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The Role of a Pastor in the Church

Perhaps the greatest problem we face today is the precipitous and almost total collapse of the faith. We are experiencing the regression and disintegration of a certain form of Church. In this context, the subject of the priesthood has become a powerful wailing wall against which many priests and helpless lay faithful are banging their heads. We are beginning to suffer a shortage of priests linked to the disappearance of young people's willingness to commit themselves to this vocation. There is a growing concern in some clergy about the outdated shape of priestly life (celibacy, loneliness, lack of care). With the number of vacant parishes with priests, the number of people uninterested in the affairs of the Church is increasing. This is accompanied by a sense of spiritual overload, futility, and resignation, leading to an increasing questioning of the nature of society's expectations of the priest: should he be more a servant of the altar and the sacraments or a leader capable of managing human spiritual aspirations in a different way. Should he be more of a leader or a follower, a shepherd or a companion?

Underpinning the pursuit of these new formulas is the negative attitude of some circles to the priestly vocation and the fear on the part of those concerned themselves of becoming a "refuse of this world, repugnant for all" (2 Cor 4:13). The sacred action of the priest and his way of living are losing their allure in the eyes of those who seek spiritual nourishment far from the world of the Church and the sacraments. Church worship remains unattractive for many, especially the young. A priest is more often in demand as a social worker, parish manager and religious service provider than as a *sacerdos*. Not surprisingly, in this situation many imagine a priest with a wife or a priestess with a partner. Small wonder, if his task is social activity and providing entertainment rather than caring for the souls and salvation of the faithful. Indeed, it is no longer clear what actually constitutes the essence and centre, the specific mission and task of the parish priest. Everything becomes wishy-washy. Where is the point of identity and integration of being a priest?

"In the beginning I had 1,500 parishioners", reminisced a parish priest friend from Germany. "Then there were 3,000 and then 10,000. This was not the end. Parishes are merged and become very huge. Being a priest in the face of this reforming of the Church is increasingly difficult. Eventually we have become a community of 40,000, 218 of whom attend Mass Saturday evening or Sunday. When I was a child, half of the faithful came to Mass; when I became a priest, a quarter; in the latter period, we don't even reach three per cent. And we are still tirelessly sticking to the same model. I believe that we need to reach for other solutions and not stretch the old models to ever larger areas". The conclusion is self-evident: we need to look for new horizons of evangelisation. And this is where problems begin.

One has to consider what has happened in the meantime in our modern, post-modern mentality. Our secular age has not renounced spirituality, but it has given up Christianity. Many of the Church's pastors are withdrawing from proclaiming the abundant resources of the Christian message in the conviction that the manifestations of pervasive materialism cannot be overcome with the undocumented mysteries of faith. Therefore, they prefer to appeal to fashionable psychologism or embark on paths of religious syncretism in the hope that in this way it will be easier to strike a chord with their listeners. "Nothing will be the same as before"

