

“ESSENTIA ET NON GRADU TANTUM DIFFERANT”:  
A NOTE ON THE PRIESTHOOD AND ANALOGICAL  
PREDICATION

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EVERYONE KNOWS the passage in *Lumen gentium* (no. 10) wherein the Second Vatican Council states that the priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, while always ordered to each other, nonetheless “differ by essence and not only by degree.” Although this passage is frequently cited by both the magisterium and theologians, there has been little sustained attention to the meaning of this crucial phrase.<sup>1</sup> Why is this phrase important? What is meant by an “essential” difference between the two priesthoods? And does positing an essential difference bespeak a depreciation of the priesthood of the faithful?<sup>2</sup>

Several years ago, I offered an analysis of the preliminary schemata of Vatican II in which the paragraph containing this

<sup>1</sup> The full sentence reads: “*Sacerdotium autem commune fidelium et sacerdotium ministeriale seu hierarchicum, licet essentia et non gradu tantum differant, ad invicem tamen ordinantur; unum enim et alterum suo peculiari modo de uno Christi sacerdotio participant.*”

<sup>2</sup> In a recent volume, Lawrence B. Porter adduces several theologians who claim that Vatican II offers very little light concerning the “essential difference” between the two priesthoods. For his brisk treatment of Gisbert Greshake, André Feuillet, and others, see *The Assault on Priesthood* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2012), xliv-xlv.

significant phrase was debated.<sup>3</sup> In the present essay, I undertake not another historical review of the *Acta synodalia* (although the conciliar documents, at all stages, are at the basis of this discussion). **Instead, I offer a more speculative consideration of the relationship between the two priesthoods and of the meaning of the phrase “*essentia et non gradu tantum differant*.”** I propose that the Thomistic notions of participation and analogy are the two philosophical themes undergirding this distinction. They help to explain how there is a real sharing in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ by both the faithful and their ministers, even though Christ’s priesthood subsists in a proportionately different way in each state of life. I further argue that this passage of *Lumen gentium* offers a good example of the “hermeneutic of reform” that Benedict XVI endorsed in his well-known Christmas address of 2005 on the proper interpretation of Vatican II.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, the very language of “essential difference” is a cause for some uneasiness in contemporary theology. The primary reason for this anxiety is that all Christians, whatever their state in life, are first and foremost disciples of Jesus Christ, sharing a common vocation to holiness. This was, indeed, the point of inserting the chapter on the “people of God” in *Lumen gentium* prior to discussing any particular states of life or offices within the Church. To speak, then, of an “essential difference” among Christians appears to smack of an “unequal” approach to the Church rather than a perspective that views the Church as the one people of God journeying toward fulfillment.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas G. Guarino, “The Priesthood and Analogy: A Note on the Formation and Redaction of *Lumen Gentium* 10,” *Angelicum* 67 (1990): 309-28.

<sup>4</sup> The pope spoke of “the ‘hermeneutic of reform,’ of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us.” See “Christmas Address to the Roman Curia” (22 December 2005) in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 98 (2006): 40-53 at 45-46.

<sup>5</sup> Yves Congar says that chapter 2 of *Lumen gentium* sought to surpass the image of the Church as a “*societas inaequalis*” in *Le Concile de Vatican II: Son Église, Peuple de Dieu et Corps du Christ* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), 109-22, particularly 113.

The very idea of an essentially different ministerial priesthood appears, at least on the surface, to purvey a kind of elitism and social stratification characteristic of the *ancien régime*, an idea entirely outdated given our long experience of egalitarian democracy. Isn't it truer to the nature of the Church to emphasize the equality of all the baptized on their pilgrim journey to the heavenly Jerusalem? Is it proper to speak of one Christian priesthood as substantially distinct from another without reverting to an obsolete ecclesiology? Already in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Martin Luther had forcefully railed against this distinction, saying,

They [his opponents] have sought . . . to set up a seed bed of implacable discord, by which clergy and laymen should be separated from each other farther than heaven from earth, to the incredible injury of the grace of baptism and to the confusion of our fellowship in the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

