

## ***PRESBYTERORUM ORDINIS: UTOPIA OR CALL TO HOLINESS?***

*Cristinel FODOR\**

**Riassunto:** Il Concilio Vaticano II ha avuto a cuore tutti i problemi della Chiesa. Una particolare attenzione doveva essere accordata alla formazione dei sacerdoti, coloro che devono continuare l'annuncio del Vangelo fino alla fine dei tempi. Il documento *Persbyterorum Ordinis* traccia le linee fondamentali di una formazione integrale e attuale dei preti.

Le pagine seguenti, partendo dalla situazione odierna, a cinquanta anni dal Concilio, vogliono dare una risposta alla domanda se il documento sulla formazione dei sacerdoti è una utopia o una chiamata alla santità.

**Parole chiave:** *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, santità, formazione, sacerdoti, Vaticano II.

Fifty years after the opening of the Council we live in a globalized world, very different and rapidly changing, with new problems and new challenges and we have the opportunity to approach again, more in depth, the conciliar texts in order to extract the treasures, yet unexhausted, held herein.

The post-conciliar times were almost always turbulent. The Second Vatican Council, however, is a special case. Unlike previous Councils, was not called to oust heretical doctrines or deal a schism; did not proclaim any dogma formal and non-formal disciplinary proceedings taken even. Pope John XXIII saw a new era looming, which he went to meet with optimism, trust in God unwavering. He spoke of a pastoral goal of the Council. It was intended not a trivial adaptation to the spirit of the times, but the appeal to talk about the faith transmitted today. It was the project of modernization that did not and could not be modernism.

Indeed, the conciliar documents have not remained a dead letter. They gave the impression to life in dioceses, parishes and religious communities, through the renewal of the liturgy, a spirituality characterized by a stronger biblical connotation and lay participation and stimulated the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The council was welcomed in particular by the new spiritual movements in the sixties, which have brought to light the multiplicity of charisms and the universal call to holiness, in a new way. However, one cannot mythicize the Council or reduce it to a couple of

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\* Catholic Institute of Iassy (email: [cristinelfodor@yahoo.com](mailto:cristinelfodor@yahoo.com))

sound bites. Nor can it be used as a stone quarry from which to take the material for each desired thesis.

For example, the Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* sets the direction of the Church, with the aim of defining the identity, ministry and life of presbyters and reflects the joys, hopes, difficulties and concerns of priests who have consecrated their life to Christ, Head and Shepherd, Eternal High Priest.

The person and mission of the priests in the Church and in the world are indispensable and irreplaceable. Ministers of the Eucharist, dispensers of divine mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, consolers of souls, guides for the faithful in all of the most difficult moments in life, presbyters act by the mandate of and “in persona Christi Capitis”.

About nine years ago, I was in a class of students in their fifth year, the first hour of the second semester, the Spiritual Theology course, on “*Priesthood. Theology and Spirituality*”, in fact commenting on the entire *Presbyterorum Ordinis* document. After a brief presentation of the content of the course, one of the students, recently returned from his pastoral year, said: “Father, the *Presbyterorum Ordinis* document presents an utopia, because this year we have had the opportunity to observe the life of our communities more closely and not even one priest lives as described in this book”.

Is the *Presbyterorum Ordinis* document a utopia, or a call to holiness? How does God want the priests to be nowadays? As He has always wanted them to be, but according to the wishes of the Church. Let us see:

At the opening of the conciliar works, no document on priests was envisaged. The only passage of some relevance on priests was at **no. 12** in the *De Ecclesia* pre-conciliar schema, which summed up in **ten lines** a doctrine considered consolidated: presbyters, though not possessing the highest degree of priesthood as is the case of bishops, are nonetheless in virtue of their ordination true priests; offering the sacrifice of the Holy Mass and administering the sacraments they also act *in persona Christi*; helping the bishops, by whom they are ordained, they receive their jurisdiction from them.

Both in the aula discussions (1 to 7 December 1962) and the successive written observations, the Conciliar Fathers almost unanimously highlight the poverty of those lines and request a development of this approach: many express fear that the Vatican II intends to say much about bishops and little about priests, and that in the service of the first the missionary dimension is rightly highlighted, while priests remain imprisoned in the empowerment for the cult.

