

**Conclusion to the Commentary on *Presbyterium ordinis* in  
Vatican II: Renewal with in Tradition**

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We conclude by asking where the legacy of *Presbyterorum ordinis* is to be found. This depends very much on whether its view of the nature of priesthood is coherent, a true synthesis of the two dominant views with which the council started, or whether it is a juxtaposition of pieces that cannot go together. In the latter case, the legacy is a choice between two unsynthesizable pieces. As one popular hermeneutic of the council would have it, we could pursue a reconstituted post-Tridentinism, a sort of re-supernaturalizing and re-sacerdotalization of ecclesial ministry (bad things), as some claim to see in the 1971 Synod and the Letters to Priests of John Paul II. On the other hand, still according to this hermeneutic, the course is forward, to the democratic and de-clericalized, egalitarian, charismatic and collaborative style of ministry toward which the council took but a few hesitant and indecisive steps.

A seemingly more moderate hermeneutic, and one critical of the foregoing, would see the decree, as it sees the production of the council generally, as a juxtaposition of views, but a not incoherent one. Rather, according to this view: “Fidelity to the council requires that both juxtaposed theses be taken seriously and that an attempt be made through a more penetrating theological reflection and a renewed ecclesial praxis to reconcile them in a synthesis that will allow further advances.”<sup>1</sup> So, the council bequeathed to the Church and theology the task of working for a synthesis that the council itself could not or did not effect.

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Pottmeyer, “A New Phase in the Reception of Vatican II,” 39.

We believe that neither of these approaches is helpful for interpreting *Presbyterorum ordinis*. The textual history of the decree and the speeches and discussions that are part of that history show that it was certainly not the intention of the council fathers to do nothing more than juxtapose two theses or viewpoints. The October 16, 1965, *relatio* of Archbishop Marty gave voice to that intention, accepted by the fathers. Further, we think it is no great feat of interpretation to see the fulfillment of this intention in number 2 of the decree. Interpreting *Presbyterorum ordinis* therefore cannot be a matter of weighing or balancing two masses of material, the theses of a progressive council majority on one side and of a conservative council minority on the other. We are to see, rather, that consecration is for the purpose of extending the mission of Christ, whose own end is the glory of the Father in a redeemed humanity. The priest-presbyter is sent forth as one consecrated *in persona Christi capitis* authoritatively to proclaim the Gospel to the world, to extend the offer of salvation in the sacraments and to build up the Church.

Determining the legacy of *Presbyterorum ordinis* depends also on whether the decree is read against the background of prior Catholic tradition, the great democracy of the diachronic voices from Scripture, itself read as *Dei Verbum*, no. 12, teaches us to read it, to the Fathers, from the Fathers to the Theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and very much including past conciliar and papal teaching. This way of interpretation was urged by the synod of bishops on the twentieth anniversary of the council.<sup>2</sup>

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See Synod, "The Final Report," no. 5, "A Deeper Reception of the Council," *Origins* 15 (1985): 445–446.

We think that, if read in that way, the synthesis of the views, and the adequacy of the one view arrived at, become manifest. If the priesthood was framed in the theology of mission, it remained the ministry which culminated in the Eucharistic sacrifice, where the Christian's sacrifice of life passes over sacramentally into the eternal sacrifice of the Lamb. Precisely because it was framed in the theology of mission, both its historical institution by Christ, as well as its sacramental enablement, now, by Christ through the Spirit, were affirmed. If the priest was not hailed as an *alter Christus*, he was described as acting *in persona Christi capitis* no longer merely at the Eucharist, but across the length and breadth of his ministry. The decree put it that the priest was to find holiness within the very exercise of his ministry—teaching, sanctifying, ruling. Still, that's what he was to find—holiness. The relation of the priest as minister to bishop, to fellow priests, to the laity, and including to the laity in their own apostolic labor—in other words, the concrete ecclesial context into which the priest is inserted was affirmed expressly and in detail. Still, he remained a “man apart,” both by reason of his consecration and in order to have something to bring to the people in whose midst he lived and worked.

If read in this way, furthermore, where the truly synthetic character of the decree becomes manifest, then it is possible to answer the question of its legacy, which would appear to be the 1992 apostolic exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis*. This is true for the ecclesiological presuppositions of the priesthood, spelled out by the Holy Father as the mystery, the communion, and the mission of the Church; it is true for the centrality of the priest as representing Christ the head; it is true for the priority of this representation relative to priestly representation of the Church; and it is true for the clarity with which the celibacy is also linked to this representative character of the priest. All these things,

some more or less developed by the council, are brought fully to expression by the pope, especially in relation to the human and ecclesial situation, the signs of the times, at the beginning of the third millennium. In this way, *Pastores dabo vobis* shows us a privileged way forward in the task of receiving the synthesis of *Presbyterorum ordinis*.