In the following paragraphs, I hope to show that Vatican II hardly intended to endorse an elitist chasm between clergy and laity, but it did intend by the phrase “they differ by essence and not only by degree” to show that the ministerial priesthood is a particular state of life within the Church, with a unique participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, a participation which, as *Lumen gentium* also insists, is ordered toward the faithful. How, then, is this crucial phrase properly understood?<sup>7</sup>

## I. THE PARTICIPATIONIST UNDERSTANDING OF REALITY

A few comments on the participationist understanding of reality can help shed light on Vatican II's teaching on the

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, trans. A. T. W. Steinhäuser, et al. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 112.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the phrase under discussion finds its immediate source in the allocution of Pius XII, *Magnificate Dominum*, delivered on 2 November 1954. See *Acta Apostolicae Sedis (AAS)* 46 (1954): 666-77. The pope refers to the priesthood of the faithful, which “*non gradu tantum, sed etiam essentia differre a sacerdotio proprie vereque dicto.*” An English translation of this speech may be found in *American Ecclesiastical Review (AER)* 132 (1955): 52-63.

priesthood. I shall briefly review some passages central to St. Thomas's thought on this matter.<sup>8</sup>

In question 3, article 5 of his disputed questions *De Potentia*, St. Thomas says:

If in many things we find some attribute common to all, then this attribute occurs because of a single cause. For an attribute common to many cannot be derived from its own self, since each one is distinguished from the others, and a diversity of causes produces a diversity of effects.

In this passage, he is arguing that since the act of existence (*esse*) is common across diverse beings, this act is communicated by another, by one who is the basis for the common attribute or perfection shared by many. In other words, whenever a common attribute is shared by different entities, the only possible grounding for this participated attribute is a common source which possesses this perfection in its fullness.<sup>9</sup> The issue is this: how can beings which are very different also possess a real similarity and unity? **Diversity, in and of itself, cannot ground unity; consequently, there must be a common source of the unifying perfection or attribute.**

Saint Thomas makes a very similar observation in the *Summa Theologiae* (*STh* I, q. 65, a. 1):

If different things are united on some point, there must be some cause for this union, since things that are different in themselves cannot be united. And so whenever in diverse things some one common attribute is found, it must be that these diverse things receive this attribute from one particular cause, just as diverse bodies are hot from the heat of one fire. This is the case with being,

<sup>8</sup> Participationist understandings of existence have gained new traction in contemporary theology, particularly as a way of overcoming narrowly rationalist modern philosophies. It is my intention to limit myself to the thought of St. Thomas on this matter. For the best study of the role of participation in St. Thomas, see Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione*, Complete Works of Cornelio Fabro, vol. 3 (Segni: Editrice del Verbo Incarnato, 2005; orig., 1939). Also, *Partecipazione e causalità* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1960). In this section, I rely on texts cited by Fabro and by W. Norris Clarke in *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach*, 39.

which is commonly found in all things, however diverse they may be. It is necessary, then, that there is one principle of being, by which all possess *esse* in their own way.

In this passage, too, St. Thomas is primarily concerned with how the *actus essendi* is shared by profoundly diverse beings, all of whom participate in the common perfection of the act of existence. As Bernard Montagnes notes, one finds here an “essential diversity of participants” who nonetheless share a common perfection or attribute having its source in the primary instance.<sup>10</sup> Saint Thomas offers clarifying remarks on a participated perfection in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics*. He observes that a perfection belongs to one being essentially and by participation to others.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere he states that God himself possesses nothing by participation, but only *per essentiam*.<sup>12</sup>

Saint Thomas’s fundamental points are easily transferable to thinking about the priesthood. Vatican II affirms that a real priesthood is shared by both the laity and the ministers of the Church. Indeed, it explicitly states as much when it teaches that the priesthood of the faithful and the hierarchical priesthood “*suo peculiari modo de uno Christi sacerdotio participant*” (LG 10). What is the ontological source of this shared attribute of priesthood? It is, of course, the one priesthood of Jesus Christ, the high priest who offers himself to the Father. The Epistle to the Hebrews testifies at length to this unique priesthood of Christ, and it is this priesthood that is proportionately shared by both the laity and the clergy.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Montagnes, *La doctrine de l’analogie de l’être d’après saint Thomas D’Aquin* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1963), 44. The book is translated into English as *The Doctrine of the Analogy of Being according to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. E. M. Macierowski et al. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 34. Citations will be of the English translation, with the corresponding page number of the French edition in parentheses.

