

Thy Kingdom Come!

Challenges for the Priest of the Third Millennium

The identity of the priest, keys for understanding contemporary society and culture and the challenges this presents.

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1. Introduction

The Year for Priests that Pope Benedict XVI has convoked for priests to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé of Ars offers a timely opportunity to ask ourselves what a priest is, where he stands before the great challenges that humanity faces, and what role he plays in the drama of modern man.

Trying to get an exhaustive answer to these questions would be presumptuous. So, in this brief article, I would simply like to give some general guidelines, indicating some possible approaches that can help priests, “the most beloved portion of Christ’s heart”, to discover the road of their own spiritual perfection and to live a ministry rich in fruitfulness.

2. The identity of the priest

Every attempt to analyze the challenges facing the priest of the Third Millennium must start with a reflection about his own identity. If not, we run the risk of depriving the very life of the priest of a foundation.

Gift and mystery

Above all, the priest should be seen, in his deepest meaning, as a *gift and mystery* – a gift that infinitely surpasses man. God fixes his gaze on a man to configure him ontologically to his son Jesus Christ for all eternity in a totally free and unmerited way. The priesthood is a gift from God for the chosen man, and this chosen man – the priest – is a gift of God’s love for others. Seen in this way, the priest becomes a mystery of election, a mystery of love and trust on God’s part, because we carry the treasure of grace in earthen vessels. It is God who takes the chosen man, inviting him to be a priest. “No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was” (Hebrews 5:4). It’s not enough for someone to want and decide to be a priest. Such a decision is necessary, but as a response to a prior calling from God, which resounds in the depths of his conscience. Even the Christian community cannot elect for itself the ministers that it needs. Christ himself is he who calls them.

All the same, what constitutes the deepest mystery of the priest is the ontological configuration with Christ as savior, wrought by the Holy Spirit through the sacrament of Holy Orders. These men, no different than other men, on being ordained priests, are

configured in their being with Christ the Head and Shepherd of his Church. They bear the indelible sacramental seal that constitutes them *Alter Christus*. Through the goodness of God's mercy, they participate in Christ's anointing and in his saving mission, such that in his name and with his power, they preach the Gospel, celebrate the Eucharist and the other sacraments and shepherd God's people, always in communion with the bishops. They can be sinful and weak men, incapable by themselves of gracefully living the Christian mystery; however, the efficacy of the sacramental grace that comes from God through their hands and words remains unspoiled. Woven together with his relationship to Christ is his relationship to the Church. The priesthood, God's word and the sacraments belong to the constitutive elements of the Church, and the ministry of the presbyterate is totally for the Church.¹

The presence of Christ the Savior

Christ is Redeemer and Savior, and his sacrifice on the Cross and his resurrection have brought to the world the reconciliation of people to God and the summing up of all things in Christ (cf. Ephesians 1:10). The priest is the presence of Christ, the Shepherd and Head among men, and the living sacrament of Christ in the world, as *Pastores dabo vobis* says.² The priest is a man of God, chosen by God for God's glory and for the ministry. In a certain sense, the priest becomes a mediator of grace, because *in persona Christi* he preaches the faith, sanctifies his brothers and sisters with the sacraments and guides them along the road of the Gospel. The priest is a bridge extending in two directions – between God and man. On the one hand, he brings God's love to men, bringing them to God himself; on the other, he is the path along which souls pass on their journey towards eternity. Just as Christ is a bridge, they too, in some sense, being his ministers, are efficacious instruments so that souls can pass through and find eternal life.

Someone who offers and is offered in sacrifice

The priest is a man consecrated to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins (Hebrews 5:1). Therefore, the principal activity of the priest should be *to offer* the sacrifice and *offer himself* in sacrifice. It is clear that this goes far beyond simply managing an office or presiding a ceremony. The priest should not only celebrate the Eucharist, but also “be Eucharist”. As the letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* reminds us, the expression “*in persona Christi*” means something more than “in the name of” or “on behalf of” Christ; it is the specific identification – sacramental – with the “eternal High priest”, who is the author and principal subject of his own sacrifice.³ Therefore, the priest should unite his life to the Lamb of God who bears the sins of the world and sacrifices himself for the salvation of souls.

