

**PRIESTHOOD IN THE HISTORY
OF THE CHURCH:
A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO THE
MEANING OF THE PRESBYTERAL
MINISTRY**

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INTRODUCTION

A sincere and open-minded exploration into the present state of presbyteral ministry certainly brings with it an unpleasant and an uncomfortable feeling. It is true that reflection into the meaning and function of the presbyteral ministry presents a gloomy picture of the presbyters and their ministry. Factors such as loss of identity, confusions in understanding the role or function, a clear decline in the status once taken for granted, a significant erosion of confidence among the public, increasing allegations of sexual abuses, financial mishandling and mismanagement, joining and organising groups based on caste, language and region, the scandalous and counter witnessing acts of open conflicts and contestations between priests and bishops and so on have contributed their own share to the present gloomy condition. While the present state has become a cause for concern it need not lead to a situation of hopelessness and despair.

What brings us out of this hopelessness and despair is the ongoing and never-ending search for new and relevant expressions of Christian ministry. A serious and sincere search to rediscover the essence and original meaning, without doubt, is at the heart of any reflection on Christian ministry and specially, on ordained ministry. No one can deny that critical inquiry into the biblical foundations and new insights into the long history of this ministry have certainly provided us with a

new perspective towards its understanding. While giving the due importance to the critical inquiry into the scripture, which throw light on the biblical basis of the ordained ministry, it alone may not be sufficient for finding out the true and the original meaning of the presbyteral ministry. Equally important and necessary is the critical study of the historical development of this ministry down through the centuries of the history of the church.

In this paper we intend to make an inquiry into the forms in which this ministry has been exercised in the church. We do not intend to make an exposition of the raw history; neither are we concerned about a detailed and chronological presentation of the history of Christian ministry. Our concern, rather, is to highlight the decisive phases in the development of the presbyteral ministry and to indicate some of the important theological orientations that underlie such developments. In doing so special care is taken to identify those developments which led to the emergence of a predominantly cultic priesthood. In other words, this historical study aims at highlighting those changes which led to the extreme "sacerdotalization," "sacralization" and "culticization" of the presbyteral ministry. We do believe that this critical study would help us to "desacerdotalize," "desacralize" and "deculticize" the presbyteral ministry.¹

A RETURN TO THE ROOTS

The task of making a critical analysis of the historical development of the presbyteral ministry is not without difficulty. Those who have made extensive studies into the historical developments have indeed referred to the difficulty involved in this task. The difficulty arises because of the complexity that lies in speaking of the exact development of the forms of ecclesiastical authority in the apostolic and post-apostolic times with certainty. The difficulty becomes all the more serious since in the New Testament one does not find priestly

¹ Kloppenburg speaks of the danger of an undue and an extreme "sacerdotalization," "sacralization" and "culticization" of the Christian ministry in the course of history. He also speaks of the legitimate need of a process called "desacerdotalization," "desacralization" and "deculticization" so as to purify the concept of priesthood and rediscover the radical newness of Christ's priesthood. Bonaventure Kloppenburg, *The Priest: Living Instrument and Minister of Christ, the Eternal Priest*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), 66.

terminology being applied to any minister of the Christian community. The cultic term "*hiereus*" is reserved only for Jewish and non-Jewish (gentile or pagan) priests, for all the baptized collectively (1 Pet 2:5-9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) and for Jesus Christ (Heb 4:14; 7:24; 7:26).² The difficulty involved in speaking of the forms of ordained ministry in the New Testament times need not become a major hurdle in one's effort to search for the true meaning of the presbyteral ministry.

The reason is that although one may not be able to speak of the forms of ordained ministry during the apostolic and post-apostolic times with all certainty, the intention of Jesus, the basic reality that underlies any reflection on Christian ministry, can be stated with certainty. According to the gospels one can have no doubt regarding the intention of Jesus, i.e., he wanted his mission to continue till the end of the times and until it reaches the ends of the earth. The gospels have recorded more than once the sending of the apostles, disciples and messengers to carry on the mission that he had started. Since the insights drawn from this study outweigh the difficulties involved in it we need to go back to the apostolic and post apostolic times to search for the roots of the presbyteral ministry. All the more the task of constructing contemporary theology demands a probe into the historic origins of the ordained ministry without which the contemporary theology will be devoid of any foundation.³ To know the historic origins of the ordained ministry one needs to go back to the New Testament and analyze the forms in which the Christian ministry was carried out during the New Testament times.

THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

The call and commission of Jesus are taken seriously by different category of people such as the apostles, disciples, teachers and prophets and every attempt is made to further the mission of Jesus in diverse ways corresponding to the different situations and needs of a particular place and a community. The fact that there were different ministers such as prophets, teachers, healers, helpers, wonder-workers, administrators, speakers in tongues, elders, overseers,

² John Jay Hughes, "Christian Priesthood," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 11, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing company, 1987), 537.

³ Donald Senior, "Biblical Foundations for the Theology of Priesthood" in *Priests Identity and Ministry*, ed. Robert Wister (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1990), 11.

deacons and so on points to the readiness and openness of the church of the New Testament times in acknowledging the variety of charisms and accepting various ministries demanded by the varying needs of the community. What needs to be noted here is that the early church directed every charism and ministry towards the building up of the communities of faith. Various charisms and ministries were placed at the service of the community of believers.

The church of the New Testament times offers us a strikingly rich picture of Christian ministry. One is wonder struck by the variety, diversity and multiplicity of ministries in the Christian communities. There were "the twelve," a group of disciples chosen and trained by Jesus himself to carry on his work of proclaiming the Kingdom. We have no reason to doubt the historicity of the choice of the twelve and their sending since all the gospels refer to the fact that the twelve were people chosen by Jesus himself and that they were commissioned with the task of proclaiming the Kingdom. The twelve, as per the gospel account, had both authority and power to share in the ministry of Jesus. This intimate group was called to be with him and to be sent to preach, with power to cast out devils (Mk 3:14-15). Just as Jesus was sent by the Father the disciples are sent by Jesus. "As the Father has sent me so am I sending you" (Jn 20:21). Moreover, preaching and casting out demons are the fundamental aspects of the mission of Jesus (Mk 1:21-28,39). As we have just stated, the purpose of being a disciple is to preach the arrival and the nearness of the kingdom and to cast out demons (Mt 10:2-4; Mk 3: 16-19; Lk 6:13-19; Acts 1:13). All these suggest that the mission of the twelve was modeled on that of Jesus himself.

Evidences are not lacking in the gospels to conclude that apart from "the twelve" there were others who are referred to by the term "disciples". The gospels do mention about two sendings, i.e., the sending of the twelve and the sending of the seventy-two. What draws our attention is that there is much similarity between the instructions given to the twelve and the seventy-two (Lk 9:1-10; Lk 10:1). The similarities point to the fact that the seventy-two are also entrusted with the task of proclaiming the kingdom and casting out the demons. There is one more category of people who are very often forgotten. The gospels refer to them as disciples, a term very generic, but cannot not be left out in any reflection on the ministry in the church of the New

Testament. For example, the gospel of John speaks of many disciples who left Jesus after the discourse on the "bread of Life". These disciples, according to Jean Galot, could not have been simple believers, but persons who could have responded to the call of Jesus, followed him, and devoted their energy to the work he has begun.⁴ The gospel of Luke records the ministry of women who accompanied Jesus (Lk 8:1-3). Were they merely taking care of the material needs of Jesus and the apostles? We have every reason to believe that these women must have been actively involved in the ministry of Jesus apart from helping the missionary entourage. One, then, is justified in concluding that Jesus' mission is not simply restricted to the twelve.

The New Testament also mentions about the elders (*presbyteroi*) and overseers (*episkopoi*), people appointed by the apostles. These ministers were heads of local communities and were responsible for the continued care of the churches founded by the apostles.

Along with these heads of local communities (local hierarchy) there was another category of ministers who can be called itinerant hierarchy. They continued the works of the apostles and took care of the churches already founded. People like Barnabas, Apollos, Titus, and Timothy are part of this itinerant hierarchy. They did not have authority of their own, but always shared in the authority of the Apostles.