<sup>11</sup> Montagnes, *Doctrine of the Analogy of Being*, 32 (39), citing I *Metaphys.*, lect. 14, no. 224.

<sup>12</sup> *STh* I, q. 4, a. 2.

In the case at hand, then, the priesthood is realized in Christ *per se et per essentiam* and in the ministers and faithful *per participationem*. As St. Thomas says in the *Sentences*, “the one who possesses the form by participation imitates the one who possesses it essentially.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, Christ fully possesses the perfection of priesthood which is communicated to both his ministers and all the baptized faithful.

## II. THE ANALOGICAL SHARING IN THE ONE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

For Vatican II, then, both the faithful and the clergy proportionately participate in the one priesthood of Jesus, who is the source and ground of this commonly shared perfection. How did this understanding of an analogical sharing in Christ’s priesthood develop at the council?

The original draft of *De Ecclesia* (discussed in early December 1962) spoke of those who are properly called priests (*proprii quoque nominis sacerdotes sunt*). Several bishops reacted negatively to this phrase, arguing that it gives the unmistakable impression that the universal priesthood is only a *sacerdotium improprium*. This impression was buttressed by the fact that the theological commentary accompanying the schema states, “the text is so redacted that the nature of the universal priesthood, both *metaphorical and analogical*, may appear.”<sup>14</sup> The clear conciliar concern was that the term “priesthood” was only improperly attributed to the laity. But is not the common priesthood, too, a *sacerdotium veri nominis*?

In fact, the first draft of *De Ecclesia* simply imitated the language found in Pius XII’s allocution *Magnificate Dominum* of 1954. In that document, the pope states that the chief duty of a priest is “to offer sacrifice” and “where there is no true and

<sup>13</sup> “Unum quod participative habet formam imitatur illud quod essentialiter habet” (Montagnes, *Doctrine of the Analogy of Being*, 35 [45], citing I *Sent.*, d. 48, q. 1, a. 1).

<sup>14</sup> *Acta Synodalia*, v. 1, pars 4, note B, p. 44 (emphasis added). See Guarino, “Priesthood and Analogy,” 312-14, for further details on this early draft of *De Ecclesia*.

proper power of sacrificing [*potestas sacrificandi*] one finds no priesthood properly and truly [*proprie vereque*] so called.”<sup>15</sup> Pius XII further says that the priest alone offers sacrifice since the Christian people, while they participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice, do not themselves enjoy sacerdotal power. He goes on to state that those who are simply present at Mass (whether laity or clergy reverently assisting at the liturgy) “in no sense sustain or act in the person of Christ sacrificing.”<sup>16</sup>

In both *Magnificate Dominum* and the first schema of *De Ecclesia*, the faithful do not share in Christ’s priesthood except metaphorically. In both documents, the term “priesthood” appears to be attributed to the Christian faithful only by way of extrinsic denomination. At just this point, however, we need to be cautious. For while Pius does indeed argue that only the ministerial priest possesses the priesthood *proprie vereque*, he nonetheless acknowledges that the faithful “possess a certain ‘priesthood’ [*quoddam habere ‘sacerdotium’*] that one may neither depreciate nor minimize.” A kind of priesthood exists in the faithful, the pope reasons, since we read in Scripture that the faithful are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet 2:9). Saint Peter further states that the faithful possess “a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5).<sup>17</sup> At just this point Pius XII makes the crucial theological distinction which finds its way into *Lumen gentium*:

Whatever is the full meaning of this honorable title and claim [the term ‘priesthood’ attributed to the faithful], it must be firmly held that the ‘priesthood’ common to all the faithful, high and reserved as it is, *non graduantum, sed etiam essentia differre* (differs not only in degree but also in essence) from priesthood *proprie vereque* so called, which lies in the power of offering the sacrifice of Christ Himself, since the priest fully and properly so called bears the person of Christ, the supreme High Priest.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Magnificate Dominum* (AAS, 667; AER, 53).