Sign of contradiction

Identification with Christ means that the priest should also be a sign of contradiction. Like Christ, his mission implies dying on the Cross in reparation for his own sins and the sins of the souls that have been entrusted to him. The priest is in the world without being of the world. And the world, with its attitudes, will necessarily level a negative judgment

against him. The priest is a man that lives against the current, since he lives and challenges others to live the paradox of the beatitudes, imitating Christ's life. Christ's words at the Last Supper enlighten us and give us great consolation: "If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you" (John 15: 18-19).

3. Keys for understanding the future

Identifying the keys that define the future is a task that exceeds the human mind. Therefore, I limit myself to giving some guidelines about what the future could hold.

Scientific progress as end in itself

The 20th Century has been marked, much more than preceding centuries, with a noticeable acceleration in scientific and technological progress: Cures for illnesses have been discovered, problems of feeding people have been solved, the world has become small thanks to progress in communication, etc. Man feels very sure of himself – so very able to dominate creation – and he considers himself practically without limits or boundaries. Along with this feeling of security and self-sufficiency, we detect the peculiar phenomenon where man wants to see in progress the sufficient reason for itself, giving it an ethical and moral value just for the fact of being progress.

There is hidden here an ancient heresy in modern trappings: gnosis. With gnosis, man thinks he is able to guarantee his own salvation. In the ancient gnosis, man obtained salvation or liberation through special practices of initiation or thanks to the control of his own spirit or body. Today, salvation comes to him through scientific progress, which takes the place of God. Man thinks himself able, with technology, to save man, to overcome all his limits and to make his life basically eternal. It seems that technology can make human existence fully satisfactory and to resolve all that would give man anguish. This error with regards progress can have tremendous consequences for human existence, because if progress gives value to itself, and scientific progress is more important than even the human person, human lives can be suppressed to obtain it. It is, in sum, what was alleged by Joseph Mengele, the so-called "Angel of death" of Auschwitz, and with him, the whole Nazi ideology. It is also what communist ideology maintains: In order to construct a future paradise, we can dispose of the human person. There are also modern manifestations of this error – the defense of experimentation on embryonic stem cells for the cure of illnesses, terminating persons for scientific advancement.

The assault against human life

Another key for reading the future is the constant assault on human life, whose consequences we have only begun to see. Beginning already some decades ago, as a consequence of an almost worldwide massive cultural campaign – except for Muslim countries – a kind of rejection of life has been established in the consciences of men, which takes diverse forms. In some countries, we are seeing a brutal decline of the

birthrate to levels that cannot provide a return to population stability. Over and above abortion, already legalized years ago, the practice of euthanasia has been introduced in the legislation of nations. It is clear that the source of the disdain for life is selfishness, given that we reject and commercialize defenseless human life or what no longer contributes to the statistics of well-being.

The results are starting to be seen: aging of the population and the structural incapacity to cover the costs of pensions and retirement, chilling figures of abortion worldwide, the maintenance of the population of developed countries thanks only to immigration, mostly Muslim. The future continues to present a bleak forecast if there is no radical change in the mentality of people.

The disdain for life has brought with it the promotion of sex freed from any bond or responsibility, and above all from its consequence, which is procreation. Certainly, modern life has been deeply eroticized, and this has caused in persons a structural incapacity to commit oneself for life and to establish stable and lasting relationships. Sex is seen only in its playful and adventurous aspect; as a result we see a high rate of divorce and procreation outside marriage. The campaigns to distribute more and more condoms, trying to avoid pregnancies, has not worked, because the real cause has not been addressed, which is the adequate education for the correct and mature use of sex.

Multicultural, relativistic and individualistic society

The world as we usually imagine it – compact, united and culturally defined – doesn't exist anymore. The countries of today are a mosaic of cultures and ways of seeing life. They are also a mosaic of beliefs and religions. Even in the most Catholic countries, we can't say that Catholic principles constitute the basis of the culture and behavior of the greater part of their people. There is a high percentage of people that accept and approve of abortion, an extremely high percentage of people that don't go or rarely go to Church, and who therefore are Catholics only in name.⁴ On the other hand, society is relativistic because it affirms that human knowledge can never attain an objective and universal truth, but that it only consists of mere "approximations" that depend on the historical moment, culture, and one's personal way of seeing things. We come to think that the only thing that unites modern society is tolerance of the different perspectives of others.