The criticism led to a **new paragraph** (no. 15), still in the *De Ecclesia* schema, added in March 1963; after various passages, this paragraph will become the *Lumen gentium* 28. But as the *Lumen gentium* was reaching its final form, it became ever more clear to the Conciliar Fathers that the renewed doctrine about Church and the episcopate had to also reflect on the priesthood. The *cultic* priest model, shaped especially during the second millennium and inserted into the *missionary* vision of the whole Church and the episcopal ministry that Vatican II delineated, constituted an extraneous and static element in a renewed and dynamic context. This was the fundamental reason why during the same month of March 1963 it was decided to develop the paragraph on the presbyters into a special autonomous text that would later become the decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*.

During the two years of elaboration, the text will undergo seven drafts before reaching its final form. The interventions, aiming to criticize and improve the approach, were very numerous. From the reading of such interventions and the synoptic confrontation of the various drafts of the scheme, the existence of three optics among the Conciliar Fathers can be deduced:

1. the ones coming mainly from the newly formed Churches or the missionary territories, who insisted on the ministry of the evangelical proclamation;
2. others, mostly representing ancient Churches or, however, reflecting a strong desire of continuity with the tradition of the second millennium reminded the cultic obligations;
3. and finally, many felt that the specificity of priesthood lies in its pastoral categories and the dedication to the ecclesial community.

### **The three perspectives of the decree**

The editors' work reached a rich text that tried to put together these different views as much as possible, without juxtaposing them, but seeking instead their integration. The result, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, can be appreciated from at least *three significant perspectives* that even today, fifty years apart, highlight its contemporaneity and still incomplete understanding.

1. The first perspective focuses on **the switch from the model of the two potestates to that of the three munera**. The theory of the two *potestates*, already crystallized at the beginning of the second millennium, lead the priestly ministry to two different origins: the sacrament of priesthood, which enabled the exercise of acts of worship (*potestas ordinis*) and the canon law, which enabled preaching and pastoral leadership (*potestas*

*iurisdictionis*). Thus, from a theological point of view, priestly ministry was focused on worship, which became, inevitably, its distinctive element.

Now, considering the model of the three *munera* for the presbyters as well, already in *Lumen Gentium* 28 and then further developed in the *Presbyterorum ordinis* 4-6, the Second Vatican Council wanted to reorient all priestly duties to the sacramental ordination: Christ is the one empowering for preaching, celebration, leadership. The Church then intervenes to regulate this threefold empowerment, by transforming *munus* in *potestas*. Thus, it can be said that the transition to a ternary scheme has not deleted the binary one, but rather integrated it into a richer context, from a theological point of view.

Let us consider, for example, the conciliar read-through of the *establishment* of the ministry focused at the beginning on the last supper of Jesus with the apostles and extended in the *Presbyterorum ordinis* 2 to the whole mission that Christ has entrusted to the apostles: thus, for the Vatican II, Jesus established the ministry (later on articulated over the centuries by the Church) in the universal of the mission entrusted to his apostles on several occasions; a mission that includes, of course, as a culminating moment, the Eucharistic mandate; but that also includes the duty to baptize, forgive/retain sins, to evangelize, to teach how to keep the commandments, to graze the flock, to wash each other's feet.

**2.** The second perspective is expressed by the *inversion in the text title*, when passing from the third to fourth drafting, when the “*de vita et ministerio*” becomes “*de ministerio et vita*”. The overturning of the approach rightly corresponded to this inversion: up to the third drafting, the reflection on the spiritual life of presbyters preceded the one on the apostolate, and then the inversed scheme was adopted. The previous presentation corresponded to the picture of the *tank*, which had to be filled up in order to gain sufficient autonomy to conduct the service; whereas the current presentation corresponds to the image of the *communicating vessels*, for which the very requirements of the ministry itself orient the presbyters' spiritual life, which in their own turn feed the apostolate (cf. particularly *PO* 13).

This way, the Second Vatican Council adopted the idea that the presbyter is sanctified in conducting his ministry, leaving the instances of the proclamation, celebration and pastoral life in their various aspects to characterize his spirituality. Thus, it becomes obvious in which way the Vatican II focuses on the “pastoral charity” (cf *PO* 14), as a category capable of unifying the life and work of presbyters.

3. The third perspective is expressed in the significant *introduction of the plural form* instead of the singular one: as the document took shape, they spoke less and less about the priest/ presbyter and more and more about priests/ presbyters. The Council saw the Church as *communio*, that is participation in the Trinitarian communion, and as unity in diversity. This conciliar deepening of the ecclesiology of communion and the winning of the episcopal collegiality have freed the priesthood of the individualism it suffered from for centuries, highlighting its intimate relational nature (cf *PO* 7-9).