<sup>16</sup> *Magnificate Dominum* (AAS, 669; AER, 55).

<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Pius XII had stated in the encyclical *Mediator Dei* that “They [the faithful] participate, according to their condition, in the priesthood of Christ” (no. 88).

<sup>18</sup> *Magnificate Dominum* (AAS, 669; AER, 55).

We see in the pope's formulation of 1954 a tentative understanding of the priesthood of the baptized, one that remains theologically undeveloped. It was just this hesitant understanding that found its way into the original draft of *De Ecclesia*.

In the second draft of *De Ecclesia*, a schema which appeared in the summer of 1963, the theological commission corrected the equivocal attribution of the term "priesthood" to the faithful. The offending phrase, indicating that only ministerial priests are *sacerdotes proprii nominis*, was dropped, as was any claim to the *indoles metaphorica* of the universal priesthood. However, in reaction against the improper attribution of priesthood found in the first draft, there is, in the second schema, a less pronounced accent on the *difference* between the two priesthoods. While the truly crucial phrase "*essentia et non gradu tantum differant*" was never removed from the second schema, several bishops complained that this second draft failed to outline adequately the difference between the baptismal and ministerial priesthoods, thereby tacking closer to a univocal understanding of the two *sacerdotia*.<sup>19</sup> Only in the final draft would a clearly analogical resolution emerge, with Christ's priesthood actually subsisting in both the faithful and their ministers, although in a proportionately different way.

The council resolved the issue of the two *sacerdotia* by way of analogical predication. This is clearly reflected in the aforementioned statement of *Lumen gentium* that both priesthoods "*suo peculiari modo de uno Christi sacerdotio participant*." Here, the priesthood is fully realized in Christ who is, as St. Thomas says, the *verus sacerdos*.<sup>20</sup> His priesthood (which is the priesthood *maxime et verissime*) is participated in formally and intrinsically by both the ministers and the faithful.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, a baldly univocal reading of the second schema would not have been possible since the crucial phrase remained. However, the second schema *tends* toward univocity insofar as it eliminates several key sentences found in the first draft. For details on the second schema, see Guarino, "Priesthood and Analogy," 314-21.

<sup>20</sup> *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, c. 76.

Diversity arises from the fact that each of the analogates has a different relationship with the primary and exemplary instance. In the final schema, there is an *intrinsic but proportional participation* in Christ's priesthood by both the laity and the clergy.

But why did the council insist on an *essential* difference between the two priesthoods? Clearly, Vatican II intended to reject the univocal predication of Christ's priesthood to the faithful and their ministers. Univocal predication occurs when there exists "a single specific form possessed more or less intensely by a subject," for example, a person who is more or less virtuous, or water that is more or less hot. This type of gradation, *secundum magis et minus*, does not, and is not intended to, overcome univocity.<sup>21</sup> If the two priesthoods were distinguished only in this way—a single form possessed with various grades of intensity—there would exist a simple difference in degree between the universal and the ministerial priesthoods since the same attribute (Christ's priesthood) would be shared by the two *sacerdotia*, but with no substantial difference between them. If that were the case, the ministerial priest would not be exercising an "essentially different" priesthood, but simply his baptismal priesthood in a new, pragmatically designated, capacity. To overcome precisely this kind of univocal attribution, diverse "forms" of Christ's priesthood must be specified in the common and ministerial priesthood, even though both are intrinsic participations in the one priesthood of the Redeemer.