PRESBYTERAL AND EPISCOPAL LEADERSHIP AND FUNCTIONS

The college of presbyters constituted the highest authority in the local communities. It is widely accepted that in the early stage there was no clear distinction between the two terms and they were used interchangeably. Raising the question of the difference between the *episkopos* and the presbyters, Mohler observes:

Certainly their proper virtues are described analogously in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 3:1ff; Tit 1:5ff.), especially in the letter to Titus (1:7), where *episkopos* is substituted for *presbyteroi* as if the terms were interchangeable. Elsewhere when *episkopoi* are mentioned, *presbyteroi* are not (Phil 1:1). And when Timothy is

⁴ Jean Galot, *Theology of Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 84.

advised of the respect due to presbyters, *episkopos* are not mentioned. But the essential function of presbyters as guardians is to preside (1 Tim 5:17). In Ephesus all the elders seem to be called guardians (Acts 20:17, 28).⁵

Mohler cites the work of Spicq, who maintains that the terms: presbyters, leaders (*hegoumenoi*), presidents, pastors, and guardians are interchangeable in the Pastoral Epistles and concern the same office of government in the local churches.⁶

Though the college of presbyters was the highest authority in the beginning stage, slowly the head of the college of presbyters becomes the highest authority. He is referred to in the New Testament as overseer or bishop (*episkopos*). This development, according to the scholars, coincides with the decline of the office of the apostles and the itinerant hierarchy. With the decline of the office of the apostles and the itinerant hierarchy, the overseers became prominent, with some special powers such as the power to transmit the authority through the imposition of hands. *Episkopos* became presidents of the Christian community (1 Tim 3:4-5), guiding the family of God as a father. He was the administrator of the *ekklesia*, the pastor of the flock and cultic officer of the assembly. He was the official representative of the church (1 Tim 3:1ff.), in charge of the collection and the distribution of alms. He was expected to be very sound in doctrines since teaching and guarding traditions were his major responsibilities (Tit 1:9).

In the light of what we have just said, one can speak of the leadership of *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* as an integrated leadership, i.e., a leadership which affected every aspect of the life of the community. Teaching, guiding, and offering worship were their primary functions. Governing, guiding, judging, teaching, admitting new members, collecting and dispensing alms, partaking in the synogogue liturgy, visiting and anointing the sick and celebrating the Eucharist⁷ were important activities which come under the triple function. There was

⁵ James A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood* (New York: Alba House, 1970), 21-22.

⁶ J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 22.

⁷ There are some who are of the opinion that it is difficult to determine fully whether the office of presbyter or bishop included a cultic or priestly function during the New Testament period. Ref. Donald Senior, "Biblical Foundations," 13.

no separation between leadership, teaching and worship. Paul's address to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:28-32) comprises all these functions. Cult was not a sphere of community life set apart, but its genuine self-expression.

While speaking of the cultic role of the presbyters and *episkopoi*, we do need to keep the fact in mind that there is no explicit statement in the New Testament supporting the exclusive right of the apostles to preside over the Eucharistic celebration. Basing on the scriptural evidences it is difficult to prove that the Eucharist was celebrated by the apostles alone and later (during the time of the Pastoral Epistles) by *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* alone.⁸ But one can say that the apostles and later *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* were presidents of the Eucharistic celebration in so far as they were leaders of the entire life of the community. However, we need to take note of the separation of the dispensation of charity from the work of the apostles whose primary ministry consisted in prayer and ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Since prayer and proclaiming the Word are referred to as the most fundamental functions of the apostles, being presidents of the cultic celebrations of the community need not thought to be outside the competence of the apostles.

Moreover, even a simple analysis of the ministry of the apostles would suffice to prove that their leadership was integral. This would mean that the sacramental (cultic) function is also one of the important dimensions of the ministry of the apostles. The Acts provides us with lot of information regarding their integral leadership. They were involved in proclaiming the Word (Acts 4:5-21), received goods which members of the Christian community donated to be distributed to the poor (Acts 4:32-35), judged the erring (Acts 5:1-11), sent missionaries to communities where there was need (Peter and John were sent to Samaria-Acts 8:14, Barnabas was sent to Antioch-Acts 11:22). Apart from these tasks the apostles also were engaged in the sacramental ministry. Peter plays a decisive role in the baptism of Cornelius (Acts

⁸ According to Donald Senior, "there are no New Testament texts which clearly designate the leader of the Eucharist. In Lk 22:19 Jesus tells the Apostles to "do this in remembrance of me" but we cannot be sure this refers to their being the leaders of the Eucharist or that this was their exclusive prerogative." Id. "Biblical Foundations," 18-19.

