Re-reading *Lumen gentium* and *Presbyterorum ordinis* Sixty Years Later

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Introduction

This symposium marking sixtieth anniversary of conclusion of the Second Vatican Council has provided me the opportunity to reflect upon the decree *Presbyterorum ordinis* (*PO*) and its teachings. This presentation studies *PO* through the lens of great conciliar constitution *Lumen gentium* (*LG*). My purpose is not to examine *LG* itself, but rather to consider *PO* solely through the lens of *LG*.

PO opens with the following lines: "The excellence of the order of priests in the Church has already been recalled to the minds of all by this sacred synod. Since, however, in the renewal of Christ's Church tasks of the greatest importance and of ever increasing difficulty are being given to this order, it was deemed most useful to treat of the subject of priests at greater length and with more depth." (*PO* 1) These opening lines were certainly relevant to the Church years ago. They are even more relevant to us, given everything we are witnessing in the Church today.

Why another document?

The Church did not produce *PO* as a redundant addition to an already crowded field of ecclesiastical documents, but as a response to the genuine pastoral needs of that time. Many senior priests ordained in the 1960s and early 1970s often remarked that their own seminary formation, shaped by Tridentine assumptions, could no longer adequately respond to the pastoral realities of the mid-twentieth century. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, the movement called Modernism challenged the church's theology of the priesthood, as well as the foundations of sacramental identity and magisterial authority.[1] Theologians such as Alfred Loisy and George Tyrrell unsettled seminary formation, prompting Pius X's *Pascendi* (1907) to condemn Modernism as the "synthesis of all heresies" and to impose the Anti-Modernist Oath in 1910. Many theologians recognized that what the Church needed at this time was a renewed theological grounding of priestly identity, not merely in terms of what priests do, but in who they are in relation to Christ, the bishop, the laity, and the world. *PO* represents the Church's attempt to respond to the theological and pastoral challenges to the priest's apostolic mission by recovering the patristic vision of priestly ministry in contemporary circumstances. PO is not therefore an example of redundancy, but of *ressourcement* meeting *aggiornamento*.

Priestly Formation from Trent to the Eve of Vatican II

History sheds light on this issue and helps us better understand it. When the Protestant Reformation erupted in 1517, it exposed to the wider Christian world what reformers within the Church at that time had long lamented: the formation of priests was inadequate. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) convened in response to this crisis. Trent did not invent priestly formation. Rather, it recovered and codified it. Its decree *Cum adolescentium aetas* mandated diocesan

[1] Modernism challenged theology of the priesthood by subjecting dogma, Scripture, and Tradition to historical-critical scrutiny, relativizing the revealed truth.

seminaries and insisted that future priests be formed from youth.[2] Philosophy and theology were anchored in the Scholastic method, with Thomas Aquinas as the normative guide, a position further reinforced by Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* (1879). The seminary became a total institution in the fullest sense of the term: daily Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, regular confession, spiritual direction, communal meals, and disciplined silence structured the entire process of formation. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this Tridentine model had spread throughout the Catholic world and would later be codified in the 1917 Code of Canon Law (c. 1354).

Trent understood what the apostolic age had practiced instinctively, namely, that the priest is not merely trained but configured, shaped interiorly by the mystery he is called to serve. In this light, the seminary is not simply a school but a prolonged encounter with the living God. The French School of the seventeenth century, represented above all by Pierre de Bérulle, by Jean-Jacques Olier and the Sulpicians, by Jean Eudes and Vincent de Paul, left a profound imprint on priestly formation. Its theology of the priesthood emphasized ontological configuration to Christ the Priest, interior mortification, and a spirituality of annihilation before God (*anéantissement*). In particular, Olier built a model of seminary culture that would extend throughout the Church well into the twentieth century.

By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, priestly ministry and formation were oriented more toward defending the Church than engaging the pressing questions of the age. The curriculum remained largely static, with philosophy and theology taught in Latin from manuals written generations earlier. By the mid-twentieth century, theologians such as Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Karl Rahner had begun to question whether this model of formation adequately prepared priests to read the signs of the times. That question would come decisively to the foreground at Vatican II.

