Priestly Relationships according to *Presbyterorum ordinis*: Renewing the Gift of Communion

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Introduction

Presbyterorum ordinis has been described as one of the "stepchildren" of the Second Vatican Council. Drafted late in the conciliar process, the decree bears the marks of intense debate and hurried compromise. The French theologian Yves Congar criticized it for offering a fragmentary account of the presbyteral office, juxtaposing – without integrating – a traditional, cultic image of the priest with newly emergent emphases on teaching and pastoral leadership.

From the outset, the council fathers intended the decree to address the life and discipline of the clergy rather than reopen fundamental questions about the origins and nature of the priesthood. Yet even within these limits, consensus proved difficult. During the third session of the council, an earlier schema was rejected by a vote of 1199 to 930. Over the following year, bishops proposed more than 10,000 amendments. It was a minor miracle that the final text passed on December 7, 1965, by an overwhelming vote of 2390 to 4. Whether this result came about from genuine satisfaction with the text, or mere conciliar fatigue, I leave it to others to determine.

The decree unfolds in three chapters. The first situates the ministerial priesthood within the church understood as the priestly people of God, who share in Christ's paschal mystery by uniting themselves to his sacrifice. The second chapter addresses the functions of the priesthood, the relationships that flow from ordination, and the practical question of the distribution of clergy in a global church. The third chapter underscores hierarchical communion with the order of bishops and goes on to provide a series of reflections on the virtues and spiritual aids necessary for priestly life and service today.

A great deal of theological discussion has centered on the priority given in chapter two to the priest's teaching office. Some have seen in this a departure from the primacy long accorded to the cultic dimension in medieval and early modern theology. Yet the sanctifying role of the priest is by no means eclipsed. The decree clearly affirms that the Eucharist is "the source and summit" of the priest's ministry—the font from which all his activity flows and the goal toward which it is ordered.

Theologians such as Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger sought to move beyond an imagined dichotomy between the prophetic and cultic dimensions. They argue in the years after the council that proclamation of the word in its supreme degree includes sanctification and governance by making the word sacramentally present in the Eucharist and pastorally present in a rightly ordered community. When we speak of the *munera triplex* – teaching,

sanctifying, and governing – the crucial task is not to rank them but to hold them together. The three functions form an inseparable whole, flowing from the sacramental character that configures the one being ordained to Christ as head of the church.

But there is a deeper theological claim that needs attention. This configuration is not merely an authorization to perform sacred functions, however essential they are for the Christian life. It is not reducible to empowerment. Certainly, all the baptized who form the common priesthood share in Christ's threefold office of priest, prophet and king in a manner proper to their state. Yet sacramental ordination effects an ontological change – *character indelebilis* – as taught by the Council of Trent and reaffirmed by Vatican II in both *Lumen gentium* and *Presbyterorum ordinis*. What develops more fully in the postconciliar magisterium is precisely an appreciation that this ontological change is intrinsically relational.

The structure of chapter two signals this insight. The text moves from priestly functions (paragraphs 4–6) to priestly relationships (paragraphs 7–9). That transition is not accidental. It suggests that what the priest *does* flows from who he *is*, and who he is can only be understood within a web of ecclesial relationships. Pope John Paul II makes this point explicit in his apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* ("I will give you shepherds," 1992). Ordination, he argues, configures the priest "to Christ the head and shepherd," and this configuration is lived concretely in relationships: to Christ, to the bishop, to the presbyterate, and to the entire people of God (cf. paragraphs 12, 16–18). Far from imparting an abstract substance, the ontological change brings about a receptivity to the graces that allow the ordained to share in Christ's mission of leading others into the communion he has with the Father.

More recently, Pope Leo XIV, in his apostolic exhortation *Dilexi te* ("I Have Loved You," 2025), marking for the sixtieth anniversary of the Vatican II decree, has adopted this explicitly relational understanding. Ordination establishes what he calls a "stable participation in Christ's pastoral relationality." Without denying the ontological transformation implied by sacramental character, Leo insists that its effect is never self-contained. It binds the ordained to Christ and structurally to the church's communion, mission, and accountability to the other members of the presbyteral order and to the faithful of the local church.

