

THAT THEY MAY BE ONE!

(JN 17, 11)

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the way he presided at the Requiem Mass for Pope John Paul II and conducted his first appearances after his election as pope, people encountered another personality other than the one they thought they knew. This time they were seeing an image unfiltered by any editor – a shy, humble, but courageous man, whose spontaneous smile exuded warmth, joy, and hope. But it was a man who was no longer the customs officer who had to decide what was allowed entrance to the church and what was not. He was now Christ's vicar on earth, the representative of him who is Love.¹

The priestly theology of Pope Benedict XVI is one which speaks of life experience. It illustrates a man full of love and hope for Christ and the whole of humanity. He never seems to tire of repeating the need of a personal relationship that the priest is to have with Christ. For him, the priest is one who has tasted, or at least wants to taste, the delights of a sweet encounter with Christ and thus longs to share it with humanity. We shall here consider briefly how the Holy Father expounds on the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

THE PRIEST

To the question, "What is the Sacrament of Holy Orders?" the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which Pope Benedict himself redacted, answers that Holy Orders is *the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time.*² Such a declaration immediately sheds light upon the two principal protagonists of each and every call that the Lord makes in the Church, that is, the Caller and the called, Christ and the candidate to whom the call is directed.

Indeed *only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers.*³ Christ's priesthood is a perfect self-offering to the Father and it is *in Christ, through Christ and with Christ* that we effectively offer ourselves to the Father. From its very origin, "the sacrament of Holy Orders is an expression of a particular charism, a gift of the Holy Spirit and therefore coming from on high. Christ stands as its origin and, like every other charism; it is not simply a sociological result of the Church. It comes from on high; it is not born of some worldly democracy, it is born entirely of Christ ... for the community."⁴



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"IN PERSONA CHRISTI CAPITIS"

In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "it is Christ himself who is present in his Church as Head of the Body, Shepherd of the flock, High Priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of truth."⁵ The priesthood of the New Testament is no longer a question of lineage, as was the case in the Old Testament, but of "discovering oneself in the mystery of Christ". The mystery of the priesthood of the Church lies in the fact that we can speak with his "I": *in persona Christi*. He wishes to exercise his Priesthood through us.⁶

Furthermore, Maurizio Costa offers us a good insight on what the Church means by "*in persona Christi Capitis*",

It does not mean that the ordained minister represents Christ with the intention of substituting him, to put himself in his Christ's place ... He Christ has not come to take the place of some absent God, but

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to make the Father totally present amidst man ... Christ wants them the ordained ministers to be *his sacraments*, in the same way as he is the sacrament of the Father, to be mediators of his unique priesthood, of his unique sacrifice, of his unique salvific mission; and not only as his intermediaries, in the same way as he is the mediator and not merely intermediary between the Father and humanity.⁷

The union which the call gives the priest, or seminarian, to Christ is so intense that the Pope can only define it as a *falling in love*⁸ with God, a moment of grace which brings the human person to an intimate knowledge of the God who has revealed his face in Jesus Christ.⁹ The priest is above all a servant of others, and he must continually work at being a sign pointing to Christ, a docile instrument in the Lord's hands ... The priesthood, as Saint Augustine said, is *amoris officium*; it is the office of the good shepherd who offers his life for his sheep.¹⁰

INTIMACY WITH CHRIST

Intimacy with Jesus Christ is in fact, in my opinion, the most recurrent theme that Pope Benedict seems to repeat when talking on or to priests. Such closeness to the sacred calls upon the priest to a daily renewal of his call so that *daily life will not dull what is great and mysterious*¹¹ for "... no one can give what he does not personally possess. We cannot pass on the Holy Spirit effectively or make him perceptible to others unless we ourselves are close to him we ourselves need to remain within the radius of the Holy Spirit's breath, in contact with him."¹²

The need for a personal relationship with Christ is evermore urgent in this dispersed contemporary world. The apostolic mission which the priest is entrusted must be the result of an encounter with Christ who, says the Pope, *wants to use your lips, and your hands, your spirit of sacrifice and your talent*.¹³ The Holy Father's pleading to priests is thus to *immerse yourselves in his love, and give him your love!*¹⁴