– Bishop Franz-Josef Overbeck recently predicted. To this end, the hierarchical structure of the Church and the image of the priest are to be addressed. So are the question of celibacy, the ordination of married men and the appreciation of the role of women in the Church. Hand in hand with these proposals is the commitment of many clergy and theologians to a new secular religion in which the Church is no longer the only means of achieving salvation. Rather, it is the “being together” (synodality) of all members of a society, made up of individuals and groups regardless of religion and creed. Catholic believers are no longer the primary object of concern. Over the last one generation, the number of Catholics has decreased so rapidly that they now are an insignificant minority. The project authors have therefore turned towards a far more ambitious goal of reviving “true” universalism, moving beyond the “old” universalism of the Catholic Church and natural law. This “breakthrough” is founded on clear assumptions: “any” faith goes, while theology replaces metaphysics (i.e. a pursuit of truth) by ethics (action!). As Charles Péguy aptly observed, in their thoughts and deeds they “no longer believe in what they believe”. They are not concerned about the past, and therefore the deposit of faith, nor do they refer to previous documents, for these have become “inflexible” and “backward” over time. The incalculable Tomorrow has become their idol. It is therefore necessary to break free from the shackles of the past, such as hierarchy, sacramental priesthood, celibacy, and a coherent theological system. No resources should be spared in the struggle to achieve this goal. According to Fr. Frank Unterhalt, “our pastors speak and behave like leftist politicians rather than like pastors of the Holy Church of God. Anyone who forgets the Cross and favours the dictatorship of relativism must consider the consequences”. In 2001, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger made clear: “After the Council it became customary to think that social progress was the content of the Gospel, that one should devote oneself first and foremost to external, material matters, and only afterwards, time permitting, to deal with divine matters. We see the effects of this: even missionaries today lack the courage to proclaim the Gospel”. The Church is experiencing a profound crisis. Many synodal bodies discuss the question of authority above all: how to introduce equality of rights between men and women, how to accept diversity and multiple orientations and types (gender). Cardinal Walter Kasper, the leader of German progressivism, is full of concern as to whether “we are still dealing with Catholicism”, whether “with the support of theological and theoretical erudition, one is not trying to reinvent the Church”. Especially since there is only one authority in the Church, the one which Jesus spoke about after the Resurrection: “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit” (Mt 28:18-19). It is the power over sin and death, the power to rescue people from Satan's snares and to prepare them for future life in the Kingdom of Heaven. It originates not in the will of the people or the bestowal of a higher authority, but in the power of the sacrament. This power was transferred from Jesus to the Apostles and from them to their successors and collaborators. Thus the Church, faithful to her Tradition, teaches: “The sacred Order of the presbyterate represents the indispensable and irreplaceable condition for him to be appointed pastor validly (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 521, §1). Certainly, other faithful can actively collaborate with him, even full-time, but because they have not received the ministerial priesthood, they cannot replace him as pastor. What determines this singular ecclesial centrality of the priest is the fundamental relation he has with Christ, Head and Pastor, as his sacramental re-presentation”. Furthermore, “It would be a fatal mistake to be resigned to present difficulties, and act as if we should prepare ourselves for a Church of tomorrow that some imagine as being almost without priests. In this way, the measures adopted to remedy the present scarcity, in spite of all good will, would be seriously harmful for the Ecclesial Community” (Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction *The Priest, Pastor and the Leader of the Parish Community* of 2002).

Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “The Church is in particularly urgent need of convincing pastors who oppose the dictatorship of the spirit of the times and resolve to live and think fully on the basis of faith”. In some countries of the Communist Bloc, where the persecution of the Church led to the disappearance of priests, people used to gather in deserted churches or, if this was not possible, in the cemetery around the grave of some deceased priest. They would place a stole on the altar or tomb slab and recite the prayers of the Mass rite. When they reached the moment when the transubstantiation was to take place, a deep silence fell, sometimes sobbing could be heard. St. John Paul II, recalling this image, addressed the priests: “If at times any of you doubts the relevance of your mission, if you are uncertain of its meaning, if you think that it is unfruitful or unhelpful to others, let him recall that scene”.

How many people in the world long for words that only a priest can speak? They long to receive the Body of the Lord and to hear “I forgive you your sins” addressed to them. Where these words are not spoken by the presbyter in the name of Christ, the bread remains barren and the social endeavours vain. Christianity today is faced with a fundamental dilemma: to seize upon the paradigm of modernity to the point of lending dominant human appetites a religious sanction in the name of seeking the client, or to retain, in the conditions of the modern world, the status of being a “counterculture”, a sign of opposition, an alien in an alien world (cf. *Epistle to Diogenetus*). Its future will depend on its ability to maintain its uniqueness, which will not dissolve under the pressure of yielding to people's expectations.