10:44-48). Apostles impose hands on the new converts in Samaria (Acts 8:15-17), and in Ephesus (Acts 19:6). The elders pray over the sick (James 5:14).

Just as the ministry of the apostles was modeled on the ministry of Jesus, the ministry and leadership of the presbyters and *episkopoi* were modeled on the ministry and leadership of the apostles. Therefore, it would not be a mistake to say that the leadership of the presbyters and *episkopoi* was also integrated leadership since they just continued the work of the apostles.

THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

The Pastoral Epistles give us the picture of a stable and well-established leadership of *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi*. That their primary responsibilities were maintaining the discipline and continuity of the community life is very much evident from the Pastoral letters. 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 present a clear picture of an *episkopos* and a presbyter. These passages offer us a glimpse into the characteristics of an *episkopoi* and presbyters. Some guidelines regarding the personal, social, and faith life of the ministers are outlined in these passages. Regarding the personal life of the ministers the Pastoral letters insist on being temperate, sensible, dignified, and hospitable. Negatively they exhort them not to be drunkards, violent, quarrelsome, and money minded. Concerning the social life they are to be family men, married not more than once. The implicit meaning is that they should be men who are able to manage their home affairs. Those who are incapable of managing their own house will not be in a position to manage the household of God. As far as the faith life of the ministers is concerned they should not be neo-converts. Insistence on not being a neo-convert has to be understood against the background of the difficult times that the early church was facing amidst false doctrines, heresies and schisms. Safeguarding or keeping the tradition was considered to be an important task of the *episkopoi* and presbyters. When they are in a position to guarantee continuity by safeguarding tradition they will be esteemed by others, especially, by the non-Christians.

However, one can easily observe that the above said characteristics are common characteristics, expected of any civilized person, and there is nothing religious or specifically Christian about them. Is there any

specific characteristic or quality for the Christian minister in these passages? The specific characteristics or qualities of the Christian ministers enumerated in these passages concern their office. Three such qualities are underlined. They are 1) holding firm to the doctrine, 2) ability to teach and 3) ability to confound those who contradict the truth. As one goes through the Pastoral letters he/she can come to the conclusion that during this time the *episkopoi* and presbyters were reliable strongholds of the tradition.

The letters also indicate and highlight some of the problems that existed in the ministerial life. 1 Tim 5:17-18 brings to light the problem regarding the payment of the ministers. The following verses (vv. 19-25) lay practical norms concerning acceptance of accusations on clerics and how to proceed in dealing with the accusations. The ministers are exhorted to be careful in accepting complaints and admit them when they are true. They are not to be partial and there should never be place for party politics. They should be slow in imposing hands on anyone.

These instructions and exhortations suggest that definite structures of ecclesiastical authority begin to emerge already during the time of the Pastoral Epistles. One can also notice the imminent danger that is present in this development. That is, with the strengthening of the office and the consequent emergence of definite structures the dynamic, charismatic and prophetic character of the church is lessened.

A CONSCIOUS AND PURPOSEFUL CHOICE

The analysis of the ordained ministry in the early church, especially, in the period of the Pastoral letters, raises the question of the choice of the terminology to refer to the Christian ministry. The terminologies opted to refer to the Christian ministries are totally secular having no link or association with the cultic or sacrificial system of the religion of Israel. While the Old Testament had terminologies associated with the temple and sacrifices the early church seems to be disinterested in borrowing the already existing terminologies. The question then is, why does the early church avoid the term priest?

(*hiereus*), a typical Old Testament term for a cultic functionary, to describe a particular Christian ministry?⁹ Though there are different opinions we can identify two reasons, a theological and a historical one, in support of our argument, i.e., the choice of the early church was a conscious and purposeful one. The choice can neither be ascribed to the scarcity of terminologies in the Old Testament nor can be said to be purely accidental.

