The Christologies in the Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents on Priestly Formation

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I must begin with an apology. This was not exactly the talk that I was preparing for, but I came across an interesting insight while doing some work for another project. I was reading Joseph M. White's famous book on the history of seminaries in the United States.[1] And there was just a passing remark that just stuck with me, then made rethink the presentation I was going to give. I decided that I would rather give a half-formed talk than a finished one that may not be quite as pertinent to our discussion today. And in some ways, it really is a good follow-up to Father Hy Nguyen's presentation earlier this morning.

Christ the Eternal Victim as the Model of Priestly Formation

Joseph M. White's book offers a reflection on the life, structures, and character of seminaries in the early part of our nation's history. He states there was really a theological blueprint, specifically a definite Christology, that governed the whole institution. It was a certain kind of a vision of Christ that determined every aspect of the seminary program. After all, if the priest is ontologically configured to Christ, then the priest must be who Christ is. If the priest acts *in persona Christi*, then which image of Christ one adopts becomes all-important for the identity of the individual priest.

I maintain that prior to the Council that operative metaphor which governed the life of the seminary was Christ as the Eternal Victim. The whole seminary Rule of Life, the discipline of the seminary, and, to a lesser extent, the seminary curriculum were all based upon this one title for Christ. Some of this approach is very much in accord with the Sulpician tradition. If Christ is the Eternal Victim, then this is how the priest lives his life and carries out his ministry also as an eternal victim. This is why we see such a heavy emphasis upon a term we love to use in the Sulpician world, namely, *anéantissement*, that is, self-annihilation or self-abnegation. To be sure, the seminaries of former days could be spartan and at times brutal environments, and that was intentionally so. This is often attributed to the lingering effects of Jansenism, but this was not necessarily the case. It was, once again, a certain kind of a Christological model that determined how the future priest was to be formed. Thus, there was a kind of intentional effacing of the personality of the candidate, so that another personality could emerge, specifically the personality of Christ the Eternal Victim.

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[1] Joseph M. White, *The Diocesan Seminary in the United States* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 14.

Operative Christologies in Priestly Formation Today

White's observations led me to consider some issues in the ministry of priestly formation today. A great deal has been written about and many lectures given concerning the challenge of implementing the Second Vatican Council's vision of the priesthood. How does one form men according to the new understanding of the Church arising from *Lumen gentium* which Father Nguyen talked about so eloquently this morning as did Bishop Massa last night? We are a long way from a narrow institutional model, which Cardinal Avery Dulles described in his classical work *Models of the Church*. Vatican II provided new images for the Church, e.g. mystical communion, people of God, etc. All of these are true. I would, however, like to offer a distinct perspective, one that I gained from many years of being a seminary professor who often teaches both Christology and Ecclesiology. I have come to the recognition that neither of these two fields of study exist in splendid isolation. The manner in which one conceives of Christ is going to shape how one views His Body, the Church. It makes sense that the identity of the Head and the members cannot really be disengaged from each other. But the same dynamic works in the opposite direction as well. In whatever way one conceives of the reality, the nature, the mission of the Church perforce is going to shape how one views Christ. The relationship between Christology and Ecclesiology should be approached dialectically.

This raises a question. Is there a Christology at work in all the documents in the Second Vatican Council? I believe that there is, one that is largely implicit however. It is certainly not as explicit as was the case in the post-Tridentine years. I could not agree more with Father Nguyen that there is something foundational about doctrine of the ontological change in an authentically Catholic theology of the priesthood. To be sure, though the grace of holy orders, a man is configured to Christ. But which vision of Christ, what kind of Christology, must inform the way we do priestly formation? We know that not all Christologies are created equal. While there is perennial truth contained in the image of Christ as Eternal Victim, this model has limitations as well. By itself it has little to say about the entire life of Christ and the way He fulfills the office of king and prophet as well as priest. The Son came to suffer and die, but also to live a life, indeed, a fully human life, one with a theandric quality.