NOURISHING SUCH INTIMACY

This relationship with Christ needs to be nourished ever day; it demands that we be dependent on Christ. The Holy Father himself provides some *secrets*. In order to keep close to Christ, we must *meditate on his Word* wherein *we talk to him and he talks to us*. This listening, walking in the environment of the Word must be transformed into a response

in prayer¹⁵, in the *Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist* in which he comes to us and enters us, and also in the *Sacrament of Penance* which purifies us of the daily grimes that daily life deposits on us. The Pope also mentions *paying attention to carrying out human tasks well* and also to *respect our neighbour*. Finally, he also mentions *a sensitivity for good initiatives*.¹⁶ *The secret of holiness, says Pope Benedict, is friendship with Christ and faithful obedience to his will.*¹⁷

METAPHORS AND IMAGES

Being a very liturgical person, Pope Benedict often illustrates his theology with the use of images and metaphors, of which we shall consider a few.

HANDS

The first image the Holy Father uses to explain the servile / intimate dimension of the priest of Christ is the use of hands. Through the ancient rite of the imposition of hands, Christ says to the Ordinand, *you belong to me you are under the protection of my hands of my heart*.¹⁸ Being an instrument of human action, Christ *wants our hands so that they may become his own in the world so they can pass on his divine touch*.¹⁹

Jesus says to his disciples, *"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."* (John 15, 15) The laying on of hands in the ordination rite is the liturgical action by which the Lord makes us his friends, entrusting himself to us, thereby enabling us to share his *thought and will*.²⁰ *Learn to think as Christ thought, says the Pope, learn to think with him a thinking of the heart that we ourselves enter in vital contact with God*.²¹ The Pope has a word of hope for the clergy of today who might feel themselves too shaken by this disrupted world: *God never fails*.²²

VESTMENTS

In the administration of the sacraments, the priest acts and speaks "in persona Christi", he speaks for the Other, for Christ, *giving ourselves to him as he gave himself for us*.²³ This "putting on of Christ", as Pope Benedict calls it, takes place at every Mass by the putting on of liturgical vestments. This demands *entering ever anew into the "yes" of our office – into that "no longer I" of Baptism which Ordination to the priesthood gives to us in a new way and at the same time asks of us*.²⁴

The Pope first speaks of the *amice* which represents the priest's total concentration in Christ: *my heart must open itself docilely to the Word of God and be recollected in the prayer of the Church*.²⁵ He then speaks of the *alb* and *stole*, which are festive robes reminding us of that text in the Book of Revelations mentioning the washing of the robes in the Blood of the Lamb thus making them white and shining like light (cf. Rev. 7, 14). *The "Blood of the Lamb" is the love of the Crucified Christ. It is this love that makes our dirty clothes white, that makes our clouded spirit true and bright, that transforms us, despite all our shadows, into "the light of the Lord"*.²⁶ Finally he also mentions the *chasuble* representing the yoke of the Lord. It recalls the words of Jesus who invites us to take his yoke upon us and to learn from him who is *gentle and lowly in heart* (Mt 11, 29).

ANGELS


The Holy Father speaks of the priestly ministry by the metaphor of angels too. In the Pope's own words, *the Angel is a creature who stands before God. Angels are God's messengers; they bring God to men; they open heaven and thus open earth*.²⁷

Bishops²⁸, notices Pope Benedict, already in the Book of Revelation were called "angels" of their church. *Indeed Bishops must be men of God; they must live oriented to God; multum orat pro populo*.²⁹ Like Michael they must protect the people of God leading them to *find joy of faith and to learn to discern the spirits; to accept good and reject evil; to remain and increasingly to become, by virtue of the hope of faith, people who love in communion with God-Love*.³⁰ Like Gabriel they must be messengers of God's Incarnation by firstly *making their own flesh available to him, give him the matter of the world and of their lives Enter into union with Christ yourselves assume Gabriel's role: to bring Christ's call to man*.³¹ Like Raphael he is entrusted with the task of *healing men and women ever anew to the reconciled power of Christ's love because man is in need of truth and love above all things*.³²

MAGI

The evangelical passage of the Wise Men sheds light upon the fact that the call to priesthood, like any other call in the Church, is a journey wherein a personal encounter with Christ is longed for. Addressing seminarians in Cologne, Pope Benedict speaks of the seminary as a *significant time in the life of the follower of Jesus*.³³ In the simile of





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the Magi's journey, the Pope seems to capture the very nature of every vocation, especially that of the priesthood. He says, "The Magi set out because of a deep desire which prompted them to leave everything and begin a journey. It was as though they had always been waiting for that star. It was as if the journey had always been a part of their destiny, and was finally about to begin."³⁴