Within this framework, I would like to take the pulse of the three concrete relationships highlighted by *Presbyterorum ordinis* that flow from ordination and are decisive for priestly life and ministry—each containing what I judge to be its characteristic challenge for our own times: the priest-bishop relationship (restoring trust), the priest-presbyterate relationship (combatting isolation), and the priest-laity relationship (reconciling differences). Each is more or less under strain and faces a particular temptation. Yet each also shares the common solution of being renewed by and for the sake of communion with Christ.

Part I. The Priest – Bishop Relationship: Restoring Trust

From the moment the priest receives the laying on of hands by the bishop, he lives and acts in communion with the episcopal order. As paragraph 7 points out, "All priests, *in union with the bishops*, share in one and the same priesthood and ministry of Christ, so that the very unity of their consecration and mission requires their *hierarchical communion* with the order of bishops." Ordination is not only a reception of powers to perform sacred acts but also *being received into* an order that is defined by relationships with all its other members, including the bishop—who is also the link between the particular church and the universal body of believers. By ordination, priests become essential co-workers and advisors to their bishop—a bond that applies to diocesan clergy, priests in consecrated life, and those serving outside their diocese of incardination.

This relationship finds eloquent expression in the liturgy, where the priest invokes the name of the pope and of the local bishop in the Eucharistic Prayer, manifesting his bond of sacramental communion both with them, and through them, with the entire church. It therefore guarantees the catholicity of the worship over which he presides. All his actions, whether they pertain to teaching, sacraments, or pastoral governance, look to the bishop as the foundation of his authority to act in the name of Christ and for the building up of the local church.

Out of this sacramental bond comes a set of attitudes and modes of action that are to be realized in every priestly vocation. Paragraph 7 exhorts bishops to regard priests as "brothers and friends," caring for their spiritual and material well-being. At the same time, priests, for their part, "must stand by their bishops in sincere charity and obedience," sharing the bishop's pastoral burden with loyal cooperation. The council's teaching summons presbyters and bishops alike to a relationship of trust, honest dialogue, and evangelical charity. Such qualities are not optional but essential to the church's mission. It is a father–son and a brother–brother relationship modeled on our biblical forebears (cf. 2 Tim 1:6).

But what has happened to this relationship in the years since the closing of Vatican II? The Catholic Project at the Catholic University of America conducted two studies, one in 2022 and the other in 2025, that suggest the relationship is under strain, and for reasons due, at least in part, to the sexual abuse crisis that erupted more than two decades ago. Though priests generally report a high degree of satisfaction in their vocation, the two versions of the *National Study of Catholic Priests* indicate that trust and confidence in episcopal leadership have markedly declined, with only a modest change toward a more favorable outlook between the first and the second of the studies. Although more than seventy percent of priests believe their own bishop cares for them personally, only about half report having confidence in his overall leadership.

Writing in *First Things* (March 2025), Msgr. Thomas G. Guarino attributes widespread mistrust of bishops to current policies for responding to abuse claims and the fear of being falsely accused. Guarino has for years called for revisions of the *Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* (2002) to protect the rights of priests against whom accusations have been made. "In many dioceses, it has become standard practice to suspend any priest who is named in a civil complaint, no matter how bizarre, aged, or flimsy that complaint might be." Such removal of a priest on a single accusation alone strains the

standards of justice and contributes to an atmosphere in which trust in the episcopacy as a whole is appallingly low—twenty four percent according to the earlier study.

Without wading into the complex history of the charter or the application of many of its principles for investigating claims made against bishops in Pope Francis's motu proprio *Vos estis lux mundi* ("You Are the Light of the World," 2019), I concur with Guarino that the fallout from the crisis has created troubling tensions in the relationship. Bishops, with the help of lay and clergy advisors, have gone to great lengths to educate themselves and Catholic laity about the scourge of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults. Changes in canon law and policies adopted in many quarters of the church have helped to protect the innocent. Reparation has been done, often at devastating costs to dioceses, communities of consecrated life, and those accused of misconduct. Of course, this essential work is never completed. But stronger juridical remedies may still be needed to uphold the rights of clergy who are falsely accused; to have their cases adjudicated in a timely fashion; and to have their good name restored if they are found to be innocent of the charges made against them.