As an example of this relativism, it's enough to cite the recent declarations of a famous movie director⁵ about the concept of "family": "In my world of film, in no way does the fact that the Pope only recognizes the Catholic version of the family come into play. A family is a group of persons, centered on a little being, that love each other and fulfill their needs. It doesn't matter if they are separated parents, transvestites, transsexual or nuns with aids. My families are more real than those of the Pope, because they don't live according to some kind of dogma, but according to their commitments to life."

Society is very individualistic and has abandoned the concept of a common nature in which all human beings share. The only thing that identifies us is that each one seeks their own benefit. The ethic is utilitarian, and it is established starting from one's own

interests. We think that everything is licit as long as it doesn't hurt others. Having abandoned an ethic based on human nature, the only principle that rules is positivism and the agreement of the parties. We concede to the decision of the majority the possibility of determining what is good or bad, forgetting that democracy, without principles, can be the worst of tyrannies.

Forgetfulness of God

One of the characteristics of modern culture is the systematic forgetfulness of God and his presence in the world. Habitually, what is postulated is not atheism, but deism: God exists, he has created everything, but since he has given laws to nature, and freedom and intelligence to men, it is they who carry history forward. God does not intervene in any way in the life of men.

Fewer and fewer wonder whether what man is constructing is in accord with God's will. Science, as we have already explained above, follows its own rhythm and is an end in itself. Art departs more and more from any ethical reference. In some cases it becomes truly pornography or blasphemy, and there are few people who would dare express their own repulsion for fear of being labeled "intolerant". Politics itself is reduced to looking for popularity without asking yourself if you are truly serving the common good, and we are coming to the point of considering it an obligation for a politician to exclude their own religious and ethical convictions from political decision-making.

According to these people, the "hypothesis" of God is no longer needed because man has succeeded in dominating nature. God cannot exist because he would nullify man. This absence of God, of the personal God of revelation, has been replaced in contemporary man by superstition or the pseudo-religious offerings of sects, so fashionable today.

Disdain for authority

One of the characteristics of the modern era is also the disdain for authority, above all starting with the crisis of '68. During those years of conflict and revolt, all authority whatever was seen as imposition or constraint of one's freedom – the only absolute value. Civil and political authority, religious authority, family authority, etc., were placed in doubt and evidently lost trustworthiness.

Disdain for all authority and the loss of faith has also resulted in the Magisterium being placed in doubt and considered to be just another opinion among many. This way of thinking about the Magisterium does not belong only to many lay people – more exposed as they are to secularization – but also to a good number of religious and priests.

Disdain for authority has brought the press and the means of communication to do what some years ago would have been impossible: to ridicule the Church as an institution, the Pope himself, the bishops and the clergy in general. It is a situation we must learn to live with. In the language of the Second Vatican Council, it is, perhaps, a sign of the times.

Dialectical mentality

Another characteristic of the contemporary world is its dialectical mentality. Man, with his need for simplifying things, always looks to label people and see different groups in opposition to one another. In this way, it is not difficult to set against each other different races, young people against adults, Europeans against Asians, etc. – and in a previous epoch, capital against work. When we live in a world based on contraposition, we come much more easily to revolution and we focus our goal on annihilating our adversary. Contraposition as a postulate, in its true essence, puts us directly in opposition to Christianity, because Christian charity unites and resolves contraposition, instead of exacerbating it.

In a subtle, but very real way, the so-called “masters of suspicion” – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – have played a role in all of these processes of cultural transformation. Marx took from Hegel the dialectical principle as the driving force of history. Nietzsche, speaking of the superman, excluded the possibility of God’s existence, because for him, religious faith was proper to beings with complexes, incapable of being themselves. Freud, with his hypothesis of the subconscious, the ego and the superego, was the basis for the sexual revolution and the separation of sexuality from procreation.