The more you discover him the more you are moved to seek him, says the Pope, until the encounter becomes adoration, that is, a standing in the presence of the Lord and thereafter willing to serve him.³⁵

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Lastly, the Good Shepherd image probably explains best the nature of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ of which all the rest partake. As Peter makes clear in his first epistle, Jesus is the *Chief Shepherd* of the flock which is the Church (cf. 1 Pt 5, 4). *Through the Sacrament of Ordination the priest is totally inserted into Christ so that by starting from him and acting in his sight he may carry out in communion with him the service of Jesus, the one Shepherd.*³⁶

Jesus' attitude must be the only attitude which the priest knows and lives. The words of Jesus – *I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep* (John 10, 14-15) – should not be a mere intellectual knowledge but of a profound personal relationship; a knowledge of the heart of one who loves and one who is loved; of one who is faithful and one who knows how to be trustworthy.³⁷ The Pope's words on the Shepherd speak of a very intimate relationship which he seems to embrace with God. For Christians, the Shepherd is "the image of the One who set out to seek his lost sheep: humanity; the

image of the One who follows us even into our deserts and confusion; the image of the One who took upon his shoulders the lost sheep, which is humanity, and carried it home."³⁸

CELEBRATOR OF SACRAMENTS

The priest is called to holiness; he is called to communicate the *Holy Spirit's breath*³⁹ which befriends us to God and makes us share in his divine life. Pope Benedict talks very often of the priest as one standing in a *total and exclusive devotion*⁴⁰ before God, thereby making himself available to serve him. In the Sacraments, the celebrant stands before God and before the Assembly as an *alter Christus* to make visible God's invisible grace.⁴¹

We shall consider here two particular sacraments, often referred to in the priestly discourse of the Pope, which illustrate further the essential nature of the priesthood.

EUCHARIST

For Pope Benedict, the Eucharist is a *sine qua non* in the priest's life. It lies at the centre of a life dedicated totally to God. For him, the centrality of God means *to be with Christ in daily Mass, always celebrated with deep interior participation.*⁴² An active participation (by both celebrant and community) makes the Eucharist the sign *par excellence* denoting community, communion, commitment and oneness.

"Through the Eucharist, the Lord not only gives himself to his own but also gives them the reality of a new communion among themselves. The disciples become his dwelling place which, as history unfolds, grows like the new and the living temple of God in this world. Immediately after the Institution of the Sacrament, Jesus spoke of what being

disciples means in the new community: it is a commitment of service, just as he himself is among them as the One who serves."⁴³

The Eucharist, as a sign of communion, not only unites the whole body of Christ that is the Church, but, as the Holy Father points out, also unites the ordained amongst themselves.⁴⁴

PENANCE

The priest is a minister of forgiveness and *evil can be overcome only by forgiveness.*⁴⁵ For the Pope, the *suffering love of Christ* has the power to *destroy* evil and it is through this suffering love that priests draw the power to forgive.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Sacrament of Penance speaks of the peace that Christ brings into the world, for *when the Lord says this "peace to you", he does not give something, but he gives himself. Indeed he himself is peace* (cf. Eph 2, 14).⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

The whole of the Pope's Magisterium on the Ordained Ministry, arrived at through a life's worth of experiences, is summed up in the simple yet profound words of Don Andrea Santoro, which he quoted at the end of the homily of Chrism Mass of 2006. "I am here to dwell among these people and enable Jesus to do so by lending him my flesh.... One becomes capable of salvation only by offering one's own flesh. The evil in the world must be borne and the pain shared, assimilating it into one's own flesh as did Jesus".⁴⁸

Jesus assumed our flesh, the Pope says, *let us give him our own. In this way he can come into the world and transform it.*⁴⁹ In the Priestly Ordination, particularly in the laying on of hands, the *encounter between two freedoms comes into being*, making Christ and the Ordinand one at heart – burning with the fire of the Gospel and the joy of the Lord indwelling in him – and thus the priest becomes a *servant of joy*.⁵⁰

