation? Perhaps the ordained man might serve his people better by going to the 'secular' places where they are - their homes, the pub, the work place, the cinema...rather than calling them (often in vain) to church halls, and cold meetings. He might feel, in the process, that the organisation of the parish ('his' parish) feels thinner, diminished; but he might be able more profoundly to serve the authentic call of the baptised.

### **Conclusion: learning who we are through Christian love of the other**

I have tried to give some account of how the Vatican II theology of the baptismal vocation - far from undermining priestly call and identity - provides it with a refreshed and life-giving context within which the ordained man can continually rediscover his own calling to the service of this vocation. In this account the language of *service* has loomed large. The gift of the ordained in this kind of service is to *discern* - through prayer, study and Christian friendship - what is, in fact, needed for the nurture of baptismal vocation in any given context. And in order to do this, he will need not only to deeply love and appropriate the theology and spirituality of the baptismal call that he serves (and in which, in a particular way, he shares, of course), but also seek to learn - from the many graced and wise lay people with whom he will work - the specific shape and challenge of living baptism in the world. The priest's growth in these fundamental matters of basic service is what will provide life and roots for his celebration of sacraments, his teaching and preaching, and his knowledge and active love of his people.

At the heart of this vision is the recognition that what is central is not, in fact, the relation between ordained and non-ordained; rather, all of this can only make sense when we put Christ's Priesthood and its salvific mission first. This is what prevents this account simply collapsing into a functional reading of priesthood; it is essentially rooted in the ontological bonds with Christ enjoyed by the lay and ordained baptised, in ways specific to their

sacramental lives. Whether baptised lay person, or ordained presbyter, what we are about is living out Christ, in and for the world. That all people should meet Christ - this is our *only* purpose (John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* 13). This is our common vocation, which the structures of our community are there to serve.

I began this talk by referring to a perceived - and, it must be said, often keenly felt - crisis of priestly identity. We live in a time where questions of identity, and of 'vocation' are often triggers to interior reflection: What I am for? Who am I to be? What does God want of me? We will all, no doubt, have found ourselves in such places of anxious interiority at one time or another. What I have tried to demonstrate is that, contrary to our contemporary instincts, the answers to these questions are to be found, also, *beyond ourselves*; we discover who we are, and what shape our vocation to holiness must take, through loving and thoughtful *engagement with the other*. I couldn't *tell* you what it is to be a mother; but more than twenty years of the rigorous and joyful discipline of parental loving, and the domestic asceticism of self-giving which it entails, does mean that, at the very heart of me, a mother is what I am. It is what I live. To *discover our vocation in Christ waiting for us* in the practice of loving service is a joyful gift. It is this gift, found in all hearts that have undergone the sometime difficult pedagogy of active loving, that I would wish for my brothers who are priests for Christ's priestly people.

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**Abbreviations used in the text:**

LG - Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*

AA - Vatican II's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*

GS - Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*

DV - Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*