4. The challenges for the priest of the Third Millennium

The situation that I have described in general strokes offers a particularly invigorating panorama for the priest. As John Paul II said at the start of his pontificate, “This is a wonderful time to be a priest.”⁶ The priest, animated by the awareness that Christ is the only savior of man and that he has been constituted through the sacrament of Holy Orders as a minister of redemption, is called to live in the world of today amidst the challenges that it presents for Christ’s Gospel, with faith and holy boldness. Despite the enormous responsibility and many conflicts, the priest knows that the power of evil will not triumph because it has already been defeated for all time: “This is the essence of hope.”⁷

The following paragraphs summarize, in some way, the keys for understanding the future that I have expounded above and identify the challenges that the priest of today meets head on. These challenges can be turned into a program of life for priests who wish to fulfill Christ’s mission in the Church of this new millennium.

Men of God

The priest should be a man of God. As a priest, he has the seal of the sacrament. In consequence, his will and faculties should immerse themselves in Christ’s sentiments (cf. Philippians 2:5). If he is not grounded in Christ, he will be snatched up by the hurricane of secularization. Therefore, he needs to be a man of prayer, a person that listens to and mediates on the Word to lovingly adhere to what God wants of him. He should celebrate the sacraments with the fervor and unction proper to the sacred things he deals with, knowing that to be a man of God, he needs to make a special effort, resisting the vertigo of the constant and accelerated activity to which the modern world submits us.

He should also cooperate with divine grace so that his daily life reflects the holiness that he transmits with the sacraments. The sacraments are efficacious *ex opere a Christo operato*, but it is clear that God extends his grace with more abundance through those priests that are configured more fully to his Son, the supreme and eternal priest of the New Covenant.

The priest is a man deeply aware that salvation comes from God, and therefore he cannot think that the solution to man's problems lies in human means or in the priest as a human person, regardless of how prepared or charismatic he may be. He understands that he must join his actions and his word to a deep Eucharistic life – whether in its celebration or in adoration. This will make him himself, in a certain sense, “Eucharistic”, that is, someone who makes himself a victim and oblation, as a priest, to serve Christ in the mission of saving souls. His presence among men, his brothers and sisters, should be like that of the morning watchman, an announcer of heavenly things, a continual reminder of Christ for souls, who incarnates God's love in the world. A man of God is the only one who can give meaning to man and today's society because he makes possible an encounter with God's love. A beautiful story is told of the Curé of Ars recorded in a statue in the entrance to the village: When St. Jean Marie Vianney went to Ars for the first time, he lost his way. He asked a little shepherd boy that he met to guide him, and the boy brought him to the village. The Curé said to him, “You have shown me the way to Ars; I will show you the way to heaven.”

Being a man of God is not incompatible with having your feet on the ground. The priest is a person that loses neither his own objectivity nor realism. He knows on the one hand that humanity needs to subjugate the cosmos and dominate it, but on the other hand, that what man definitively yearns for is found only in heaven, the definitive goal and the end of our pilgrimage on earth. Science does not save man; Christ does. The priest cannot yield to horizontalism or naturalism, because he would cease being necessary for the world. He would mistake himself for a worker or a social advocate, of which there are already enough in the world. He should never fall victim to a reductive vision of his priesthood, wherein it would only be a service or a function.⁸ The priest is a servant of Christ in order to become, starting from him, through and with him, a servant of others.

In forming a man of God, the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary – as mother, model of virtue and above all, heavenly protector – plays a very special role. Her relationship with priests, Christ's ministers, flows from the relationship between Mary's divine maternity and Christ's priesthood. Priests are her beloved sons and in a priest's heart the advice of St Bernard should resound: "In dangers, in doubts, in difficulties, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let not her name leave thy lips, never suffer it to leave thy heart. And that thou mayest more surely obtain the assistance of her prayer, see that thou dost walk in her footsteps. With her for guide, thou shalt never go astray; whilst invoking her, thou shalt never lose heart; so long as she is in thy mind, thou shalt not be deceived; whilst she holds thy hand, thou canst not fall; under her protection, thou hast nothing to fear; if she walks before thee, thou shalt not grow weary; if she shows thee favor, thou shalt reach the goal."⁹

Builders of charity

Precisely so as to be centered on eternity and to help people on their road to heaven, the priest should build charity, for charity is the virtue that is in some way a foretaste of heaven here on earth.