### III. THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE FAITHFUL

While I cannot offer here anything resembling a comprehensive theology of the priesthood, I do want to

<sup>21</sup> Montagnes, *Doctrine of the Analogy of Being*, 30-31 (37), commenting on *De Ente et Essentia* 5 (ed. M.-D. Roland-Gosselin [Le Saulchoir: Kain, 1926], 41). For an English translation, see *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), 53.

differentiate, in accord with the conciliar affirmation of an “essential difference,” the kind of *sacerdotium* exercised by the common and the ministerial priesthood.<sup>22</sup>

Intrinsically connected with the notion of priesthood is the idea of sacrifice. As St. Augustine says, “*Ideo sacerdos, quia sacrificium.*”<sup>23</sup> In the baptismal priesthood, Christian men and women strive to live holy lives by placing their entire being at God’s disposition, or, as Scripture says, by “offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Yves Congar describes this exercise of the universal *sacerdotium* as “the priesthood of self-offering, the offering of one’s very life.” And again, “for the faithful to be a priest is first of all to offer one’s life, to make of one’s own person a reality constantly directed to God.”<sup>24</sup> Saint Augustine aptly says, “*Totum sacrificium ipsi nos sumus*”: We ourselves are the whole sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> All of the actions, then, by which a person consecrates his or her life to the Father, with and through Jesus Christ, constitute the exercise of the baptismal priesthood. Perhaps we can say that the *potestas sacrificandi* of the universal *sacerdotium* has a deeply interior and personal dimension; it is the self-oblation of each individual Christian. But it is not limited to a private element alone, since there is a significant liturgical aspect to it as well.

Scholarship prior to Vatican II sought to re-emphasize the exercise of the priesthood of the faithful that occurs within the liturgy. In a 1937 essay, Dom Gregory Dix complained of a

<sup>22</sup> There exist innumerable exegetical and theological treatises on the priesthood of the faithful. My fundamental interest is in understanding how the concepts of participation and analogy stand at the basis of distinguishing the two Christian *sacerdotia*.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 10.43. For a detailed analysis of the relationship of priesthood and sacrifice, see Jean Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984), 131-34.

<sup>24</sup> Yves Congar, *At the Heart of Christian Worship*, trans. and ed. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2010), 74 and 96.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 10.6 and 10.19. Cited by Congar, *At the Heart of Christian Worship*, 79. Saint Thomas also speaks of the universal priesthood as the self-offering of one’s life to God. See *IV Sent.*, d. 13, q. 1, a. 1, qcla. 1, ad 1.

tendency, dating from the fourth century, “to concentrate it [the liturgy] in the hands of the ministers, so that it becomes in fact something done *by* the clergy *for* the laity, instead of the action of the Body of Christ.”<sup>26</sup> Congar appreciatively notes Dix’s essay, but argues that any early deficiencies had been significantly remedied by the encyclical of Pius XII *Mediator Dei*, and even more insistently by Vatican II.

*Mediator Dei*, for example, explains that the faithful exercise their priesthood in the liturgy by “the offering of themselves as a victim” (MD 98). Moreover, “all Christians, especially those who are present at Mass, are said to offer the sacrifice.” But what is precisely meant by the phrase “to offer” in this context? The encyclical explains:

It is necessary, in order to avoid giving rise to a dangerous error, that we define the exact meaning of the word “offer.” The unbloody immolation at the words of consecration, when Christ is made present upon the altar in the state of a victim, is performed by the priest and by him alone, as the representative of Christ and not as the representative of the faithful. But it is because the priest places the divine victim upon the altar that he offers it to God the Father as an oblation for the glory of the Blessed Trinity and for the good of the whole Church. Now the faithful participate in the oblation . . . because they not only offer the sacrifice by the hands of the priest, but also, to a certain extent, *in union with him*. It is by reason of this participation that the offering made by the people is also included in liturgical worship. (MD 92 [emphasis added])

*Sacrosanctum concilium* repeats this accent on the baptismal priesthood exercised in the liturgy, stating:

They [the faithful in the liturgy] should give thanks to God. By offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, *but also with him*, they should learn also to offer themselves, too. (SC 48 [emphasis added])

The same idea is intensified in *Lumen gentium*:

<sup>26</sup> See “The Idea of ‘The Church’ in the Primitive Liturgies,” in *The Parish Communion*, ed. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1937), 97-143 at 132-133.

Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they [the faithful] *offer the Divine Victim to God*, and offer themselves along with him. . . . All perform their proper part in the liturgical service, not, indeed, all in the same way, but each in that way which is appropriate to himself. (*LG* 11 [emphasis added])

Finally, let us attend to the comments on the universal priesthood found in Paul VI's 1965 encyclical, *Mysterium fidei*. After noting that in the liturgy "the whole Church plays the role of priest and victim along with Christ, offering the sacrifice of the Mass," he adds:

To be sure, the distinction between the universal priesthood and the hierarchical priesthood is something essential and not just a matter of degree, and it has to be maintained in a proper way. Yet we cannot help being filled with an earnest desire to see this teaching [the exercise of the common priesthood in the liturgy] explained over and over until it takes deep root in the hearts of the faithful. (*MF* 31)

In all these passages, one may discern a marked accent on the universal priesthood as a power bestowed by the sacrament of baptism through which one offers one's own life, and Christ himself, to the Father. This oblation takes place both in the liturgy and in daily life. Congar sums this up succinctly, "Jesus offers himself and he offers us. The faithful, his members, offer him as well, and themselves along with him."<sup>27</sup>

#### IV. THE PRIESTHOOD OF MINISTERIAL PRIESTS

Congar lamented the fact that the Reformers, in their legitimate desire to restore the role of the faithful in the liturgy, did so "under catastrophic conditions" causing them to deny the ministerial priesthood.<sup>28</sup> The Council of Trent reacted to this denial by insisting on the unique and lasting character of the priestly office, an office which, as Pius XII and Vatican II taught, is essentially different from the priesthood of the

<sup>27</sup> Congar, *At the Heart of Christian Worship*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

faithful. But how is this “essential difference” properly understood?

The form of Christ’s priesthood which exists specifically in the ordained minister is conferred through the sacrament of holy orders, which configures the priest to stand in Christ’s place, *in persona Christi capitis*, offering the Lord’s unrepeatable sacrifice. For this reason, *Mediator Dei* teaches that when Christ is made present on the altar, this action “is performed by the [ministerial] priest and by him alone” (MD 92). Writing in 1967, Congar observed that Pius’s encyclical “correctly wanted to reject the idea that all the people might be the true celebrant, with the ordained priest merely their delegate. We absolutely have to respect this teaching of *Mediator Dei* as dogmatically fundamental.”<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in a 1983 statement, rejected the claim that the sacrament of holy orders did not “impart any character with ontological significance . . . but would simply give expression before the community that the original power conferred in the sacrament of baptism had become effective.”<sup>30</sup>

What is at stake here is the unique role of the ministerial priest in the sacramental realization of Christ’s oblation. Through the gift of holy orders, the priest liturgically actualizes the Lord’s sacrifice at Golgotha.<sup>31</sup> *Lumen gentium* affirms this when it states, “the priest alone can complete the building up of the Body in the Eucharistic sacrifice. Thus are fulfilled the words of God, spoken through his prophet: ‘From the rising of the sun until its setting, my name is great among the gentiles, and in every place sacrifice and a pure oblation is offered to my

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 52. He notes, however, that *Lumen gentium* 11 has a somewhat different accent, since the dogmatic constitution says that the faithful “offer the divine victim to God and offer themselves along with him.”

<sup>30</sup> See “*Sacerdotium Ministeriale*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 79 (1983) 1:1001-1009. What is rejected in this document is precisely the univocal understanding of the priesthood, *secundum magis et minus*, noted above.

<sup>31</sup> See Cyprian Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle and W. A. Jurgens (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1976), 150-55.

name” (LG 17). A little later the dogmatic constitution says, “Acting *in persona Christi*, and proclaiming his mystery, priests join the offering of the faithful to the sacrifice of their Head. Until the coming of the Lord, priests re-present and apply in the sacrifice of the Mass the one sacrifice of the New Testament (LG 28). Of course, in the very paragraph under discussion, *Lumen gentium* states that the priest “acting *in persona Christi*, brings about the Eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people” (LG 10).

In his capacity as a minister, then, the priest has received the form of Christ’s priesthood in a unique way. With all the faithful, of course, he offers his own spiritual sacrifices to the Father, and so exercises his baptismal priesthood. But he is now enabled, by a sovereign gift of God’s unmerited grace, to re-present in the liturgy the mystery of Christ’s own oblation. All of the faithful join him in offering Christ to the Father, but they do so with and through the ministry of one who uniquely stands, by God’s grace, *in persona Christi*.