Yet beyond these legal remedies, we can look at other means of restoring trust in the relationship between priests and bishops. Two paths suggest themselves. First, the bishop must consciously present himself as a promotor and facilitator of priestly formation and fraternity. Communion cannot remain an abstract theological claim; it must take flesh in times of prayer, continuing education, and fraternity that bishops share with their priests. Study days, retreats, and even moments of recreation, which amply exist today, are not peripheral to the co-responsibility for the mission of the diocesan church, but integral to it. Where bishops participate in these gatherings—not merely as organizers but as "brothers among brothers"—a familial atmosphere can emerge, and walls of distrust can begin to break down.

Second, I would commend an annual one-to-one meeting between the diocesan bishop and each priest incardinated or ministering fulltime in his diocese. What I have in mind is borrowed from the Society of Jesus. Every year the Jesuit provincial, or his delegate, conducts with each member of the province a *manifestation of conscience* to review the external dimensions of his ministry and life in community, but also to attend to his interior life. Based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the *manifestatio* focuses not on sins but on discernment of how interior movements (consolations, desolations, etc.) are shaping both the Jesuit's ministry and his relationships with others inside the community and outside of it.

Transposed to a diocesan context, such a conversation with the bishop might invite the priest to speak candidly about his interior life and how it is impacting his work and living arrangements. What fruits from his annual retreat might he share? What changes in his schedule or added routines might improve his health? Has he planned a vacation this year? Granted, in large dioceses the bishop may need to delegate a portion of this role to an auxiliary bishop or a group of priest vicars competent in the skills needed for such open-ended dialogue. But the investment of time is worth it. Such an annual "heart to heart" can be a tangible means of renewing trust and building communion, which models for the rest of the

faithful what it means to be a “listening church” and a disciple of Jesus who accompanies others.

Part II. The Priest–Presbyterate Relationship: Combatting Isolation

Paragraph 8 of the decree teaches that by ordination priests are joined together in an intimate sacramental brotherhood. They form one presbyterate under and with the bishop and share a single mission: to build up the Body of Christ. In fact, the decree speaks only in the plural when referring to priests so as to underscore their communal identity. From the ancient sign of the common laying on of hands at ordination to regular concelebration in the Eucharistic liturgy, these expressions of unity are not decorative, but constitutive of the essence of the office. They also fulfill Christ’s prayer for unity among his priest-disciples (cf. John 17:21).

What the Council taught in 1965 applies with no less urgency today. Fraternity already takes varied forms: mentoring across generations; collaborating on ministerial programs; offering hospitality to a traveling brother; attending workshops together; recreating through sports and the arts; and where possible, sharing a form of common life. When a brother is sick, overburdened, or lonely, such solidarity takes on a particular urgency. Friendship deepens the holiness of both the one who carries out such gestures and its recipient. The decree cites Proverbs 27:17: “iron sharpens iron,” suggesting that friendship fortifies priests to meet the challenges of their apostolate.

Yet sixty years out, two serious obstacles stand in the way of priestly fraternity. The first is ideological polarization that mirrors patterns found elsewhere in today’s American culture. The Catholic Project data show a clear generational sorting of ideological and theological leanings among priests in the United Sates. Sixty-one percent of those ordained before 1975 identify as “very” or “somewhat” liberal whereas fifty-one percent of those entering the priesthood since 2010 view themselves as “very” or “somewhat” conservative. The same generational divergence appears in liturgical priorities. Priests ordained since 2000 are more likely than those ordained before 1980 to emphasize Eucharistic devotion (88% vs. 57%) and to prioritize access to the Traditional Latin Mass (39% vs. 11%).

When politics and liturgy become badges of belonging to this or that group, fraternity among priests can devolve into constant boundary management. The problem is further intensified by the architecture of today’s social media environment. Pope Leo XIV warns that algorithms, which are designed to maximize engagement and reward quick emotions, sort users into “bubbles of easy consensus and easy outrage” and thereby “increase social polarization.” In clergy circles, these consequences are corrosive, leading to strained conversations at table, mutual suspicion about pastoral motives, and friction over musical and rubrical preferences around the celebration of the Eucharist, which should be a focal point of unity rather than an occasion for tribal signaling.