There are places where a parish priest is forced to run seven other previous parishes. He travels from church to church to celebrate Mass and hear confessions. In many places, the shortage of priests has forced the otherwise generous and noble ministry of lay people. I know of many married people and others who look after churches and vicarages that were once teeming with parish life but are now only visited by a parish priest fulfilling his mission as an “itinerant” guardian of the sacrament. I myself have sometimes been helped, either in Poland or in Italy, by sacrificial laymen in various forms of pastoral care: from animating youth meetings, leading the Liturgy of the Divine Word, accompanying the sick with a kind of eschatological pastoral care, young people on the paths of maturing to accept a vocation to priestly and religious life, to lengthy preparations for the sacraments of Confirmation and Marriage. Without the need to clericalize the laity and blur the boundaries between shepherd and sheepfold. Sometimes the community, via copying democratic procedures, tries to replace or even substitute the parish priest in the parish, yet the results are indeed deplorable.

The time is tough yet “Let your loins be girded about, and your lamps burning” (Lk 12:35), i.e. focus on the priorities. What is the task of the pastor today? In the Gospels as well as in Christian art and literature, Christ is the good shepherd. The sheep on His shoulders is the soul that is saved, while the sheepfold is the Church. The shepherd takes full responsibility for the sheep; he does not run away from the wolf and is ready to lay down his life for the sheep. There are many ways of losing one's life for the sheep for Christ's sake. In the documents of the Second Vatican Council it was mentioned as the first task of the priestly office “to preach the Word” (CC 28; DP 4). The priest is also ordained to preach the Word through sacramental actions. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, “the priest performs two actions: the main one consists in consecrating the true body of Christ, the second in preparing the people to receive this sacrament” (*STh., suppl.* 40, 4). The role and mission of the shepherd is not based on the wisdom of the world, but on the power of Christ: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in

weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive (words of) wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2:2-5). The priesthood is the greatest spiritual leadership on earth. As St Basil taught, “by inhabiting the earth and living on it, [priests] have been given permission to govern the affairs of heaven and to exercise a power which God has granted neither to angels nor to archangels”.

The priest, especially the parish priest, is also a guide for the faithful and their spiritual director: he has to teach them the difficult art of accepting Christ’s teaching, of persevering in it in every circumstance, and of defending themselves against falsehood and temptation. St. John Chrysostom spoke in the following manner about the need to learn spiritual struggle: “Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion (1P 5:8) at the sight of the those who have recently been in his captivity and have rejected and renounced him to follow Christ... Henceforth, there will be a battle with him, which is why you are led to it by a priest like the fencers of Christ” (*Baptismal Instructions*, II, 23). After his conversion, Saul was entrusted to the spiritual care of Ananias, who told him what he was to do (Acts 9:10-19). St. John Climacus believed that if someone wants to leave Egypt and overcome unbridled passions, they need Moses. “If I want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and enjoy the holy freedom of the children of God, I must entrust myself in humility to a man, a representative of the Divine Master, and listen to him in simplicity of spirit. There is only one thing to fear: following my own opinion” (*Scala Paradisi*, I, 4: PG LXXXVIII, 636). St. Bernard was of the opinion that “Who deems himself to be his own master becomes a disciple of a fool” (*Sermo* VIII, 7; *Epist.* LXXXVII, 7). Spiritual progress is a long and arduous climb up a steep path to the top in the midst of a precipice. It would be great imprudence to venture on this path without an experienced guide. The director must have the courage to give paternal admonitions, to show the defect, to combat it, without allowing the penitent to manipulate him. The manager substitutes for Christ Himself, resolving matters with firmness and in accordance with the rules of evangelical perfection. By admonition, advice, and rebuke, he snaps souls out of lethargy. Constantly calling on the Holy Spirit, he listens to His inner responses so that she can then communicate them to another person. One example of post-modern pastoral disorientation is the model of the parish presupposing not a shepherd, but a companion; not an authority, but a friendly listener. An attitude of total neutrality is required of the spiritual director: not to judge, not to interpret, not to examine, and not to advise. Such an attitude does not seem to take into account at all the fact that the only way to lead people to God is through Jesus Christ. Here the pastor does not precede the flock and does not lead it in any direction, but rather follows the person as a “travel companion”. Imposing anything or making demands is to be avoided as people are to follow their own feelings rather than Jesus Christ. This position is underpinned by a false image of God, whose indulgence accompanies man wherever he goes and whatever he experiences. However, St. Paul asserts: “Reprimand publicly those who do sin” (1 Tm 5:20), since, as St. Augustine claims, “love is a power that urges us to admonish and rectify others. If you really love another person, you will admonish them” (*Epistolam Ioannis*, VII, 1.7). To preach Christ to his parishioners, in the appropriate moment and when it is not found appropriate, to prepare for them Sunday homilies and catechesis as rich in content as possible, to break down the Word of God for them at perhaps every Mass and other services, even on weekdays, to be more of a missionary than a clerk in the chancellery and during Christmas season home visits are the priority forms of giving one's life for the sheep. The hours spent for them in the