Lumen gentium and the Reshaping of Priestly Formation in Vatican II

In the wake of the Counter-Reformation, Catholic ecclesiology tended to overemphasize the institutional character of the Church, a tendency that persisted until Vatican II. Richard Gaillardetz observes that "since it was the integrity of the visible and institutional church that was under attack, it was the visible, institutional integrity of the church that would receive a most spirited defense."[3] *Lumen gentium* (1964) marked a decisive turning point not only in ecclesiology but also in the Church's self-understanding of ordained ministry. It relocated the priest within the broader mystery of the Church as the People of God.[4] My purpose here is not to study *Lumen gentium* in itself, but to focus on the image employed by the Council that most decisively reshapes priestly ministry and formation, namely, the image of the People of God.[5]

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Church was commonly imagined under the dominant image of a pyramid: pope, bishops, priests, religious men and women, and finally the laity. Historically, Kenan Osborne notes that after Constantine (313 AD), the clergy came to

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[2] Council of Trent, Session XXIII, *Decretum de Reformatione*, chapter 18 (1563).

[3] Richard R. Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making* (Paulist Press, 2006), 1.

[4] *Lumen gentium* used different images to describe the Church, such as sheepfold, vineyard, household of God, holy temple, mother and spouse. However, in this presentation, I focus in particular on the image of People of God, which was given its own separate chapter in *LG.*

[5] I realize that the Scriptural image of the people of God is very complex as M. Barth wrote: "Who are the people of God? Jews, Christians, both together, or neither of them" See M. Barth, *The People of God* (Sheffield, 1983), 9. My purpose is to highlight the theological theme relevant to the ecclesiological image contributed to *Lumen gentium*, and how it influences *Presbyterorum ordinis*.

occupy the status of a recognized social class, with legal privileges and public standing.[6] At the same time, monasticism was exerting increasing influence on the ideal of the priest: celibacy, asceticism, and a life set apart gradually became normative, though not yet universally enforced. By the medieval period, ministry had shifted from a charism rooted in the community toward a hierarchically structured office.[7]

Lumen gentium places the People of God in chapter 2, before the hierarchical structure of the Church in chapter 3. This ordering is itself a theological statement. The Second Vatican Council used the image of the People of God to re-balance the role of the laity in the Church, at precisely the right time and in the right place. First, both Catholic and Protestant theologians were already exploring this image. Second, the French *nouvelle théologie* and *ressourcement* theological movements, in particular the work of Yves Congar, helped to recover this image by renewing attention to the theology of the laity and to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church.[8] The Council also shifts theological priorities by placing baptismal ontology at the center, thereby recalling the common priesthood of the faithful (*LG* 9–10), while emphasizing that the ordained priesthood differs from it "in essence and not only in degree" (*LG* 10). With this framework, the priest exercises his ministerial priesthood within the community, not apart from it.[9]

Lumen gentium's recovery of episcopal collegiality also reshaped priestly ministry and formation. By restoring the theology of the local church and of the bishop as head of a particular flock, and by emphasizing the priest's commitment to the diocese (*LG* 23, 27), the Council relocated priestly identity within a concrete diocesan communion. Priestly formation, at least for diocesan clergy, thus presupposes incardination into a particular church and incorporation into the presbyterate gathered around its bishop.

In sum, *Lumen gentium* did not simply provide a backdrop for subsequent documents on priestly formation; it helped direct their theological program. The priest formed after Vatican II was to understand himself as a man of the Church, shaped by her mystery, ordered to her mission, and sustained by her communion.

Two Central Themes: Configuration to Christ and Chosen among God's People

Configuration to Christ: The Heart of Priestly Spirituality

Above all, the priest is called to be configured to Christ. This configuration is not a metaphor or a pious aspiration, but an ontological transformation of the priest's very being, a permanent and indelible conformation to Christ the Head, Shepherd, and Servant of the Church. *PO* articulates this with theological precision. When the priest acts *in persona Christi Capitis*, it is truly Christ who acts through him. This is not merely spiritual rhetoric. It is the doctrinal bedrock upon which every dimension of priestly existence rests. Why is this configuration so

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[6] Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (Paulist Press, 1989), 145-148.

[7] For Osborne, the High Patristic period is formative but also ambiguous. It gave the Western Church a theologically serious doctrine of ordained ministry grounded in apostolic succession, sacramental ontology, and in the role of presider at the Eucharist, but it also established theological trajectories toward clericalism, sacral elitism, and a weak theology of the laity that would require centuries to re-examine.