From these tensions comes the deeper obstacle to priestly fraternity today, which is isolation. The Catholic Project data indicate that more recently ordained priests report higher

levels of loneliness than older cohorts. Forty-five percent of those ordained in 2000 or later, compared with twenty-seven percent of those ordained before 1980, indicate a struggle with loneliness. Of this younger segment, thirty-three percent also say that their relationships with other priests "tend to be superficial." Overextension also appears to reinforce this pattern, as forty-five percent of priests ordained since 2000 report being expected to do "too many things" in an era of diminishing personnel.

Paradoxically, in the midst of this discordant context the desire for fraternity among all age groups remains strong. Forty-eight percent express interest in priest fellowship or fraternity groups as a form of ongoing formation. The gap, therefore, seems less a matter of ideals than of trust and a workable rule of life that protects relationships as an integral part of the vocation rather than as an optional extra.

There is another factor that exacerbates the problem. If fraternity is to become concrete again, priests like so many of the laity they serve need a new approach to social media and the use of technology—one that must be more disciplined and communally oriented. The point here is not to fall into technophobia, but to acquire interior freedom vis-à-vis technology. In this new era, we need to work on cultivating the capacity for choosing the presence of another over the compulsion to use smart devices, to protect times in the schedule for silence and reading, and to keep pastoral availability from being swallowed up by constant digital activity.

Our propaedeutic stage programs in most American seminaries, thanks to the *Program of Priestly Formation* (USCCB, 6th edition), have implemented "technology fasts"—often restricting device-access for six-day periods or longer—not as a rejection of these tools but as an apprenticeship in that interior freedom so necessary for a priestly way of life. These practices in the seminary invite crucial considerations for later on. What would it look like for priests to designate "technology-free blocks," to limit social media to confined windows during the week or workday, and to refuse the subtle belief that to be faithful means being always *immediately* reachable?

Here the church's recent teaching is strikingly relevant. *Antiqua et Nova*, from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (2025), reminds us that human beings are "ordered by their very nature to interpersonal communion," and that "human intelligence is not an isolated faculty but is exercised in relationships." Pope Leo XIV presses the same point with directness: "technology can never replace real in-person relationships." The question, then, is not whether a tool works for us, but what it makes of us: artificial intelligence can help a priest with research for his homily and letter-writing, but it cannot be allowed to replace either his own voice in the pulpit nor his personal encounters with colleagues and the people he serves. In the language of *Antiqua et Nova*, replacing relationships with "interactions with technology" risks substituting "authentic relationality" with "a lifeless image."

At the same time, new media can strengthen friendship when it is consciously ordered toward embodied presence rather than being a substitute for it. Digital tools can help a priest check in on a brother, share prayer intentions across the diocese, plan a trip to the theatre or

sporting event, and coordinate dinners that might not otherwise happen. We saw during the pandemic that life could be sustained through regular online contact. Many dioceses held presbyterate-wide Zoom calls that continued beyond the crisis for addressing diocesan business, reporting on infirm brothers, celebrating anniversaries, and sharing news about successful pastoral initiatives. The lesson worth retaining is not that screens are enough, but that they can lower the threshold to creating the conditions for real fraternity—so long as the end point is being together in person for prayer, ministry, and restorative leisure.

Part III. The Priest – Laity Relationship: Reconciling Differences

Paragraph 9 builds on the council's recovery of a central biblical and patristic insight that had been eclipsed in Catholic theology for centuries. The ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the baptized are mutually ordered to one another in the one mission of Christ. This teaching, already articulated in *Lumen gentium* (nos. 10, 28), retrieved the biblical-patristic notion of the church as a priestly people (cf. Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:5)—a theme that Catholic theologians in the modern period had often approached cautiously because of its association with the Protestant Reformers.

