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Thomas P. Rausch

Loyola Marymount University, trausch@lmu.edu

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Language, Priestly Identity, and Ordination

BY THOMAS P. RAUSCH, SJ

Language both names the world of our experience and affects the way we perceive or imagine it. In the years since Vatican II, the Catholic community has developed a new language for speaking about its central act of worship. Prior to the council, Catholics spoke of the "holy sacrifice of the Mass," of "hearing" Mass or "fulfilling one's Sunday obligation." There was considerable emphasis on the "miracle of transubstantiation." Today, Catholics speak more often of the "liturgy" or "eucharist." Their worship language is less passive, more communal and participative. They "join" in the liturgy, "take part" in its "celebration." The word of God is "proclaimed" by several "lectors." Homilies have replaced the sermon.

Beneath this change in language lies a whole new understanding of the nature of liturgy and the role of those who take part in it. The church is recovering the theology of the liturgical assembly.

A Similar Change for Priests

A similar change has taken place in regard to the liturgical role of those whom the Catholic tradition calls "presbyters" or, more popularly, "priests." In the past, the priest was said to "confect" the eucharist or to "say" Mass (in German-speaking countries, he "read" the Mass). With a greater appreciation of the communal nature of liturgy, it has become customary to refer to the priest at Mass as the "celebrant" and, finally, as the "presider."

"Presider" (from the Greek *proistēmi*, "to set before," "to be at the head of") is an ancient term. It has been used at least since the time of Paul to designate those who preside over the life of the community (cf. 1 Thes 5:12; Rom 12:8; 1 Tim 5:17). In Justin Martyr (c. 150) there is clear evidence that presiding over the community means presiding at its liturgy (1 *Apol.* 65). Today, however, presider is used in liturgical contexts that are not necessarily eucharistic. We speak of a presider at a communion service or at the liturgy of the hours. Some of these presiders are lay rather than ordained.

The substitution of the word "presider" for "priest" has contributed to a loss of identity for many priests. At

Rev. Thomas P. Rausch, SJ, is professor and chair of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, CA.

the same time, it has sometimes contributed to a confusion of roles in the liturgical assembly. Some have concluded that eucharistic presidency, like other presidential roles, is based simply on a charism for leadership or that it can be shared or rotated within the group. Others have gone so far as to celebrate eucharistic services without ordained presiders, thus adopting a "low church," congregational ecclesiology which is contrary to the Catholic tradition.

Understanding the Role

How should we understand the role of the one who presides at the liturgical assembly? In contemporary theology there is a tendency to speak of priesthood as a function rather than a status. Liturgists such as Gordon Lathrop and John Baldovin argue, correctly, that the language of priesthood for ordained ministers is metaphorical rather than literal. While this is true, such language is certainly traditional. As early as the year 96, the author of *1 Clement* compared the order of the Jewish cult, with its high priests, priests, and levites, with the order of the Christian community, with its apostles, bishops, and deacons. As the church became more aware of the sacrificial dimension of the eucharist, it began using

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sacerdotal language about those who presided at the eucharist. The *Didache* (c. 100) recognizes the wandering prophets as eucharistic leaders (10) and calls them "high priests" (13). The prayer of consecration for the ordination of a bishop which comes to us from Hippolytus of Rome (c. 215) refers to the bishop as "high priest" (*Apostolic Tradition* 3,4). Tertullian (d. 225) and Cyprian (d. 258) also speak of the bishop as *sacerdos*. Cyprian extended the term to presbyters, but only in conjunction with the bishop, a usage which has been traditional in the church. It is also in Cyprian that we find the first reference to presbyters presiding at the eucharist without the bishop (*Letter* 5).

But the fact that language of priesthood for priests and



Rev. Richard R. Verberg, of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, lies prostrate during the Litany of the Saints at his ordination in 1971. Photo courtesy of the Catholic Herald.

bishops is metaphorical, based on their role at the eucharist, does not mean that their role is merely a function. The priest does not simply preside. What is crucial is the question of authorization. The Latin word "ordain" means to order or to incorporate into an order. By ordination to the order of presbyters, the one ordained is incorporated into the church's pastoral office. A new relation now exists between the one ordained and the community; something real has happened. The tradition expressed this by speaking of an ontological change or "character" received in the sacrament of orders. Henceforth in his sacramental ministry, the priest is able to act in the name of the church (*in persona ecclesiae*) and, thus, in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*), the head of the church. According to Vatican II, the priest by ordination is enabled to "act in the person of Christ the Head" (*in persona Christi capitis*) (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 2).

Saying What Is Specific

Neither the metaphorical nature of the ordained priesthood nor the common priesthood of all believers means that the word "priest" should be abandoned, as Hans Küng once suggested. The terms "minister" or "servant leader" are sometimes suggested as alternatives, but these are not able to say what is specific to ordained ministry. The English word "priest" is derived etymo-

logically from the Greek word *presbyteros*; its roots are in the New Testament. The fact that it also conveys the cultic sense of "*sacerdos*" has expressed the orientation of the church's apostolic office to the eucharist and the nature of the church as a eucharistic community. In the Reformation traditions, where ordained ministry was redefined as a preaching office (*Predigtamt*) or ministry (*Dienst*), the centrality of the eucharist in the church's life too often disappeared.

Both the baptized and ordained ministers share in the one priesthood of Christ, though in different ways. All the faithful are "configured" to Christ through baptism and so have a participation in his priesthood, but ordination incorporates a baptized person into the church's apostolic office. This office gives the priest a special role, a charism for a particular service, not a higher status. Priests are enabled by ordination to represent the church and to act officially in its name and, thus, in the person of Christ.

The ordained priesthood serves the common priesthood of all the faithful, particularly when the priest presides at the assembly's celebration of the eucharist. By his communion with the bishop, the priest symbolizes and maintains the communion that exists between the local congregation and the local church and with the worldwide communion of the church. The real meaning of ordination is to be found, not in sacred power, a concept open to misunderstanding, but in sacramental authorization.