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On the priesthood, celibacy, and women's diaconate

The three degrees of Holy Orders must be viewed in the perspective of the Gospel, Tradition, and the true needs of the Church, rather than the fashionable catchwords of contemporary ideologies.

No one can make himself a priest, not even Jesus Christ. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read: “It was not Christ who glorified himself in becoming high priest, but rather the one who said to him: *You are my Son...*” (Heb 5:5). As true God and true man, Christ is the perfect intermediary between God and men. He invited His disciples to partake in this mission and “has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father” (Rv 1:6).

We refer to the unique priesthood of Christ and the common priesthood of the faithful, who partake in it. However, when calling the Twelve, Jesus established the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, i.e., bishops and presbyters. They differ from one another in essence, not only in degree (...) but are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ” (LG, 10).

One enters the hierarchical priesthood via Holy Orders, which sacrament has three degrees: episcopal ordination, presbyterate, and diaconate. The last one is “not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service” (LG, 29). Diaconate, then, does not equal participation in the hierarchical priesthood, whose members, among other things, celebrate Mass and administer the sacrament of reconciliation.

Clergy and laity

There is a recurring urge in the synodal documents to reflect on the relationship of the ministry arising from Holy Orders and the ministries arising from being baptised. In essence, this is about what John Paul II called the spirituality of communion. The letter *Novo millennio ineunte* reads: “Relations between Bishops, priests and deacons, between Pastors and the entire People of God, between clergy and Religious, between associations and ecclesial movements must all be clearly characterized by communion” (no. 45). We are confronted here with the question: “How, in practice, can we preserve in the local Churches the unity in diversity that should result from participating in different ways in the unique priesthood of Christ?”

In this context, the danger of clericalism is pointed out. The *Instrumentum Laboris* states that “clericalism is a force that isolates, separates, and weakens a healthy and fully ministerial Church” (B 2.4 d). However, the term clericalism is sometimes used in a vague, not to say ideologized, manner. Dictionaries define clericalism as “the endeavour to subordinate social life, politics, and culture to the clergy and the Church”. If we accept this definition, it begs the question whether clericalism understood in this way exists anywhere at all. Major media, big business, banks, omnipotent courts, powerful politicians, global corporations, and foundations essentially have nothing to do with the Catholic Church. Today we do not face the problem of power-hungry clergy. There is, however, a problem that Benedict XVI expressed in his book *The Light of the World* as follows: “Christianity finds itself exposed now to an intolerant pressure that at first ridicules it – as belonging to a perverse, false way of thinking – and then tries to deprive it of breathing space in the name of an ostensible rationality”. Many representatives of the clergy experience this intolerant pressure.

It does not mean that there is no need to reflect on the form of the relationship between the clergy and the laity. However, clericalism is not the principal problem here. Of greater concern is the confusion, withdrawal, and timidity of many priests, who are incapable of speaking prophetically to the world. Therefore, rather than criticise alleged clericalism, it would be better to remind the clergy of St. Paul's urge: "proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine..." (2 Tim 4:2-3).

A debate about celibacy

The celibacy of priests is a recurrent topic of discussion. Will this topic be addressed at the synod? The *Instrumentum Laboris* does not refer to celibacy, yet it is crucial we remember that the concluding document of the Amazon Synod includes a suggestion of the presbyterate for so-called *virii probati*, literally "proven men", who are married. Pope Francis did not follow up on this suggestion. In the post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, the Holy Father called upon the lay faithful, women included, to take up a ministry of service which does not require Holy Orders. Given a shortage of priests, the renewal of Catholic communities must begin not with the abolition of celibacy, but with the preparation of lay catechists (men and women) and permanent deacons. Fundamental here is the transmission of the faith within the family, where the role of mothers is irreplaceable. In reference to the Amazon, the question also arises: how many priests who come from poor regions which are difficult to live in will actually return to their hometowns to serve as priests there? Paradoxically, the demand to abolish the celibacy of priests sometimes grows out of a "clerical" mentality that does not properly appreciate the role of non-priests in the Church.

The celibacy of priests is not an immutable dogma. Neither is it merely a disciplinary issue. In addition to many practical arguments, the theology and spirituality of the priesthood support celibacy. Of course, praise of celibacy must be given due weight so as not to slip into a rhetoric incompatible with respect for other rites which have married priests. Suffice it to mention here the clergy of the Greek Catholic Church, who are fruitful pastors of the faithful entrusted to them. On the other hand, it is unacceptable to attack celibacy as something that allegedly generates sexual sins and crimes, including paedophilia. Nor is it true that abolishing celibacy would be a way to boost the number of priests. Vocations to the priesthood are born in vibrant Catholic families and communities and this is the key to the shortage of priests.

One gets the impression that the persistent raising of the issue of abolishing celibacy does not emerge from sound discernment of what the Spirit is saying to the Church, but from an ideological desire for change for change's sake and a disbelief in the possibility and value of sexual abstinence in the service of God and His kingdom.

Women's diaconate

The *Instrumentum Laboris* reads as follows: "Most continental congregations and syntheses of numerous bishops' conferences call for a reconsideration of women's access to the diaconate" (B 2.3. Suggestions...). The pope referred to this already in the aforementioned exhortation *Querida Amazonia*. Francis urges against reducing the perception of the Church solely to functional structures: "Such a reductionism would lead us to believe that women would be granted a greater status and participation in the Church only if they were admitted to Holy Orders. But that approach would in fact narrow our vision; it would lead us to clericalize women, diminish the great value of what they have already accomplished, and subtly make their indispensable contribution less effective" (no. 100).

At the beginning we recalled that as the third level of Holy Orders, the diaconate is “not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service” (LG, 29). Therefore, from a dogmatic perspective, women’s diaconate would be possible. Such a position does not contradict what John Paul II wrote in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*: “I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful” (no. 4). It does not contradict, since the diaconate is part of the sacrament of Holy Orders, but – let us repeat – “not unto the priesthood”, just like the presbyterial and episcopal ministry.

The question arises, however, whether, from a pastoral point of view, women’s diaconate would be a response to a real need, or whether it would result in confusion and further demands. The synodal process has revealed groups that appeal not so much to the Gospel, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church, but rather to fashionable if vague slogans about gender equality, fight against discrimination, etc. In this perspective, the diaconate for women would only be a prelude to demanding the priesthood of women. In August 2016, Francis appointed a commission to study the question of the diaconate of women. It completed its mission with a document presented to the Pope in December 2018. However, in 2020, a second commission was set up on the same issue. To date, however, nothing is known about its activity. It is possible that the topic of the diaconate for women will be revisited during the synod sessions in October.

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