It is important to situate this relationship within the deeper truth that ordination orders the priest not only to Christ but also to the whole body of the faithful. Yet the relationship contains a paradox. By virtue of holy orders, priests exercise the "outstanding and necessary office of father and teacher." At the same time, together with the lay faithful they remain "disciples of the Lord." Fundamentally, priests are "brothers among brothers"—one in dignity with all who have been reborn in baptism. The tension is intentional. The council shifts the church away from a model of clerical isolation toward one of communion and collaboration. The priest is not a solitary operator but a member of a body whose "building up is required of everyone." Leadership must never be framed as domination. Rather, it is a call to imitate Jesus himself, who came "not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28).

Building on this foundation of mutual support, the decree offers practical guidance for how priests should relate to lay woman and men of the church. Priests are urged to acknowledge and promote sincerely the dignity of the laity by respecting their experience and competence in secular affairs. To the laity belongs the primary responsibility to consecrate all things temporal and to plant the seed of faith in the fields of science, business, education, and politics. In the ecclesial realm, priests are cautioned against monopolizing the church's mission. Instead, they are to "confidently entrust" to the laity responsibilities as teachers and assistants in administering the church's temporal goods. The goal is to foster freedom and "room for action," as well as to enable the laity to undertake initiatives on their own.

At the same time, the priest's role is not one of passive facilitation. There is an "over-and-against-ness" proper to the office of presbyter. Priests are charged to be "defenders of the

common good" and "strenuous assertors of the truth," ensuring that the faithful are not carried about by "every wind of doctrine." They face the demanding task of reconciling legitimate differences of mentality and correcting false notions within the community. Only in this way can they lead the faithful toward living the truth in charity (cf. Ephesians 4:15). Acting in the name of the bishop, priests serve as points of unity, safeguarding the integrity of the faith while fostering a genuinely welcoming ethos for all believers and would-be believers.

How do we maintain this "unity of charity" in a society marked by pluralism? The flock entrusted to the care of priests is increasingly diverse culturally and often mirrors the ideological fractures of the wider society. Demographically, the Catholic Church in the United States has undergone significant change since Vatican II. As of 2025, roughly fifty-four percent of Catholics are White and thirty-six percent are Hispanic, with smaller but vital communities of Asians (four percent) and Black Catholics (two percent). The growth of the Latino community is reshaping parish life, worship, and pastoral priorities across the country. The immigrant story repeats itself in every generation of American Catholicism. Today, forty-three percent of U.S. Catholics are either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants. The church continues to be a spiritual home for those newly arrived, even as families move through the generational process of integrating into the new society. At the same time, our pews are aging. Fifty-eight percent of Catholic adults are now age fifty or older, compared with forty-seven percent of the general U.S. population. This demographic reality raises urgent questions about parish vitality in certain regions of the country.

Political divisions in the era of the Biden and Trump presidencies also test this "unity of charity," including around the immigration question. Catholic voters in the United States are closely split, with about fifty-three percent identifying with the Republican Party and forty-three percent with the Democratic Party. On contested moral issues, pastors face the difficult task of forming consciences. For example, surveys indicate a significant gap between church teaching on the sanctity of life and the views of many Catholics, with roughly fifty-nine percent of those self-identifying as Catholic believing abortion should be legal in most or all cases.

Yet the data from surveys also reveals signs of hope. Weekly Mass attendance remains consistent at about twenty-nine percent, but more than half of Catholics—fifty two percent—report praying daily. This suggests that even where institutional participation has weakened, personal devotion remains a reservoir of grace that the church can draw upon. Moreover, recent data from late 2025 and early 2026 points to what some observers have called a "quiet revival" among young adults. In the United States, approximately twenty-one percent of Gen Z adults now identify as Catholic—up from fifteen percent in 2022—an increase estimated at more than four million people. Young men appear to be driving much of this renewed interest, showing significantly higher rates of religious practice than young women. The level of engagement is striking, with roughly half of young adult Catholics attending Mass weekly. Some dioceses report increases of thirty to seventy percent in adults entering the church through the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. Similar patterns are emerging internationally, including strong growth among young Catholics in the U.K.

