

Bishops
And Priests:
A Changing Relationship

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I. The Historical Roots

To properly understand the relationship between bishop and priest, we must examine the historical development of the relationship. The tradition of the Church has been that Christ instituted the Sacrament of Holy Orders.¹ The Council of Trent affirmed Christ's institution of Holy Orders when it stated

In the New Testament the Catholic Church has received from the institution of Christ the holy, visible sacrifice of the Eucharist, it must also be acknowledged that there exists in the Church a new, visible and external priesthood.²

This is still the tradition of the Church. What we now understand is that the New Testament never describes anyone as “priest” except Jesus himself.³ Moloney says the New Testament “does not directly consider “the Catholic priesthood.”⁴

The *Acts of the Apostles* and the New Testament letters do refer to the roles of *episcopoi* (overseer, who become the bishops), *presbyteroi* (who “become” the priests), and *diakoni* (deacon).⁵ In the New Testament *episcopi* and *presbyteroi* are used interchangeably. While the New Testament does not tell us who presided, there is clear reference to the celebration of the Eucharist such as 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.⁶ Moloney discusses the “priests” in the Jewish religion and in the Roman and Greek cultures. It is only after the destruction of the Temple in

¹ The common belief has been the Jesus instituted the priesthood when he instituted the Eucharist. Mt 26:26-30; Mk 14:22-22; Lk 22:14-21. Cf. 1 Cor 11:23-26.

² J. Neuner, S.J. and J. Dupuis, S.J., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*. Seventh Edition. New York: Alba House, 2001. “The General Council of Trent Twenty-Third Session, Doctrine on the Sacrament of Order (1563), paragraph 1707.

³ Francis J. Moloney, S.D. B., “The Catholic Priesthood,” *New Theology Review* (August 2004), 5-18, 6.

⁴ Moloney, “The Catholic Priesthood,” 5. Raymond Brown likewise says that is no ordination rite providing or even the mention of ordination in the New Testament. There is laying of hands for leaders but there is no mention of this as a universal practice. Raymond E. Brown, S.S. “Episkepe and Episkopos: The New Testament Evidence,” *Theological Studies* 41 (1980): 322-338, 332.

⁵ Moloney, “The Catholic Priesthood,” 7.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

Jerusalem and Christianity begins to see the Eucharist “as the sacrificial cult of the Christian religion,” that, “the emergence of a notion of a Christian priesthood followed.”⁷

Legrand presents how the bishop became the one who presides at the Eucharist. He begins with Acts 13:1-2, where the prophets and teachers preside at *worship*.⁸ In the *Didache*, it is the prophets, apostles, and the *bishops* preside at the Eucharist.⁹ Finally, in the Letter of Clement to the Corinthians it is the bishops-presbyters who preside over the Church *and* at the Eucharist. As bishops, they are entrusted with the liturgy.¹⁰ Up to this point the terms bishop and priest are used interchangeably as community leaders.

It is in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch that we find the clearest distinction that it is the bishop who presides at the Eucharist and those he delegates in his absence. For Ignatius, the role of the bishop as leader is summed up at “Apart from the bishop no one is to do anything pertaining to the Church.”¹¹ Ignatius is also the first to speak of the bishop as singular rather than in the plural.¹² Ignatius does not dismiss the importance of the presbyter. For Ignatius, it is a three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyters, and deacons over which the bishop presides.¹³ The use of ‘presbyters’ remains in the plural as they form a council representing the circle of apostles who surround Christ in the heavenly liturgy. The bishop is not a monarch. Speaking of both presbyters and deacons, Ignatius states, “for without them one cannot speak of the church.”¹⁴

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ Ibid., 197.

⁹ Ibid., 199. For a list of these gifts and roles see 1 Cor 12:8-10; 27-30.

¹⁰ Ibid., 200.

¹¹ Ibid., 202.

¹² Cf. John D. Zizioulas, “Episkope and Episcopate in Ecumenical Perspective” in *Faith and Order Paper* 102, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980. 30-42, 31.

¹³ Legrand, 202.

¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Second Edition, Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 1997, 1554 quoting Ignatius *Ad Trall.* 3, 1: SCH10.96.

Legrand writes that by 150 A.D. in Rome, it is clear that “the presidency of the Eucharist is an episcopal office.”¹⁵ By the end of the second century, Ignatius’ structure became the norm.

The *Apostolic Tradition* (c.215 A.D.) provides prayers for ordination. These prayers give us some indication of the role of bishop and priest. The prayer for a bishop prays for a spirit of leadership, for Christ’s spirit, for continuity of apostolic succession, and lastly for the bishop as the one who offers the gifts at liturgy. Conversely, the ordination prayer for a presbyter makes no reference to presiding at the Eucharist. Rather, the prayers for a presbyter ask for *help* in governance. Thus, it was not the role of the presbyter in the *Apostolic Tradition* to preside at Eucharist but rather to help the bishop govern the people.