In this objective sense, then—in contrast with the priest’s subjective offering of his life to the Father—there cannot be a univocal predication of Christ’s priesthood to the two analogates. A *potestas sacrificandi* exists in both the faithful and the ministers, but it is proportionately realized, just as any attribute or perfection is realized diversely, according to the capacity of those receiving it. Men, for example, participate in the perfection of the *actus essendi* insofar as they are human, while angels, animals, plants, and rocks participate in the perfection of *esse* according to their own, essentially different, natures. As St. Thomas says, participated perfections are limited by the measure of the subject. That is to say, a participated act or attribute is diversified according to the nature of the one receiving it.<sup>32</sup> In the case at hand, there exist essentially different, although analogically related, instantiations of the unique priesthood of the Redeemer.

<sup>32</sup> Montagnes, *Doctrine of the Analogy of Being*, 40 (54), citing *STh* I, q. 75, a. 5, ad 1.

One may conclude that Christ's priesthood (and so his priestly act of self-oblation) is such that both the laity and clergy share in this perfection, but distinctly so. The sacrament of holy orders allows the ministerial priest to receive Christ's priesthood in such wise that he is now enabled to stand at the altar *in persona Christi capitis*.<sup>33</sup> Through the sacrament of baptism, the faithful join with the priest in offering Christ, even as they offer their entire lives to the Father. In each instance, the *ratio* of the Lord's priesthood subsists in real, but essentially different ways.

The principle of participation, then, allows for true similitude, but without requiring the univocal predication of an attribute or perfection. The two priesthoods cannot be distinguished simply by degree (*secundum magis et minus*) since the ministerial priest alone, through the grace of the sacrament, is empowered to bring about the anamnestic re-presentation of the Redeemer's self-oblation. While all the faithful join in this offering, they do so with and through the ministry of the one standing *in persona Christi*. It is precisely this notion of diversified participation in a perfection that undergirds the conciliar claim that both *sacerdotia* truly share, with proportional differences, in Christ's unique priesthood.

### CONCLUSION



This note intends to offer a modest contribution to understanding one of the most disputed phrases to emerge from

<sup>33</sup> The Church has traditionally spoken of the unique grace (and *character indelebilis*) bestowed on the ministerial priest through ordination. Vatican II reaffirms this when it refers to "that unique sacrament through which priests, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are marked with a special character and are configured to Christ in such a way that priests can act *in persona Christi capitis*" (*Presbyterorum ordinis* 2). Congar observes that the notion of sacramental character "was developed on the basis of the New Testament, the events and texts of the early church, and above all the teaching of St. Augustine against the Donatists" (*At the Heart of Christian Worship*, 30-31). For a suggestive historical and speculative reading of St. Thomas on sacramental character, see Guy Mansini, "A Contemporary Understanding of St. Thomas on Sacerdotal Character," *The Thomist* 71 (2007): 171-98.

Vatican II. It is clear that the council resolved the question of how Christ's unique priesthood exists in both the universal and ministerial *sacerdotia* by means of the classical Thomist themes of participation and analogical predication.<sup>34</sup>

By its positive adoption of Pius XII's phrase "*essentia et non gradu tantum differant*"—a phrase which appeared in every schema of *De Ecclesia*—Vatican II intended to avoid any serious rupture with preconiliar thinking about the nature of the Catholic priesthood. Pius XII had aptly indicated that the two *sacerdotia* are related, but proportionately distinct, an insight that the council appropriated as its own. With the prior tradition, Vatican II acknowledged that the ministerial priest is marked by another "*character indelebilis*" indicating his unique participation in Christ's priesthood.