The theological reason for the choice is the radical newness of priesthood that emerges in the letter to the Hebrews. In the whole of the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews is the only book which attributes the title priest to Jesus. The letter cannot be accused of applying the cultic title to Jesus, thus making his ministry purely cultic which would have gone against the gospel presentation of the ministry of Jesus. The radical newness of the meaning of priesthood consists in the proclamation of the lay-man Jesus, born in a non-priestly tribe, the true and high priest surpassing the priests of the old order (Heb 4:14; 9:11), and the profane act, the death of a politically condemned criminal, the true and the perfect sacrifice making obsolete the sacrifices of the old order (Heb 7:27; 9:25, 28). Applying the title priest to Jesus then cannot be construed as an attempt to present Jesus in the Old Testament cultic mould. On the other hand, it is an attempt to bring a new meaning to the term priest. It is precisely this thinking which could have served as the motivating reason behind the choice. If the priesthood of Jesus is something totally new, and is a significant departure from that of the old order, then the New Testament ministry, which is a participation in the ministry of Jesus, cannot be simply cultic.

The option of the early church for secular terms is all the more justified when one goes back to Jesus' time to see the prevalent meaning of priesthood. Soares Prabhu in his analysis of the Old Testament basis of priesthood concludes that the priesthood of the post-exilic period,

⁹ Raising this question Donald Senior presents two opposite positions taken by the authors. Some scholars think that it is a deliberate move away from the hierarchical structures of Judaism and a concurrent recognition of the inadequacy of the Old Testament cult. There are others who think that the earliest Christianity could not have gone to the extent of questioning the validity of the Jewish priesthood. Id., "Biblical Foundations," 14.

which extends from the time of exile to that of Jesus, was primarily and fundamentally cultic.¹⁰ The priesthood of Jesus' time was almost reduced to a cultic priesthood concerned primarily with offering sacrifice leaving away the other important functions of revealing the will of God (oracular function) and instructing people in the law. Since Jesus' priesthood marks a clear departure from that of the old order, the early church left out those terminologies that had any association with cult and sacrifice of the old order.

The historical reason for the choice of terminologies is the rift between the Jews and those who followed the "new way". We have some indirect indications of this rift in the gospel of John, especially in chapter 9, which presents the miracle of the man born blind receiving sight. Those who accept Jesus and his teaching were considered the people of the "new way" and were excommunicated from the synogogue. It is therefore logical to conclude that the idea of a new Christian priesthood that replaced the levitical priesthood emerges after the destruction of the temple in AD 70. This development coincides with gentiles becoming numerically dominant in the early Christian community. Another parallel development is that the synogogues became less tolerant of doctrinal diversity in the decade from 80 to go and excommunicated sectarians, especially those who belonged to the "new way".¹¹ With the parting of ways with the old way (order) and with the consequent growing consciousness as the people of a new religion, the early Christian community makes a conscious choice of the terminologies.

¹⁰ George M. Soares Prabhu, "Christian Priesthood in India Today: A Biblical Reflection" in *Collected Writings of George M. Soares Prabhu*, vol. 2, ed. Scaria Kuthirakkattel (Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Theology Series, 2003), 216-220. Having studied the priesthood in Israel in the above cited article (he divides his study into three periods, i.e., the pre-monarchical period, the monarchical period and the post-exilic period corresponding to the three great divisions in the history of Israel) Soares Prabhu makes the following observation: "The professional priests of tribal Israel were primarily guardians of shrines and dispensers of oracles; the monarchical priesthood was concerned with oracle, instruction and sacrifice; the post-exilic priesthood occupied itself with sacrifice alone. A priesthood concerned primarily with the downward mediation of the word evolved into a priesthood concerned with cult alone." *Ibid.*, 222.

¹¹ According to some authors some major changes had to occur for the emergence of a special Christian priesthood. In the first place Christians had to see themselves as constituting a new religion distinct from Judaism. And secondly, they had to have a sacrifice at which a priesthood could preside. Patrick J. Dunn, *Priesthood: A Re-examination of Catholic Theology of Presbyterate* (New York: ALBA House, 1990), 45. Also refer, Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971), 17-19.

EMERGENCE OF MONARCHICAL EPISCOPACY

As the distinction between presbyters and overseers (*episkopoi*) grew towards the end of the period of the Pastoral Epistles a new phenomenon, a phenomenon which significantly contributed to the process of culticization and sacerdotalization of presbyteral ministry, evolves. The collective leadership or the collegiate exercise of authority gives way to monarchical episcopacy. The evidence for a monarchical episcopate, i.e., a local church presided by one bishop, emerges not strictly in the writings of the New Testament, but in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch in 108 AD.¹² However, it is important to know that even at this stage the college of presbyters enjoyed equal authority in the life of the Christian community.