In the fourth century, the Christian Church underwent major changes. The persecution of Christians formerly ended with the *Edict of Milan* by the Constantine in 313 A.D. Later in the fourth century, Christianity became the official state religion. This meant *massive* increases in the number of Christians and thus a massive increase in the number of liturgical celebrations. There were too many celebrations of the Eucharist on Sunday for the local bishop to preside at all of them. Therefore, we see the establishment of parishes where the presbyter became the regular presider.¹⁶ Prior to this, presbyters did not regularly priest at the Eucharist. By becoming the regular presider the presbyters become priests.¹⁷ This forced a change in the understanding of the structure of the Church. The structure had been understood in Ignatius’ model as one where the bishop stood at the center representing Jesus Christ, surrounded by his presbyters representing the circle of apostles, in turn surrounded by the people. In this model, the deacons served as the contact between the bishop and the people. It is in this image, that the

¹⁵ Legrand, 204.

¹⁶ Zizioulas, “Episkope and Episcopate,” 38. Paul McPartlan, “Presbyteral Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church,” *Ecclesiology* 1.2 (2005): 11-24, 14.

¹⁷ McPartlan, “Presbyteral Ministry,” 14.

bishop, at the center, represents the whole congregation. Likewise, it is this image that the presbyters serve as a council surrounding the bishop and giving him counsel.¹⁸ It is also here that the presbyters serve as an important eschatological element of the Church, representing the apostles encircling Jesus in the heavenly liturgy. In a persecuted church, eschatological imagery was very important. After Christianity became the state religion, the eschatological imagery was no longer tangible, as people did not fear their end would come soon.¹⁹ The model changed to a simple model of priest at the center surrounded by the people. The image of the bishop as the center of the worshipping community became lost. The bishop did maintain the distinction as the proper minister for ordination and confirmation.

By 1150, there were seven sacraments and seven “orders” consisting of four minor orders of porter, lector, exorcist, and acolyte and three major orders of subdeacon, deacon, and priest. Notably missing is the bishop. The role of bishop had become detached from “order.”²⁰ The Church was already becoming so focused on the consecration of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ that the one, the priest, who had the *power* to consecrate was seen as having the ‘fullness of priesthood.’ Thus, there was no higher degree of order associated with episcopacy. In sacramental power, the bishop was no different than a priest. What the bishop did have that the priest did not was a higher power of jurisdiction.²¹ Aquinas writes, “Hence the distinction of Orders is derived from their relation to the Eucharist.”²² He describes what role each of the seven orders contributes to the Eucharist. The priest is listed first as the one who consecrates.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Ibid., 16-7.

²⁰ Osborne, “Priesthood,” 200.

²¹ Previously, in the eighth century, Bede the Venerable had compared this imagery to that of the sending out of the Twelve to the bishops and of the seventy-two to the priests. In administration, the bishops are above but sacramentally they are equal. Osborne, “Priesthood,” 203.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Supplement, Q37, art. 2, resp.

The Church had developed into a pyramid hierarchy with the pope at the top, followed by the bishops, then the priests, and lastly the people. The pope had the fullness of power to which he delegated some to the bishops and they in turn to the priest.

It is this understanding of the priesthood and episcopacy that brings us to the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century and the Council of Trent. The Council of Trent adamantly affirmed transubstantiation and the priesthood and that the bishops are indeed superior to priests, conferring Confirmation, Ordination, and other higher power functions.²³ In its defense of the priesthood, Trent focused on the indelible character received in ordination emphasizing the cultic role of priesthood.²⁴ Trent attempted to speak of the teaching role of the bishop but without a theology of the Word little progress was made and hence little development in the relationship of bishop and priest.²⁵

II. The Understanding of the Second Vatican Council

Essential to understanding the rethinking of the Second Vatican Council is to realize all that had been “discovered” in the renewals of the early 20th Century including the recovery of some of the lost documents such as the *Apostolic Tradition*. No longer could the Church say the way we do it today is the way it has always been done. The historical documents clearly showed different practices and understandings. The question became does the Church, in keeping with ‘tradition’ return to exactly the way the early Church did it or does it simply maintain the contemporary practice. ‘Tradition’ is not to be understood as simply the current long-standing practice but as *living tradition*. For as John 16:12-13 tells us, Jesus did not tell them everything but he sends

²³ Neuner, *Christian Faith*, paragraphs 1711-1714.

²⁴ Herve-Marie Legrand, “The Indelible Character and Theology of Ministry,” *Concilium* n. 74 (1972): 54-62, 61.

²⁵ Alexandre Ganoczy, “Splendours and Miseries of the Tridentine Doctrine of Ministries,” *Concilium* n. 80 (1972):75-86, 82.

us the Spirit to guide us to the truth. Our Living Tradition flows from our growing understanding from the Spirit. The Second Vatican Council did the proper thing, looking at what was good and bad throughout the entire 2,000 years of the Christian Church to arrive at our post-Vatican two understanding of our Church.