If Christ the Eternal Victim by itself is an insufficient Christological model for priestly formation, what should be the model? Is there, once again, an implicit Christology of the Second Vatican Council that may guide us? I would say there is. The closest that we do come to an exposition of the Christological vision of the Council Fathers is in *Gaudium et Spes*, particularly the famous paragraph 22. I have always found this a fruitful resource for meditation and reflection. We can be tempted to think of the hypostatic union as meaning the union of the mysterious and the non-mysterious, the known and the unknown. And paragraph 22 says that is not the case at all. The union of the two natures is really a union of two mysteries. Humanity itself is mysterious. There is something opaque about the human condition. We are a mystery unto ourselves. How do we come to this requisite self-knowledge, which is the precondition for all wisdom? And so, paragraph 22 of *Gaudium et Spes*, I believe is a crucial statement about the meaning of humanity. It is, finally, only considering the mystery of Christ that the mystery of humanity becomes intelligible. That we know ourselves only by knowing Christ. That we know the human condition by looking at the One who is perfectly human, as the letter to the Hebrews says, a man like us in all things but sin. So once again, the overall thrust here is that Christ is not

fully human *despite* the hypostatic union, but precisely *because* of it. Because of this intimate union of divinity with his humanity, now we have the full contours of the human condition. Now we know what humans are called to be, what God intends them to be, in the light of Christ's Incarnation.

How does Christ illuminate the human condition, render the human mystery less opaque and more intelligible? He does so by passing through each of the stages of a human story. He makes the entire human narrative his own, not just our dying. And by passing through each of these stages, he radiates it with grace, but also with light. Christ appropriates for himself every stage of human existence and thus enters the human story in its totality. So, what I would suggest is that the applied Christology of the Second Vatican Council reflected in *Optatam totius* in a very subtle kind of way is not so much Christ the Eternal Victim but *Christus Viator*, Christ the Wayfarer. Christ the fellow traveler. This is who Christ is. This is how He affects the salvific plan of God. The economy of salvation is actualized by Jesus accompanying us in our life story. The Lord accomplishes his saving mission by rendering an intelligible account of what it means to be human from birth to death. and everything in between.

I would suggest that this must become the model for priestly formation. I would also suggest that this is operative in a very hidden, subtle, implicit way in *Optatam totius* and in the *Program for Priestly Formation*, sixth edition. I was thinking about Bishop Masa's comment last night that *Presbyterorum ordinis* tends to be regarded as the stepchild of the Second Vatican Council. If that is so, then *Optatam totius* is the illegitimate offspring of that stepchild. At some level, it has been supplanted by other documents that followed it, documents such as *Pastores dabo vobis*, and the various editions of the *Rationes fundamentales.* I would say that the enduring value of its principles still remains. I also believe that its Christological foundation is still relevant, if not even more so today. I just want to pick out a couple of relevant paragraphs here. I too, with Joseph Ratzinger, hold to a hermeneutic of continuity. I do not think the former model of Christology was being rejected or jettisoned by any stretch of the imagination by what came after the Second Vatican Council. Christ certainly remains the Victim offered for our salvation. This priestly role must remain foundational. But might we not seek a deeper understanding to what we mean by sacrifice? What classical definition of sacrifice could serve to deepen our reflection on this notion?

I believe such a classical definition can be found in chapter 10 of St. Augustine's *City of God.* According to Augustine, a true sacrifice is anything that leads to holy fellowship. Anything that leads to holy fellowship is the sacrifice. Bishop Massa's remarks last night and Father Nguyen's this morning both stressed the reality that the priesthood is all about relationality. It is about a deepening relationship with Christ so that a deeper relationship can be formed with the people entrusted to our care. So, this is, I think, what it means to live a sacrificial life. A sacrificial life demands the same capacity to accompany people like Jesus did through their life in order to make sure that their journey, their struggles, their story does not remain foreign to God. I think that is really the deep meaning behind Pope Francis' often-quoted phrase that priests are meant smell like the sheep they serve.

Spiritual Formation for Pastoral Charity

I am reminded of the Roman poet Terence's phrase, "nothing human is alien to me." How supremely true that is of Christ. Nothing truly, authentically human was alien to him. That is why his sacrificial existence cannot be confined to Golgotha. His whole life was a sacrifice. His whole life was an attempt to establish this holy fellowship so tragically shattered by sin. And I would suggest that this is reflected in *Optatam totius* on the training of priests. This entire conciliar document is worth a second look, and it deserves much better attention than it has received for the last six decades. Paragraph 8 talks about the spiritual formation of seminarians.