[8] Some significant French theologians who influenced Vatican II are Henri de Lubac, Henri Bouillard, Yves Congar, Dominique Chenu. They and others are associated with the movement called *nouvelle théologie.* This theological school championed the hermeneutical method knows as *resourcement.*.

[9] *Optatam totius* accordingly called for seminarians to be formed in awareness of the Church's missionary nature (OT 20) and to develop a spirituality integrated with apostolic responsibility rather than monastic withdrawal.

crucial to the priest's spiritual life? Because it establishes both the foundation and the demand of his holiness.

First, as the foundation of holiness, ordination calls priests to pursue holiness by letting his identity being shaped through configuration to Jesus Christ. To grow in holiness is to grow more fully into what he already is, a priest of Jesus Christ, by allowing configuration to penetrate and illumine every aspect of his life.

Second, configuration to Christ creates the demand for ongoing conversion. Precisely because the priest acts in the person of Christ in his sacramental ministry, a profound tension arises when his interior life contradicts his sacramental role. Configuration to Christ thus draws him, and at the same time presses him, toward a unity between who he is sacramentally and who he is personally. Ultimately, configuration to Christ is not a title the priest possesses, but a life he must continually inhabit, deepen, and offer back to God.

Chosen among the People of God

This vision of Vatican II reshapes the way priestly identity and ministry are to be understood. Its foundational principle is the universal call to holiness. *Lumen Gentium* 40 insists that all the baptized are called to holiness. The priest, first and foremost, is a baptized member of the People of God (*LG* 10), and his ordained ministry exists within and for the People of God. Accordingly, *PO* 9 affirms that the priest is called to recognize and foster the gifts of the laity.

Lumen Gentium 28 further situates the priest as a co-worker with the bishop, united to the whole presbyterate, yet always in service to the local community entrusted to his care. The model is explicitly pastoral: a shepherd who knows his flock, walks with them, and lays down his own preferences for their sake. Pope Francis, echoing this conciliar spirit in *Evangelii Gaudium* 49, warns against a "self-absorbed" clericalism that distances clergy from the people. True priestly authority, he insists, is exercised through proximity, humility, and what he famously phrasd sharing the "smell of the sheep." In sum, the priest leads always from within, never from above.

***Presbyterorum ordinis* and Formation for Priestly Ministry and Life Today**

Sixty years later, the question is no longer simply whether *PO* remains authoritative, but whether it remains theologically and pastorally fruitful. In this respect, the decree offers at least two points worthy of renewed reflection.

The first concerns the theological foundation of priestly ministry and life. *PO* offers a durable theology of priestly identity rooted in ontology rather than function, namely, configuration to Christ the Priest (*PO* 2). Any diminishment of this foundational identity risks leading priests toward spiritual desolation.

The second concerns its theological relevance under contemporary conditions. PO was written when the Church still presupposed a stable parish structure, a clear clerical identity, and an undisturbed seminary system, none of which can be assumed in the same way today. Its vision of the laity is present, but not sufficiently developed to sustain a genuinely robust theology of lay co-responsibility. Likewise, its treatment of celibacy would need to be received today in a way that integrates psychological and communal dimensions, rather than being presented solely as an eschatological sign, as described in *PO* 16.

Conclusion

In his apostolic letter "A Fidelity that Generates the Future," written for the sixtieth anniversary of *Optatam totius* and *Presbyterorum ordinis*, Pope Leo XIV writes: "Let us approach *PO* with the same attitude: treasuring the conviction that priestly formation is fundamentally spiritual and theological: a priest who is not configured to Christ has nothing to give." *PO* calls every priest to a radical configuration to Christ as Head, Shepherd, and Servant. Configuration to Christ (*configuratio Christi*) is not a pious ornament added to priestly life; it is its very foundation. Without this living conformity to Christ, priestly ministry risks being reduced to mere liturgical performance. Ordination, therefore, must be understood as an ontological transformation by which the priest is configured to Jesus Christ, the High Priest.

Excerpted from a longer original presentation which traced the development of the structures of priestly formation from apostolic times to the twentieth century.