Charity is above all charity towards God. It is the virtue that allows the priest to be a man of God. From this charity arises charity towards others, which has various aspects. First, the most basic, is to have as the center of all our actions, in every one of our thoughts and words, the good of the person we have before us. Those priests don't do the Church any good who are concerned more about structures than about the people they deal with on a daily basis. I recall that once, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, when people noted that she wasn't looking for a solution for the structures that gave rise to injustices, made it clear that there were already many people seeking to better them; she on the other hand was going to try to ensure that every person among the poorest of the poor would be cared for according to their dignity as a child of God.

The priest, in seeking the good of the person, tries not to reduce them to a number or a statistic. It's not that statistics are bad – in fact, I think they offer some ideas for the pastoral challenges the Church faces – but we can't reduce the person to a mere number. Building charity also means for us building communion. The Church is communion; it is, with the words of St Cyprian, “a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ The priesthood itself is a “radical communitarian form” and can be exercised only in communion.¹¹ The first dimension of this communion is the hierarchy, the communion with the Holy Father, visible center of the unity of the Church, and with one's own bishop, shepherd of the local Church.

The priest is a builder of communion within the diocesan presbyterate. All priests of a local Church participate in the one priesthood of Christ the Shepherd. This priestly union should express itself in interpersonal relationships that are full of charity and reciprocal help. The priest is called to gratefully welcome and lead towards communion the various charisms present in his parish and in his diocese. He should have a heart open to the varied forms of consecrated life and the new movements approved by the competent authority. These are gifts from the Holy Spirit for the Church and should be welcomed in an unbiased way. In them, many of the lay faithful find specific paths of Christian holiness and concrete ways of participating in the evangelizing action of the Church.

The priest builds communion with the whole People of God and does not think of the Church dialectically as an opposition between the ordained ministry and the baptismal priesthood proper to all the faithful. One of the time-honored images of the Council for representing the Church was that of the People of God. In this People, which is also the Body of Christ, all have the same dignity as God's children. United, we journey towards our definitive goal – heaven. The essential – not merely gradual – difference between the ordained ministry and the role of the layperson not only does not break the unity, but enriches it.

In Christ's preaching and life, we clearly see the attention he gave to the poorest of people. Attention to the most needy is a concern that should inform the priest's pastoral priorities. Helping to resolve and meet the needs of people is something proper to the Christian and all the more to the priest. To the need for material goods, there has been added today many other needs that have become urgent: loneliness in old age, depression and abandonment of so many people in large cities, the different types of addictions – so often exploited by organizations and individuals with a desire to get rich, neglected childhood without food or education, etc.

The priest is there where there is more need for counsel and the announcement of eternal goods, where the more defenseless are. The priest is someone who brings hope with his words and actions so that these situations of misery are alleviated. Despite all the technological advancements, people don't always have the possibility to receive the benefits of these developments and find themselves alone and abandoned.

The priest has, in a certain sense, the responsibility for creating just societies. It's not the priest's task to work in the area of politics, unions or economics; he is not called to be a builder of the earthly city. At the same time, he cannot forget the world in which he lives. He can and should cooperate in promoting a more just society, more in conformity with God's will, through his preaching of Gospel values and the formation of consciences. This is his specific contribution. This does not exclude his pointing out unjust situations, but rather his love for his brothers and sisters demands that he go beyond – more to the root: arriving at transforming the hearts of those who bring about such situations. He does not seek to simply object, but rather unite, striving in such situations for mutual understanding, forgiveness and effective responsibility of those who can improve unjust situations. Only in this way can he build a new society, since without changing hearts, resentments will be an encumbrance that keep people stuck in the past, without hope and forever victims to destructive violence.

Lastly, in building charity, the priest should always live charity in truth. He would give the worst service as a shepherd if through a badly understood concept of charity he abandoned the truth. We must speak the truth to souls, helping them find its value and love it. We need to show forth the whole truth that God has revealed to us in Christ's Gospel that the Church's Magisterium transmits to us. We cannot diminish or change the truth in order to "do a pastoral good." Of course, we can apply the law of graduality, but without ever distorting the truth. Pope Benedict XVI tells us in his encyclical *Charity in truth*: "Only in truth does charity shine forth, only in truth can charity be authentically lived. Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity.... Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way."¹²

Shepherd of souls

The priest is a shepherd of souls, who cares for his sheep and is ready to give his life for them. We cannot underestimate the value of this self-offering, of this passion that should

burn in the heart of each priest. He is like Christ, who offers his life for them, and he is moved by the very love of Christ towards them.