REFERENCES

- 1 JOHN F. THORNTON – SUSAN B. VARENNE, *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI. His central writings and speeches*, New York: HarperCollins 2007, xviii.
- 2 *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 322; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1536.
- 3 THOMAS AQUINAS, *Ad Hebraeos* 8, 4 as quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1545.
- 4 MAURIZIO COSTA, *Tra Identità e Formazione. La Spiritualità Sacerdotale*, Roma: Edizioni ADP 2003, 56.
- 5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1548.
- 6 BENEDICT XVI, *Homiliae in Missa Chrismatis*, in AAS 98/5 (2006), 381. Hereafter, BENEDICT XVI, *Missa Chrismatis* (2006).
- 7 COSTA, *Tra Identità e Formazione*. 57-58.
- 8 BENEDICT XVI, *Homily in the Meeting with Seminarians in Cologne* (19 August 2005) (on-line): http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050819_seminarians_en.html (16 November 2008). Hereafter, BENEDICT XVI, *Cologne* (2005).
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 BENEDICT XVI, *Adhortatio Apostolica Postsynodalis Sacramentum Caritatis*, in AAS 99/3 (2007), 123-124.
- 11 BENEDICT XVI, *Missa Chrismatis* (2006), 381.
- 12 BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone*, in *Bullettin tal-Arcidjocesi*, 151 (2008), 457-458. Hereafter, BENEDICT XVI, *Bolzano-Bressanone* (2008).
- 13 BENEDICT XVI, *Address in the Meeting with the clergy while in Pastoral Visit to Poland*, in *Bullettin tal-Arcidjocesi*, 138 (2006), 275. Hereafter, BENEDICT XVI, *Poland* (2006).
- 14 BENEDICT XVI, *Poland* (2006), 275.
- 15 In a homily the Pope gave in the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, he says, "It is through the promise of his prayer that the Lord entrusts Peter the task for the brethren. Peter's responsibility is anchored in Jesus' prayer. It is this that gives him the certainty that he will persevere through all human miseries." See: BENEDICT XVI, *Homily on the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul*, in *Bullettin tal-Arcidjocesi*, 139 (2006), 442. Hereafter, BENEDICT XVI, *Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul* (2006).
- 16 Although the Pope mentions these measures as an answer to a question made to him by a seminarian in the meeting with the clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano and Bressanone, which took place on August, 6th, 2008 – see BENEDICT XVI, *Bolzano-Bressanone* (2008), 458-460 –, nevertheless he names some of the same secrets – as he called it in a meeting he had with seminarians in Cologne in 2005 –, in other homilies and discourses he has given, namely in Cologne (2005), Bavaria (2006), and the Roman Major Seminary (2008). Also, when asked a question regarding the burden of the pastoral care of our parishes in the Bressanone Cathedral (2008) by Fr Franz Pixner, Pope Benedict answers by bringing to the fore three replies: (1) the priest must have his priorities set, (2) he must know how to delegate, and (3) indeed no priest is a priest on his own. This shows that the Pope is perfectly aware of the situation in which priests are to nourish such intimacy with Christ: see BENEDICT XVI, *Bolzano-Bressanone* (2008), 469-471. Also, in a meeting he had with the Clergy of the Diocese of Aosta in July 2005 the Pope's own words are enlightening, "Io penso che non c'è un sistema per un cambiamento rapido. Dobbiamo andare, oltrepassare questa galleria, questo tunnel, con pazienza, nella certezza che Cristo è la risposta e che alla fine apparirà di nuovo la sua luce ... non solo non perdere la certezza che Cristo è realmente il Volto di Dio, ma approfondire questa certezza e la gioia di conoscerLa ... in una relazione personale e profonda con il Signore": see BENEDICT XVI, *Discorso nel Incontro con il Clero della Diocesi di Aosta* (25 July 2005) (on-line): http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050725_diocesi-aosta_it.html (16 November 2008).
- 17 BENEDICT XVI, *Cologne* (2005).
- 18 BENEDICT XVI, *Missa Chrismatis* (2006), 381.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 381. Quoting Saint Gregory the Great, Pope Benedict also shows the importance that the priest be a witness of Christ rendering him physically present in the world. He asks, "How can a man say "no" to the greatest thing that exists, that he has no time for what is more important, that he can lock himself into his own existence? In reality they have never had an experience of God, they have never acquired a "taste" for God; they have never experienced how delightful it is to be "touched" by God! They lack this "contact" – and with it the "taste for God": And only if we, so to speak, taste him, only then can we come to the banquet": see BENEDICT XVI, *Homily in the Mass with members of the Bishops' Conference of Switzerland* (7 November 2006) (on-line): http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20061107_swiss-bishops_en.html (16 November 2008). Hereafter, BENEDICT XVI, *Swiss Bishops* (2006).