> Spiritual formation should be closely associated with doctrinal and pastoral formation. and with the assistance of the spiritual director, should be conducted such a way that the students may learn to live in intimate and unceasing union with God the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ. (*OT* 8)

This passage describes spiritual formation in very traditional language and, I would suggest, according to very Sulpician language. The union between the seminarian and Christ which it describes is not, however, an end to itself. The paragraph goes on further, and unfortunately people often do not read further on: "Those who are to take on the likeness of Christ by the sacred ordination should form the habit of drawing close to him as friends in every detail of their life." (*OT* 8) Next is the key sentence of the paragraph in my mind: "They should live his Paschal mystery in such a way they will know how to initiate it into the people committed to their charge." (*OT* 8)

For *Optatam totius,* the priest's union with Christ, his unique kind of configuration to the Lord is not meant to be an end in itself. How is the priest's configuration to Christ going to extend itself in the way he treats others and interacts with them? Does this configuration have a material impact upon others? The conciliar and post-conciliar documents on priestly formation and on priestly life and ministry insist on an expansion of priestly work and identity beyond a merely cultic role to embrace all three *munera*, teaching, governing, as well as sanctifying. These name the three key ways in which the priest must relate with his people and accompany them if he is to be a priest of Jesus Christ.

Transformed by Grace

I believe fundamental shift has occurred here away from an individualistic understanding of what this graced configuration means, that is, from a focus on certain powers to do certain acts, to a new way of being in the world and being with others. I had a conversation with Dr. [Matthew] Dugandzic, [the Academic Dean], last night on this very topic. The whole language of ontological change can be tricky. Is this an insertion of Aristotelian metaphysics into something originally kerygmatic? To a certain extent, that is true. And we certainly do not live in a culture which is comfortable with language of ontology. But I agree with Romano Guardini, that is more of an indictment of our times than a condemnation of the language of ontology. When I teach the course on the priesthood, I do not talk so much about an ontological change as I speak about an ontological claim. Such terminology is a statement about how deeply the vocation, the call from God to priestly service must penetrate one's being. Hans von Balthasar has an interesting

meditation on this. Jesus the Lord makes a total claim upon these men for the service of the Word. The priestly ministry is not supposed to be simply a single aspect of their life. It is not simply one function among others. When God called each of the prophets in the Old Testament, the totality of the prophet's life had to begin anew. God claimed the whole person. “Eat the scroll.” God even made a claim upon the digestive tract of the man who is to be the servant of His Word. “Marry this woman. Name your children this.” Even the conjugal life, the reproductive life of the prophet is claimed.

One of the ways the language of ontology can be helpful is to indicate the depth of our responsibility to God and to others. This is part of the radicalism of the Gospel that the Council is trying to put forward in this document. The call of God must be a total claim. It cannot be just an aspect of one’s personality. It must form the core of one’s identity. To return to von Balthasar, if one looks at Christ himself, he is his mission. Early in our Christian tradition, Christ became functionally the last name of Jesus, became part of his personal name. What was once simply a function, a title, now forms the core of his identity. We need grace to accomplish that kind of transformation. The tendency toward sin which is the legacy of original sin in us is the same tendency which prompts us to live isolation from others, to live only for ourselves, to narrow our horizons. In order to really accompany people in the radical way Christ did is beyond our natural capacities. It is certainly beyond our nature as wounded by sin.

To a certain extent, this is not a new idea. It is very much at home in the French School. Cardinal de Bérulle, the father of the French School, asked himself a question as he meditated upon the sacramental character of priestly ordination. How is man different after ordination now that he has been configured by grace? Bérulle thought that the difference hinges upon a greater capacity to receive the suffering of others. Left to ourselves, we tend to be self-enclosed. We tend to be insensitive to others. We are so focused on our own story that the story of others just cannot penetrate. And so, we need a special grace, a divine intervention, in the life of discipleship through baptism and certainly in the priestly life through ordination to overcome the type of natural resistance to receiving the pain of others in the course of the priests’ encounters with them along the path of life’s journey. It is precisely this grace to accompany others on the path to God that I think is at the center of the mystery of holy orders.