But besides this self-gift that is made real day in, day out, he instructs souls with correct Catholic doctrine. He teaches them the faith by means of an adequate catechesis, using all possible means, because the people of God has an urgent need to know the faith so as not to be dragged about by other pseudo-religious ideas. Above all, the priest should be a guide and shepherd of his brothers and sisters by the witness of a virtuous life, fed by prayer and contact with the Eucharist.

Attention to souls takes shape above all in the administration of the sacrament of reconciliation and penance. The priest should always be available to the lay faithful to hear their confessions. It is there, in the quiet of the confessional, where the most decisive battle for the soul of the world is waged. It's where God's grace deeply touches people through the humanity of the priest. St Jean Marie Vianney used to hear confessions more than ten hours a day, aware of the value of even one soul and the special action of grace in this sacrament. The example of this humble French priest had a decisive influence in the life of John Paul II as seminarian, priest, bishop and Pope – who during his whole ministry always looked for time for hearing confessions. Even as Pope, every Good Friday, he went down to St Peter's Basilica to administer God's mercy.

We should recognize that “popular piety is one of our strengths because it consists of prayers deeply rooted in people's hearts”¹³ and the heart of society. It is an expression of the yearning for eternity that is never extinguished. A shepherd of soul never despises this piety, but rather promotes and directs it properly so that it turns into deep and enduring convictions proper to mature Christians.

The priest impacts culture through the use of the means of communication, through the education of children and youth, and through evangelizing action in political and legislative circles. These are the vehicles – mass media, education and legislation – that transform culture.¹⁴

In a resolute way, he will infuse in the Catholic layperson the desire to live according to their baptismal commitments, such that it will be they, the laypeople together, who evangelize the world of science, art, business, etc. He will help them, offering spiritual formation, helping their pastoral work, and sustaining them in all their initiatives. He should promote collegiality because the action of the laypeople is vital for the future Church. We cannot think of a Church in which only the clergy would carry out pastoral work. Here is the most important pastoral challenge for the priest and the Church of the Third Millennium. It is the hour for the laity and without them, we will not be able to bring to completion the New Evangelization to which the Church has been called by Pope John Paul II.

Finally, a shepherd of souls, with his prayer, much hope and faith in God's action, will develop an adequate and prudent vocational ministry so as to allow the Lord's invitation to total self-giving to be heard by many young people. He will aid this work with a truly

luminous and elevated testimony of his being a priest, which will arouse in a young person the desire to leave everything and follow Jesus Christ.

Integral formation

In order to carry out this whole program, whoever aspires to the priesthood needs an exquisite personal formation which involves his whole person. The formation of a priest, as *Pastores dabo vobis* asks us, should be integral – spiritual, human, intellectual and pastoral – directed, in a harmonious way, to all the aspects of his life, so that he can be prepared for his mission. Such a formation is not improvised. It takes years and continuous effort during all the time of seminary, as well as a permanent and responsible dedication until the last moment of his life.

The world has become very competitive. People get the best qualifications and update themselves in their specific fields. If this is the case for people who deal with purely human matters, all the more should it be for the priest who deals with the salvation of souls, faith, morality, etc. The studies completed and the capacities acquired in the seminary are not sufficient, regardless of the dedication and effort employed; rather it is important that insofar as it is possible, priests seek to always improve their own formation to be able to respond to the most dicey questions the world presents. It would also be fitting for the priest, according to the type of pastoral work he is involved in, and with the goal of coming into contact with the people and problems that concern them, to also have a certain familiarity with the themes that are relevant to the life of people: economics, social and political life, ideologies and cultural structures, etc.

In his effort to acquire an integral formation, the priest takes Jesus Christ as his only ideal, seeking to identify himself with him, not only in the aspect of his personality, but in everything. Without a doubt, the most important is the heart: He will be a priest after Christ's heart. As the prophet Jeremiah says, "I will give them shepherds after my own heart" (Jeremiah 3:15). Therefore, he should love as Christ loves, see things as Christ sees them, judge things as Christ judges them.