The old theology of ministry was deeply marked by the relational dimension: the servants among them, led by the apostle (in the NT) and the Bishop (from Ignatius onwards); and the servants in relation to the communities they came from and where they served. Here once more, the Second Vatican Council reread with greater attention the old sources in order to rehabilitate the priesthood in its theological conspicuousness after centuries in which it seemed having been reduced to the architectural grandeur (the presbytery, a place delineated by the banister), or which at most seemed an useful operative expedient (unity is strength).

For the Council instead, the presbytery is a theological reality stemming from the profound communion of those who receive the same sacrament of priesthood in the same local Church. By virtue of this intimate unity, inherent to the sacrament itself, the presbyters form a “body” in which all together, under the leadership of the Bishop, carry out the ministerial responsibility of that determined Church.

And in order for us not to remain on *the dry land of speculations*, but to jump into *the sea of Christian living*, I invite you to dwell a bit longer on this third point: the intimate relational nature of priesthood (cf *PO* 7-9). Indeed, I was also influenced in this choice by the discussions among the priests in Bucharest gathered for this year’s spiritual exercises, but also by the shortcomings that I have discovered in myself.

The trend of individualism and refuge in ourselves is increasingly universal. Despite this, although we have a growing opportunity to get together and to know each other, thanks to the continuous development of transport and communication means, we often experience the feeling of living in a crowded and noisy market where it seems difficult to build authentic relationships.

*Jesus Christ* – Saint John Paul II said in 1995 to a large group of bishops – *did not call the disciples to follow Him individually, but personally and at the community level. And if this is true for all the baptized, it is especially true for the apostles and their successors.*

*Run away from people and you shall be saved*, Ava Arsenie said, ancho-rite in the Egyptian desert. And again: *I cannot be with God and with men at the same time*. Face to a frivolous and extravagant world, the retreat into solitude to be with God seemed at that time the only way to follow Jesus without reservation. A belief that has marked the history of the Christian life for centuries. The *Imitation of Christ* says:

The greatest Saints avoided the society of men, when they could conveniently, and did rather choose to live to God, in secret. One said, “As often as I have been among men, I returned home less a man... Whoso therefore withdraws himself from his acquaintance and friends, God will draw near unto him with His holy Angels”.

And yet, very quickly, the Desert Fathers realized that the Gospel could not be lived in its fullness if not together. Basilus the Great wrote:

Our Creator wanted us to need each other for the very reason that we live in unity with one another ... Indeed, if you live by yourself, whose feet can you wash? Who can you care of? How do you sit on the last seat? ... Life in society is therefore a stadium where we exercise as athletes; a workout room that helps us go forward, a permanent exercise of perfection observing God’s commandments.

This belief brought the coenobites together in order to live the Gospel altogether and to enjoy always the presence of Christ.

In my opinion, we are witnessing today to an analogue and wonderful development. We know how while the value of the person has been emphasized during recent centuries, the individual dimension emphasized the spiritual life very much. Now, for several decades, the community dimension strongly reappears among God’s people. The *Church comes back to life in the souls of people*, as stated by Romano Guardini.

*Those of us who are older* – wrote Karl Rahner years ago – *have been spiritually formed in an individualist way, given our origin and our formation*. And he states that, in the future, the spirituality lived together would play a more decisive role. As a proof to this, he brought the experience of the first Pentecost in the Church: *An event that certainly did not consist in the casual meeting of a collection of mystics who lived individually, but in the experience of the Spirit had by the community*.

More than anything else, people shape us. God uses people to form people. Therefore, the link between the priest and another person is never *entirely* just an interaction between a man and another man – the Holy Spirit yearns to engage vigorously in every relationship. In this regard, certain authors of the Scripture speak of “communion of the Holy Spirit” (2Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2.1; 1Jn 1,6), which is the overflow of rivers

of living water from one person to another, something without which we cannot live.

In reality, **solitude** is a daily problem of priests... «Saint John Paul II was once asked for an advice on how to facilitate communion among priests. He answered: ***Eat together!***»

The “monastic” model of the old solitary parish priest who, after the midday sleep, reads the breviary around the church dressed in a white coat is no longer wished by the new generations. Youth nowadays expresses a greater desire to be together. The most difficult question during the vocational examination before the holy orders is: *Do you like solitude?*

We, priests, find it very difficult to make friends. We are accustomed to **vertical relationships** with our superiors and those whom we see as the flock that has been entrusted to us, and not to **horizontal relationships** of sincere and pure fraternity. Learning to cultivate friendship is a true school of communion.