As far as the historic emergence of the presidency of the local church is concerned, a factor to be noted is that it was a collegiate presidency. Many early churches seem to have been governed by a body of elders, all of equal authority. Even when church structures took more definite shape in the individual presidency of a bishop the collegiate form was not lost, since each community still retained its presbyteral college. Some of those who were the first to assert the authority of the bishop in strong terms, such as Ignatius of Antioch or Cyprian of Carthage, were also those who stressed the need and existence of the presbytery.¹³

¹² The letters of Ignatius indicate the evolution of the terminology being used in the Pastoral letters. While in the Pastoral letters and in Clement *episkopos* and *presbyteros* are used interchangeably, in Ignatius it is not so. The term *episkopos* is reserved to the president of college of presbyters, who takes the place of Christ. J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of Priesthood*, 43. "You have only to acknowledge God and the bishop, and all is well; for a man who honours his bishop is himself honoured by God" *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 9:1. (Cfr. also 8:1); "Let us be careful not to oppose the bishop, so that we may be subject to God" *Letter to the Ephesians*, 5:3; "When you are obedient to your bishop as though he were Jesus Christ, it is clear to me that you are living after the manner of Jesus Christ himself" *Letter to the Trallians*, 2:1; "I must count you blessed who are united with your bishop, just as the Church is united with Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is united with the Father" *Letter to the Magnesians*, 4:1. (Cfr. also 7:1). Scholars are of the opinion that the New Testament does not present us a situation in which the bishop becomes the sole authority with presbyters as his assistants. R. E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop*, 35.

¹³ David Power, *The Christian Priest: Elder and Prophet* (Sheed and Ward: London, 1973), 31.

It is an undeniable fact that the third and fourth century growth of monarchical episcopacy and the resultant preeminence of the bishop over the presbyters have their roots in the writings of Ignatius, who compares the bishop to God the Father and the elders to the college of the apostles, and the deacons to Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Just as the Lord did nothing apart from the Father, either alone or with his apostles, so nothing should be done apart from the bishop and the presbyters.¹⁵

Apart from the bishop no one is to do anything pertaining to the Church. A valid Eucharist is to be defined as one celebrated by the bishop or by a representative of his. Wherever the bishop appears the whole congregation is to be present, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the whole Church. It is not right either to baptize or to celebrate the agape apart from the bishop. But whatever he approves is also pleasing to God so that everything you do may be secure and valid.¹⁶

The free rule of the charismatic prophet apostle of the times of the New Testament gives way gradually, but not without a struggle, to the permanent residential community officers. The bishop, the chief of the permanent residential officers, is raised to the presidency of the presbytery. Though he is still called a presbyter, which certainly indicates a basic equality, enjoys certain functional privileges.

This growth becomes more and more clear and obvious in the coming centuries. The third century Church order of the East tells us that the bishop becomes the center of the Christian community and holds the place of God in the government of his people. He serves as their high priest and king, an evolution of the monarchical bishop of Ignatius, but with more Jewish flavor.¹⁷ The bishop of the times of *Didascalia* is a divine person,¹⁸ the supreme judge to the community with the God given power to bind and loose. He is a guide, teacher, minister of the Word of God, guardian of the poor and the needy and

¹⁴ *Letter to the Magnesians*, 6.

¹⁵ *Letter to the Magnesians*, 7:1.

¹⁶ *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 8.

¹⁷ For further details regarding the third century Church order of the East refer, *Syrian Didascalia Apostolorum*. References to *Didascalia Apostolorum* are taken from J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 55-58.

¹⁸ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 9.

protector of the widows and orphans. We also note the concern that the power and importance given to the bishop should not blind his eyes. He has to be without blemish, without anger, merciful, gracious and loving and charitable to orphans, widows and strangers. He has to be simple in his life-style not looking for luxuries and pleasures. He should not be a lover of money, wine, extravagance and luxury.¹⁹

The prominence of the bishop needs to be understood from the perspective of the historical need and necessity of the growing church. The respect recommended to a bishop has to be understood against the background of disunity and heresy which threatened the growth of the church in its initial stage.²⁰ A constant plea in Clement, Ignatius and their successors is for the unity of the church against the threats and heresies and schisms. The bishop is the center of unity and should be obeyed as Christ obeyed the Father. The bishop, as the head of the presbyteral college, becomes the chief admissions officer, judge, teacher and cultic president. In his capacity as the chief of the college of presbyters, he teaches, guarantees and safeguards the apostolic message and tradition.