Cum Petro et sub Petro

Today, when we are swarmed with so many erroneous ideas and when a culture of relativism reigns, one of the challenges that faces the priest is that of being a promoter of unity around the Pope, principle and visible foundation of the unity of the Church. Unity with the successor of Peter is the safe path to live according to the truth. Christ founded his Church on Peter and prayed for him that he would confirm his brothers in the faith. Without the successor of Peter, Christ's Church would not subsist.

We are not speaking of a mere sentimental or emotional union, but supporting our faith in Christ on the rock of Peter. From here comes adherence to the Magisterium and to ecclesiastical discipline. This adherence demands not allowing ourselves to be dragged about by a love for theological novelties, considering the Magisterium antiquated or just another opinion, as fashionable theologians promote. We need an attitude of faith and

humility to recognize that only the successor of Peter and the shepherds that keep a full communion with him, are the trustees of the *charisma Veritatis* (charism of Truth). Under the guidance of its shepherds, the Church keeps itself in the truth that God has revealed to us in Christ for the salvation of humanity.

From all this, we deduce the importance of priestly obedience. Contemporary culture has modified the Christian content of this virtue. It regards it as humiliating submission and as a renunciation of one's freedom. This is not the obedience proper to a Christian or priest that Christ taught us in accepting the plan of his Father. "*Factus est oboediens usque ad mortem*" (He was made obedient even unto death). The obedience of the priest has its foundation in the conviction that the legitimate authority of the Church comes from God. The priest does not renounce his own will, but rather adheres with full freedom to God's will constituted through the mediation of his legitimate representatives. Even less does he renounce his reason, because he always keeps the capacity to discern and propose to his superiors his own point of view. But faith requires that the priest – if a command is morally good, and if it is confirmed by the authority after one's perplexity has been presented to it – accept it in peace and bring it to completion, even though it may not be agreeable or it be different than what he would have decided. This is the obedience which the Church of today needs in its priests.

Defender of life

It's clear that being a defender of life is one of the main commitments of the priest of today.¹⁵ Life is under siege, and many have united to attack above all the weakest and most defenseless: the unborn person, the elderly, and the sick. These dark storm clouds that threaten life – and therefore culture and society – are nothing new. The echoes of the collective follies of the Second World War still reach us today. The same disdain for life then lives on in our time, only that modern society has as its ally a more developed technology, capable of greater exterminating power.

The priest carries the conviction of being a messenger, promoter and defender of life. He helps the lay faithful to avoid being deceived by the fallacies and manipulation that are used today. He creates, on the contrary, a culture that welcomes, celebrates, protects, defends and promotes life. What's at stake is much more than what it seems at first sight. Christian societies are the most developed societies and at the same time the most immersed in this anti-life mentality. Countries that for centuries were the bearers of Christian culture, and that gave so much to the world and humanity in a fruitful symbiosis of culture and Christianity, are those that have a higher risk of extinction through a sort of demographic suicide.

In order to promote a culture of life, according to his possibilities, the priest will help couples that are preparing for marriage to opt for life. They should also be concerned about supporting researchers in the field of medical ethics and contributing to the formation of judges and legislators who can support life in the legal initiatives that are proposed. They should support the creation of groups of doctors and gynecologists who

promote life and help install in hospitals and health structures, bioethical advisors and consultants.

Sign of contradiction

Although I have already spoken about this in speaking about priestly identity, I would like to dwell on an idea. The priest knows that he is “*alter Christus*” and that he participates in Christ’s redeeming mission. Therefore, he fulfills his mission in bearing his personal cross, helping other people carry theirs as an inescapable path of the life of every Christian. In this way, he makes up for his own sins and for the sins of others, giving priestly value to his own suffering.

The priest lives the cross and accompanies the Christian faithful to accept theirs with Christian resignation. In contrast, humanity seeks ever more intensely to free itself from all suffering and difficulty. For this reason, the priest is someone not understood. For people of today, he is a sign of contradiction because he points out that the way to eternal happiness does not necessarily follow the way of pleasure and the absence of difficulty.

The world’s reaction to a faithful priest is one of suspicion, doubting his intentions, considering him a sick individual with a twisted psychology. It’s true that unfortunately, some of our brothers in the priesthood, not having sufficient psychological stability or the necessary moral depth, have given the world the picture of the priest that has justified at least in part, the suspicion that weighs upon the Catholic priesthood. At the same time, it is meet and just to not forget the hundreds of thousands of priests that are faithful to their vocation in the midst of great difficulties and that with their great spiritual and human stature are instruments for the good of millions of people.

