



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

THE PRIEST PARTICIPATES IN THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST HEAD AND SHEPHERD

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As is known, the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* is depends upon two principles:

1. It places the priesthood within its natural context, which is *ecclesiological*.
2. It emphasizes the *christological* aspect. The priesthood is a sign of the presence of Christ in the Church and in the world. It constitutes a manifestation and is a living transparency of Christ the priest, head, teacher and shepherd for the building up of the Church and leading her to the Father.

These two principles, inseparably linked to each other, have had enormous consequences for theology and above all for priestly spirituality.

- a. The priesthood is not an absolute value and conceived in itself; it is *relative*. It must be conceived and lived in relation to priesthood of Christ and the common priesthood of all the baptized in the community of the Church. In this context *authority is service and communion*. In this way *authority* regains its primitive meaning: I help someone to grow (P0, 2 and 9).

- b. The participation of the priest in the authority of Christ is not something from outside, it is an ontological relationship assured by the sacrament of the *imposition of hands* (cf. LG 21 and 28). The ordained with the gift of a *stable* grace participates in all the salvific works of Christ.

- c. The grace of ordination is not only limited to the Eucharist; it is a charism where sanctification, pastoral and educative guidance, and mission are closely linked together: one is ordained not only to be something (ontological aspect) but also to activate the priestly charism (dynamic aspect) (P0, 2-3). Ordination makes the human person capable of the entire work of the mission and evangelization.

1 Translated from the original Italian by Rev. Peter Welsh.

2 Bishop of Syros, Santoprino and Crete

d. From all this we deduce that the priest is not simply an administrator of the sacraments or a bureaucrat. He is able to participate in the work of Christ head and shepherd in a way totally efficacious if he truly becomes a living transparency of Christ, the victim and servant (cf. *PO*, 9). The holiness and the sense of obedience, the rediscovery of the ecclesial and christological dimension of priestly authority can help priests on one hand to exercise their service in the footsteps of Christ whom they represent and never to serve themselves in the priesthood by exercising an unhealthy dominion over others ("not lording it over others," 1 Peter 5:3) These virtues of holiness by example can help the laity to see in the priest Christ the shepherd and head. Today, with the emphasis which is rightly given to the laity, there exists the danger of leveling the charisms in the Church. All want to have the charisms, even that of being a sign of Christ the head and shepherd! This above all happens with certain ecclesial movements which verbally recognize the charism of the priest, but, in practice, limit it only to his presiding over the Eucharist, recognizing as "head and shepherd" their own superiors in the movement.

These and other elements have been underlined by the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, and have positively influenced the life of thousands of priests. Now, thirty years after this important document, should it not be the case to underscore in a solemn way some aspects which the council has left in the shadow?

1. Is the priesthood simply a participation in the episcopal priesthood as *Presbyterorum Ordinis* may appear to say (cf. *PO*, 5), or does it have its own meaning which is not only vicarious? Does the priest represent the bishop or is he in the community a sign of Christ head and shepherd?

2. Does not the priest, as participant of the authority of Christ head and shepherd, sometimes run the risk of underscoring too much the christological aspect of the priesthood to the detriment of the pneumatic? The priest acts *in persona Christi* but also for, *in* and *with* the support of the whole Church in the moment in which he addresses the *epiclesis* to the Father to send the Holy Spirit and thus continue the work of Christ and give us a pre-taste of the *eschaton*. On this point the experience of the oriental tradition could be precious.

3. Sometimes, in practice, overlooking the pneumatic aspect, results in forgetting the prophetic aspect of the priesthood.