In studying the documents of the second and third century Church, it is clear that the bishop is the leader of the community and the priest/presbyter acts on behalf of the bishop. The presidency of the Eucharist belongs to the bishop. Thus, it is the bishop who has the fullness of orders.²⁶ The Latin Rite has eliminated the minor orders and the subdeaconate. We are left with a three-fold order of bishop, priest, and deacon.²⁷ It is also the understanding of the Second Vatican Council from the early Church Fathers that a bishop does not function in isolation but with all the bishops, “For although we are many shepherds, we bring to pasture a single flock.”²⁸

In both *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10 and *Lumen Gentium* 11, the Second Vatican Council also recaptured the understanding of the Church Fathers of the centrality of the Eucharist to understanding the Church. The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Church, the ‘Eucharist makes the Church.’ The bishop, and as his representative, the priest, are the ones who preside at this celebration.

In addition to the collegiality of the bishops,²⁹ the Council also recaptured the concept of a *presbyterium*. The bishops do not function in isolation from each other, neither do the priests. Together, they form a brotherhood and a consultative body. This

²⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution On The Church, Lumen Gentium* in Vatican Council II, Volume I: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents, New Revised Edition. Austin Flannery, O.P., Ed. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company. 1996, 21.

²⁷ Paragraph 1536 uses the language of “degrees” of Orders.

²⁸ Quoted in Bernard Botte, O.S.B. “The Collegial Character of the Priesthood and the Episcopate,” *Concilium* vol. 4 no. 1 (1965), 88-90, 89. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 22.

²⁹ *Catechism*, 1560.

idea of ‘sacramental brotherhood’ is found in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*.³⁰ In the same document, we also find the idea of the bishop consulting the priests “about matters that concern the needs of pastoral work and the good of the diocese,”³¹ a presbyteral council.

Presbyterorum Ordinis also refers to the

Priests exercise the function of Christ as Pastor and Head *in proportion* to their share of authority. In the name of the bishop they gather the family of God.³²

The priests do have a role of their own but serve as co-workers of the bishop.³³

III. Implications for Today

In coming to understand that the New Testament never directly mentions any notion of ‘priesthood’ the Second Vatican Council did not throw out priesthood from being instituted by Christ. Rather, it continues to state Christ sent the Apostles and then their successors as having the “sacred power of Order” sharing in the consecration and mission of Jesus.³⁴

Lumen Gentium presents a new ordering of the Church. First, of course, Christ is the High Priest. From this, we understand the people in light of a common priesthood. Lastly, from the common priesthood we move to an understanding of the ministerial priesthood. Ministerial priesthood is a particular minister in a Church full of ministers.³⁵ As the *Catechism* states, “The ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood.”³⁶ Any ministry is done from within the Church and as part of the Church.

To be an effective bishop or priest one must recognize what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, that there are many gifts, many forms of service, and different working but it is all the

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Presbyterorum Ordinis* in Vatican Council II, Volume I: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents, New Revised Edition. Austin Flannery, O.P., Ed. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company. 1996, 8.

³¹ Ibid., 7.

³² Ibid., 6.

³³ Ibid., 4.

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

³⁶ *Catechism*, 1547.

same spirit. No one has all the gifts.³⁷ Rather, we need to work together. Hence, the presbyterium serves as a consultative body to help discern what is needed and how to go about it. However, in the end there must be one voice that speaks with clarity, the bishop. The bishop and priests need to appreciate each other, within a specific diocese and beyond.

The relationship between the bishop and presbyters in the writings of Ignatius did not randomly come to be. The model of a single bishop with a council of presbyters developed because it works. It was lost in the massive growth in the Church in the fourth century. Likewise, while the scholastic thinking failed to appreciate the episcopacy as the ‘fullness of orders,’ it nonetheless understood the importance of leadership and Eucharist. The thing that was lacking was an understanding of the link between the Eucharist and the Church. By restoring the link between the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Church, the link between Orders and bishop was also understood.

How then are the bishop and priests to relate to one another today? The bishop is not to be a monarchial leader. The bishop, to be an effective leader, must be willing to listen to what his priests in his own diocese have to say and what other bishops are doing. Likewise, priests as pastors of parishes cannot live in isolation, seeing their parish as their own possession. They should be willing to present their voice to the bishop. Having had their voice heard, they obey the bishop. The priest has the sacramental “power” to consecrate, to baptize, to absolve but these must all be exercised in light of the whole Church and the bishop is that connecting point. This power is from his ordination and Christ is the source of his priesthood.³⁸

³⁷ 1 Cor 12:8-10; 27-30.

³⁸ *Catechism*, 1548.

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