In some cases for the priest, the cross is not only present as moral contempt or lack of appreciation. Priests out of fidelity to Christ have resisted and still resist the coercion of so many ideologies that want to use them for their own power or political ends. The price they pay is high. Many of us have received the gift of faith through the limitless generosity, unbreakable fidelity and unconquerable faith of priests who have preferred death to denying Christ. This fidelity is the fidelity that is expected today and always from priests.

The priest accepts his mission and destiny, recognizing that, if he is not a sign of contradiction, if his standards are like those of the world, if he doesn’t differ from the fashionable way of thinking certain cultures propose, perhaps he is not living according to his priestly state of life. Perhaps he is not helping people on their path towards our definitive homeland. Perhaps his salt has become insipid. At the same time, we can’t mistake going against the current for an attitude of controversy and political denunciations of certain social structures. The priest goes against the current because he is evangelical, not because he adopts a political orientation. While it’s true that sometimes there are situations of injustice that cry out to heaven, and it is necessary to denounce and change them, the priest should keep his proper place, as a man of God and not someone that creates agitation and subversion.

Holiness

With this word, we have a summary of all the ideas that I have mentioned up to now. Only saints change history. Holiness is the vocation proper to all Christians, but for the priest it is even more. Holiness is a notion, which by dint of it being used has lost its true meaning and all of its capacity for interior transformation. The priest will be holy as a consequence of his own sacramental configuration with Christ the Shepherd; he lives like Christ, imitates his virtues and travels the path of his life as an offering to the Father out of love for people. He prays and enters the mystery of the Trinity, of which he will be a reflection. He carries out his ministry aware of what he is doing, and he himself frequents the sacraments. Without holiness, he doesn't fulfill his mission, and he squanders the vocation to which God called him. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Priestly holiness is what causes a special attraction in souls who discover in the priest that mystery of God that revives the nostalgia for eternity proper to every person.

5. Conclusion

In this overview, I have tried to describe the identity of the priest, keys for understanding society and contemporary culture and the challenges this presents. Perhaps there is nothing new. Still, I believe that the deeper priests live their proper identity, the more they will be able to face the challenges of the world, being able to better help people to live their common vocation to holiness.

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Notes

¹John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* (March 25, 1992), 16.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis_en.html

²John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* (March 25, 1992), 42.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis_en.html

³John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (April 17, 2003), 29.
http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0821/___P5.HTM

⁴John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (January 6, 2001), 40.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html

⁵Pedro Almodóvar.

⁶John Paul II, Address of the Holy Father John Paul II to priests, missionaries, religious brothers and sisters, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland (October 1, 1979), 10.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1979/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19791001_maynooth-religious-people_en.html

⁷Benedict XVI, Meeting with young people and seminaries, Saint Joseph Seminary, Yonkers, NY (April 19, 2008).
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080419_st-joseph-seminary_en.html

⁸Cf. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Il Ministero e la vita dei presbiteri, Relazione nel Simposio Internazionale in occasione del XXX anniversario della promulgazione del Decr. Conc. Presbyterorum ordinis”, Vatican City (October 23-28, 1995), 1.1, in *Sacrum Ministerium*, Year II, 1/96, 12.

⁹Saint Bernard, *Homilies on the excellences of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 2. Hom. II super "Missus est", 17; Migne, P. L., CLXXXIII, 70-b, c, d, 71-a, cited in Pope Pius XII, *Doctor mellifluus*, 31.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_24051953_doctor-mellifluus_en.html

¹⁰Saint Cyprian, *De Oratione dominica*, 23; cited in Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium*, 4. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

¹¹John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* (March 25, 1992), 17.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis_en.html

¹²Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), 3.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html

¹³Benedict XVI, Address to pastors and priests of the diocese of Rome (February 22, 2007).
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070222_clergy-rome_en.html

¹⁴Cf. Luis Garza, LC, “The battle for the soul of the world”, Address to university students from the United States, Switzerland, 2003, Ed. ART.

¹⁵Cf. John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (March 25, 1995), 5.
http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/___P4.HTM