How do we bridge the gap between this complex pastoral reality and the ideal of clergy-lay communion extolled by the council? The recent synodal process highlights several virtues that may prove helpful. First, we must know our competence. In matters of politics, priests must avoid partisanship and promote principle in the pulpit. Our role is to teach moral truths that rarely, if ever, align perfectly with the policies or platforms of the dominant political parties. History and prudence suggest that clergy—and religious leaders in general—are more reliable when calling out injustices and violations against human life and dignity than when putting their authority behind detailed policy or programmatic remedies. Our primary task is to form the laity by informing their consciences, not to replace them.

Second, we must model civility and the art of listening. The Final Document of the Synod speaks of a synodal spirituality marked by "asceticism, humility, patience, and a willingness to forgive and be forgiven." Whatever one's view of the synodal process, these virtues are indispensable for ministry in our time. Priests, as well as bishops, must be the first to listen and create spaces where different points of view, based on cultural or political perspectives, can obtain a respectful hearing. The tendency to dominate others or suppress legitimate minority opinions must be resisted if priests are to fulfill their role as ministers of reconciliation (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18).

Third, we must revitalize the structures already available in church law—pastoral councils, finance councils, Catholic school boards, and other collaborative bodies. These are not bureaucratic formalities but necessary instruments of ecclesial collaboration. *Presbyterorum ordinis* envisions the priest not as the sole decision-maker but as a coordinator of charisms within his own community and for those approved lay associations and ecclesial movements that extend the church's evangelizing agenda across dioceses. As Pope Leo XIV affirms in *Dilexi te*, priests must resist every impulse to lord over others or carry out every task themselves. Rather, they are called to "discover with faith the various humble and exalted charisms of the laity." When these gifts are called out and supported, the priest truly serves as the one who gathers, orders, and fosters the many gifts that the Holy Spirit pours out on the people of God.

Conclusion

Back in 1965, *Presbyterorum ordinis* offered the church a renewed vision of the priest's relational life: communion with the bishop, fraternity with brother priests, and collaboration in mission with the laity, for whom he is a teacher, minister of the sacraments, and shepherd. These relationships are not accidental to the priesthood; they flow from its very ontology. The priest is not an isolated religious professional, but a man inserted sacramentally into the communion of the church for the sake of the salvation of souls.

Yet beneath these three relationships lies a more fundamental one. The priest's foundational relationship is with Christ himself. From that living communion all the others emerge and find their direction. As Pope Benedict XVI observed, the priest "is a servant of Christ, in the sense that his existence, configured to Christ ontologically, acquires an essentially relational character: he is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ, at the service of humankind." Because he belongs to Jesus—the High Priest of the New Covenant—the

presbyter belongs radically to others. His authority, fruitfulness, and pastoral charity are not self-generated; they flow from his being conformed to the one who has reconciled us to God and one another.

This insight is more urgent today than ever. Bishop Erik Varden at a talk last summer at the Napa Institute, perceptively noted that the cultural memory of Vatican II's immediate aftermath has faded. "Today's young Catholics are not ungrateful for the council's great gifts," the Bishop of Trondheim notes, "but unable to proceed with their grandparents' mindsets, uninclined to flog dead horses, unenthused by fossilized projects of *aggiornamento* when the sun has set on the *giorno* by which they were defined." What younger Catholics—and we should include seminarians in this grouping—long for, Varden suggests, "is to awaken the dawn, to know the saving power of Christ, the same today, yesterday, and always, yet making all things new, often enough by exploding time-bound dichotomies." That observation resonates strongly with my own experience as a rector and seminary formator. The seminarians entrusted to us today are not primarily asking to relive the debates of the Vatican II era. They are asking much more fundamental questions: What are we about? Where do we belong within the Catholic community? Their search points us back to the heart of the priestly vocation itself: the ontology that entails being in, being for, and being with Jesus the Lord of all.

For that reason, *Presbyterorum ordinis* must be reread for the times in which we live. Its teaching on priestly relationships remains vital, but its deepest implication is a call to recenter in prayer, the Word of God, and the Eucharist—where the priest's identity and mission are perennially renewed. Only a priest who abides in Christ can live faithfully his communion with the bishop, his fraternity with brother priests, and his collaborative service to believers and the wider human family. In every age—including our own digitally connected yet spiritually restless one—the path forward remains the same: to remember, to reengage, and to remain in him who is the origin, center, and enduring fruitfulness of the Catholic priesthood.