But neither does this passage of *Lumen gentium* defend a simple and unnuanced continuity, as if Vatican II intended no reform of the prior theological tradition. At the council, Pius XII's teaching on the baptismal priesthood was more fully developed, and the idea that "priesthood" was attributable to the faithful only by way of improper or metaphorical attribution was entirely eliminated. If one compares *Lumen gentium* with *Magnificate Dominum* of 1954, one observes how the council reformed Pius XII's ordinary magisterium, which had spoken only tentatively about the universal priesthood. Precisely here one may see what Pope Benedict XVI has called Vatican II's "innovation in continuity."<sup>35</sup> The council accented the fact that all the baptized participate in Christ's *sacerdotium*,

<sup>34</sup> John O'Malley has recently argued that Vatican II, in both its genre and vocabulary, "largely abandoned the Scholastic framework that had dominated Catholic theology since the thirteenth century" (*What Happened at Vatican II* [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008], 46). While O'Malley's comment is generally correct, in the instance under discussion, it was precisely Scholastic precision that provided the necessary solution.

<sup>35</sup> "Christmas Address to the Roman Curia," 46. In the same speech, the pope states that at Vatican II there exists a "combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels" and in this "the very nature of true reform consists."

and so the word “priesthood” belongs to the faithful, too, by way of intrinsic attribution.

If there still remains in the Church, fifty years after the council’s beginning, some theological uneasiness with the phrase “*essentia et non gradu tantum differant*,” it should be remembered that this distinction is not intended to purvey elitism and social stratification. The unique “form” animating the ministerial priesthood is never at antipodes with the *sacerdotium* of all the baptized. On the contrary, there is a common mission and striving for holiness which encircles all disciples of Christ. Vatican II wisely instructed the Church to understand the two priesthods as ordered to Christ and to each other (*ad invicem . . . ordinantur*).<sup>36</sup>

Further theological questions remain about the phrase “they differ by essence and not only by degree.” Taken from *Magnificate Dominum*, this expression was elaborated within the context of the priest as leader of the Christian cult. As Pius XII repeatedly argues, priesthood is primarily about offering sacrifice (*postestas sacrificandi*). The original context for the phrase, then, is the liturgy, with no other aspect of priestly ministry mentioned. At Vatican II, however, there was an attempt to supplement the cultic dimension of the priesthood by accenting other aspects as well. One indication of this is that the traditional word for priest, “*sacerdos*,” was often replaced by the word “*presbyter*” in the conciliar documents, signifying that priestly ministry is not limited to its cultic function, but involves leadership of the Christian community in a variety of aspects, particularly in the preaching of the Word of God. In his 1954 allocution, Pius XII teaches that the priest’s “chief power and duty is to offer the unique and divine sacrifice of the Most High

<sup>36</sup> One may fruitfully explore, just here, the philosophical link between substantiality and relationality. W. Norris Clarke has noted that St. Thomas’s notion of *esse ut actus* is intrinsically ordered toward self-communication. Surely the ministerial priesthood is itself self-communicative, ordered toward God and toward the faithful, as the council insisted. See W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993).

Eternal Priest, Jesus Christ Our Lord.”<sup>37</sup> If one compares his words to those of recent popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, a difference in emphasis may be observed.<sup>38</sup> Discerning the precise meaning of the important conciliar phrase “*essentia et non gradu tantum differant*” for other aspects of priestly life and ministry demands continuing theological investigation.

<sup>37</sup> AAS, 667; AER, 53.

<sup>38</sup> *Presbyterorum ordinis* states, “Priests . . . have as their primary duty the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all” (PO 4). Commenting on this passage, the young Joseph Ratzinger noted that the patristic and, especially medieval, understanding of the priesthood made a marked “association between *sacerdos* and *sacrificium*.” But Vatican II “eliminated the one-sided emphasis on the idea of priesthood as sacrifice.” See Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, trans. H. Traub et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 2009; orig., 1966), 249-50. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Benedict XVI says: “I would recall the words of Pope John Paul II, who in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, stated that ‘the priest is first of all a *minister of the word of God*, consecrated and sent to announce the Good News of the Kingdom to all’” (see AAS 102 [5 Nov. 2010]: 751). The words of Pius XII and Benedict XVI/John Paul II are complementary surely, but the accent is placed differently in their elaboration of priestly identity. Perhaps these differences are reconciled by the words of Vatican II, which encourage priests to nourish the faithful “at the double table of the Sacred Scripture and the Eucharist” (PO 18).