- 20 In the same homily the Pope takes up again the need to nourish our daily intimacy with Christ saying, "... becoming the friend of Christ. For this friendship we must daily recommit ourselves ... we should know Jesus in an increasingly personal way, listening to him, living together with him, staying with him." see BENEDICT XVI, *Missa Chrismatis* (2006), 383.
- 21 BENEDICT XVI, *Swiss Bishops* (2006).
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 BENEDICT XVI, *Homily during the Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday*, in *Bullettin tal-Arcidjocesi*, 143 (2007), 126.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 128.
- 27 BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for the Episcopal Ordination of six new bishops*, in *Bullettin tal-Arcidjocesi*, 146 (2007), 435. Hereafter, BENEDICT XVI, *Episcopal Ordination* (2007).
- 28 According to the liturgical tradition of the Church and the language of the Fathers of the Church, the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders is conferred by Episcopal consecration; it is called the high priesthood, the acme (*summa*) of the sacred ministry: Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1557.
- 29 BENEDICT XVI, *Episcopal Ordination* (2007), 435.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 436.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 436.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 436-437.
- 33 BENEDICT XVI, *Cologne* (2005).
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 The Holy Father expounds more on this twofold mission of the priest in the Homily of the Chrism Mass of 2008. In it, he takes up the Old Testament priesthood and rereads it in the light of the New Testament. He says priests "do not receive any portion of land in the Holy Land – they live of God and for God. They did not attend to the usual work necessary to sustain daily life. Their profession was 'to stand in the Lord's presence' ... The priest must be an upright person, vigilant, a person who remains standing. Service is then added to all this": see BENEDICT XVI, *Homiliae In Missa Chrismatis Ferae V Hebdomadae Sanctae*, in AAS 100/4 (2008), 228-229.
- 36 BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for the ordination of the priesthood of 15 deacons of the Diocese of Rome*, in *Bullettin tal-Arcidjocesi*, 138 (2006), 263-264. Hereafter, BENEDICT XVI, *Priestly Ordination* (2006).
- 37 BENEDICT XVI, *In presbyterali Ordinatione duorum et viginti diaconorum Romanae Diocesis*, in AAS 99/5 (2007), 349.
- 38 BENEDICT XVI, *Priestly Ordination* (2006), 268.
- 39 BENEDICT XVI, *Bolzano-Bressanone* (2008), 458.
- 40 BENEDICT XVI, *Adhortatio Apostolica Postsynodalis Sacramentum Caritatis*, in AAS 99/3 (2007), 124-125.
- 41 The communal / corporal dimension of our faith is one which also characterises the Holy Father's homilies and pronouncements. In a conversation the Holy Father had with Peter Seewald while still Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith, upon being questioned on the real value of the Sacraments, he replied, "The interpretation of sensual and spiritual dimensions is the logical extension of the fact that God became flesh and shares himself with us in earthly things. The sacraments are thus a kind of contact with God himself. They show that this faith is not a purely spiritual thing, but one that involves community and creates community g...h the communal aspect, the corporal dimension of faith, expresses itself in the sacraments": see JOSEPH CARD RATZINGER, *God and the World Believing and Living in our time*, a conversation with Peter Seewald translated by Henry Taylor, San Francisco: Ignatius 2002, 398.
- 42 BENEDICT XVI, *Marian Vespers with the Religious and Seminarians of Bavaria*, in *Bullettin tal-Arcidjocesi*, 140 (2006), 597.
- 43 BENEDICT XVI, *Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul* (2006), 441.
- 44 The Pope points this out in many instances. One such case is the answer to a question made to him in the Bressanone Cathedral on August 6th, 2006, by Fr Franz Pixner. he says, "Priests, even if they live far apart are a true community of brothers who should support and help one another g...h Precisely no priest is a priest on his own, we are a presbyterate and it is only in this communion with the Bishop that each one can carry out his service": see BENEDICT XVI, *Bolzano-Bressanone* (2008), 471.
- 45 BENEDICT XVI, *Homiliae Die Pentecostes cum presbyterorum ordinatione*, in AAS 97/6 (2005), 782.
- 46 Cf. *Ibid.*, 782.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 781.
- 48 BENEDICT XVI, *Missa Chrismatis* (2006), 385.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 385.
- 50 BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for the ordination of new priests for the Diocese of Rome*, in *Bullettin tal-Arcidjocesi*, 149 (2008), 223-224.