We should focus more on having true friends and on knowing how to be friends in our own turn. Some people want to have friends, but not to be friends themselves. When a priest does not feel liked by the others, it means that he is isolated and that he does not communicate much with his fellow members. In some parishes, the parish priest and the vicar eat watching television, without talking to each other. They are miserable and condemned to live together.

What distinguishes the happy priests from the unhappy ones is the presence of deep and lasting relationships that bring joy, change one’s life and are meaningful. Human interconnectedness is not the same as knowing many people. It may be that some people know a lot of people working in different fields, but might not have any friends.

Let us make an inventory. Let us make a **balance of our relationships** in the Mystical Body of Christ. I think of the people in my life for a moment: who populates my world?

Aren’t these people precious to me? Aren’t they really important in my life? Aren’t they worth each and every of my efforts to keep these relationships as healthy as possible? There is no doubt that people can sometimes be difficult. And still, what could be more important than people? What will count in the final days of my life will be the people. If at the end of life relationships count the most, shouldn’t them count the most now as well?

Therefore, what can I do to strengthen my relationships? Quench my thirst with the endless love of the Trinity. And then I shall discover a love that deserves to be shown to others.

In other words the priest will have **Trinitarian relations** within the community. I will explain myself.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents the Holy Trinity as “the central mystery of faith and Christian life” (234, 261) and in this respect there is unanimity among Christians. There are a lot of theological works written throughout the centuries, monuments of the speculative capacity of human intelligence. They are generally very difficult, understood only by specialists so one wonders why it is so difficult to explain. If this is the centre of Christianity, everyone should be able to understand it, even the simplest and even children.

In reality, not only can the mystery of the Holy Trinity be *understood*, but also *lived*. From the communion of the three divine persons, the human person is invited to overcome all egoism mechanisms and to live its vocation to communion. If people are able to live the Trinitarian dynamics, this is because they were created *in God’s image* (*Genesis* 1:26). The three divine persons involve us in their lives and the impression of God-communion, of God-the Trinity is revealed in the creation and especially in the most significant of the creations: man. The Trinitarian impression can be observed everywhere.

We reflect what the **Father** is in the Holy Trinity when we become a source of brotherly, free and disinterested love for everyone around. We live in the **Son** when we let ourselves loved. We reflect the **Holy Spirit** when mutual love does not become closed, dualistic, selfish, but is open to the common good of everyone. To live love in the Trinitarian meaning we must **always take the initiative of love, always receive love and always unite** (Bruno Forte).

A person acts in a Trinitarian way when s/he lives *with* others, *for* others, *in* others and *because* of others. A brother is not an obstacle to holiness, but a path towards holiness. Rather than running away from him in order to find intimacy with God, we should seek him to create with him that *theological space in which one can experience the mystical presence of the Risen Christ* (St. John Paul II).

Therefore, the *Presbyterorum ordinis* presents a brief call to holiness and a beautiful pastoral program, not a utopia at all.

It is true that the two decades following the Council were characterized by an exodus of many priests and monks; in many contexts, there has been noticed a decrease in the ecclesiastical practice and protests of the priests, religious and lay people. Pope Paul VI spoke of the “smoke of Satan”, which has penetrated the temple of God through a crack.

However, the road that the Council has started on did not reach its end. The rich heritage that the two Popes, John XXIII and Paul VI, have left us, is still not exhausted. We must walk this road, patiently, but with determination and courage and, despite all, with inner joy. As the prophet said: “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (*Nehemiah* 8,10).



The Council awoke the joy for God, for faith, for the Church. First of all, we have to light it up again in ourselves in order for it to be able to enthuse others as well. Happiness is contagious. Of course, each of us is only a little light. And the pre-conciliar renewal movement began with individuals and small groups. The post-conciliar renewal will not be different. But if we do not let the joy die, then, one day, it will be transmitted to others. It can help to ensure that the Church, in a world that is rapidly changing and deeply uncertain, becomes, in a new way, a compass and an encouraging sign.

We are aware that the difficulties are not lacking. Epochal transformations during recent years and the beginning of the Third Millennium of the Christian Era questioned all presbyters to become heralds of the new evangelization, courageous witnesses of the love that God shows to every creature, full of joy in the daily fidelity and happy and quick availability to God who is the Lord of the harvest.

Now, at the end of this speech, I would like us to think of all priests in the world who, through their daily and silent work joyfully carry out their priestly ministry in the service of Christian communities. Our hearts and thoughts especially go out to all the priests who feel lonely, who are ill, and to the aged ones; to the priests facing persecution for believing in Christ and his Church, or victims of war and violence; to the priests who, for various reasons, are facing difficulties in carrying out their ministry in serving God and the Church.

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