confessional, the readiness to respond creatively with the sacrament even in other unusual situations, standing with people in prayer, responding with love to anger, humility to insolence, prophecy to foolishness are other ways of a shepherd giving up his life so that the sheep may live. Virgil in the *Bucolics* or Theocritus in the *Idylls* imagined poets as shepherds who will usher in a new golden age. The shepherd asks himself questions about the meaning of reality and faces the Mystery, in constant expectation of an answer from heaven, the voice of the Holy Spirit. He himself persists in the tension of giving his life while the sheep are fed and at peace. In our parishes, pastoral care is mostly about sacramentalizing human life to the exclusion of evangelising it. Now the sacraments are in the vast majority of cases offered prior to an introduction to the faith. The majority of Christians, including practising believers, are - in the words of Benedict XVI – “at the catechumenal stage”. People have the right, the Second Vatican Council argued, “to find the word of God preached in the mouths of priests” (DK 4). The path of growth in faith, which has something of the Greek *paideia* and the Latin *eruditio*, must find fundamental support in the proclamation of Christ in the form of the kerygma. As Pope Francis explained, “it is the fire of the Spirit which awakens in us faith in Jesus Christ. [...] It should therefore occupy a central place in evangelisation activity and in every attempt at ecclesial renewal”. “All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 164-165).

Yet another form of the shepherd losing his life is his willingness to suffer for his Church, for his sheep. We are living in times of spiritual indifference to the things of God, of great depravity caused by the sins of some pastors and bishops, of an onslaught of covert or overt apostasy. This clear triumph of Satan will cause suffering to many good pastors in the Church, most of them honest and hardworking. Those who have kept the faith and good morals will suffer in a cruel and indescribable way, like a prolonged martyrdom. Perhaps the hour of martyr-pastors is upon us. Faith in Christ is not sold on the basis of successful advertising. It can only be nourished and passed on at the price of the cross. The cross is an ambitious trophy of those who are not ashamed to proclaim the whole truth. Some delude themselves into thinking that it is possible to carry the Gospel message today by taking the broad and comfortable route, based on purely human means and in the confidence of money. They do not realise that in their hands this message turns into pure rhetorical sentimentalism, with neither power nor taste in it. Christianity will survive as long as it retains its unique originality in the hearts and mouths of its pastors. St. Gemma Galgani noted in her journal under Divine inspiration that in the future the Church will be rescued by ordinary, saintly priests. How many of them are there? They may be ignored due to their insignificant numbers, but “will survive through their virtue and will be left as the **seed and root for a rebirth and rejuvenation** of a new people of God” (St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes*, XXI 24). Archbishop Fulton Sheen once asked: “Who will save our Church? Neither our bishops, nor our priests or men and women religious. It will be you, people. You have your minds, eyes, and ears to save the Church. it is your mission to makes sure that **your priests behave like priests**, your bishops like bishops, and the religious like religious” (Address to the Knights of Columbus, June 1972).