The negative consequences of the development of the monarchical episcopate include, among others, culticization of the ministry of presbyters, sacerdotalism and the abuses of power. The primacy of the bishop and his role as the chief officer of the cult result in the increasing insistence on the cultic function which finds further consolidation in the following centuries.

Regarding the other consequence of abuses of power we come to know from the writings of Origen that the bishop should be a servant of the Church and not a ruler; should not misuse his powers to cut sinners off from the house of God; should live worthy of their status since they possess the chosen seats in the liturgy. The fact that some ministers were worse than secular rulers and that they have become inaccessible to the poor is mentioned in his writings. He also makes it clear that already during his time bishoprics were sought after with purely worldly motives.²¹

¹⁹ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 4 & 8.

²⁰ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980), 801.

²¹ Ref. J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 64-65.

As a consequence of the growing importance of the bishop, in the Roman church, the presbyters were reduced to counsellors of honour. They had their place in the liturgy alongside with the bishop. They were also allowed in delegation of the bishop to preside over Eucharistic celebrations in rural areas. They had no independent ministry apart from that which he shared with the bishop and that which he did with the delegation from the bishop. All authority was vested with the bishop. Secular affairs such as maintaining property and looking after charity were all in the hands of the deacons.

CONSOLIDATION OF CULTICIZATION AND SACRALIZATION

The original titles of the ministers, i.e., *presbyteros* and *episkopos*, had nothing to do with the Jewish or Pagan priestly hierarchy. These terminologies were needed to distinguish the office in the Christian community from the cultic functions in Judaism.

As we have already indicated, ever since the destruction of Jerusalem the rift between Jews and Christians had widened. Though the early Christians considered themselves part of the Jewish religion (the disciples went to the Jerusalem temple while Jesus was still with them and afterwards they were regularly attending prayer services held in the Synagogues), they started to distance themselves from the Jews as the rift grew wider and wider. The earliest Christians, being Jews or Jewish proselytes, thought of themselves as the renewed (and not as the new) Israel. They continued to worship in the temple and to regard its priesthood as valid (Ref. Acts 3:1).

But as the rift between the Jews and the Christians was not that much felt, the Christians also believed that the promises of the OT, i.e. promises made to the Old Israel, could be fulfilled only in Christianity the New Israel.²² With the growing consciousness of Christians as the New Israel, concepts such as new temple, new sacrifice, and new priesthood began to develop. Hence Jewish terminologies were

²² One does not find any explicit reference in the New Testament which suggests that Christians understood themselves as a new people. However, one finds an explicit reference to the same in the Epistle of Barnabas 5:7. The Epistle of Barnabas "describes the Church as the new and true Israel of the new covenant with a new Sabbath and a new spiritual temple in the place of the old". J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 49. Ref. also R. E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop*, 17.

introduced in the place of the secular terminologies from the beginning of the 3rd century. Thus the elders or *presbyteroi* become priests and *episkopos* becomes chief or high priest.

Already during the second century one finds in the writings of Clement of Alexandria some analogies from the Old Testament priestly organization to the New Testament ministry.²³ As the second century progresses we find more Jewish priestly customs and terminology being applied to the Christian ministry, although it is not as widespread as it will be in the third and fourth centuries.²⁴ Justin, the teacher-martyr, (d. 165) tells us more of the second century Roman church. In his dialogue with Trypho he speaks of the church as the New Israel, a priestly people offering sacrifices through their priests.²⁵

Speaking of the development of the priestly ministry in the fourth and the fifth centuries, Bernard Cooke mentions about the rapid crystallization of the ceremonial role of the bishops in liturgy. Continuing his reflection on this development he observes:

Apparently there is a considerable shift in view from the first two centuries, when there seems to have been reluctance to use *hierous* or *sacerdos* of Christian ministers. There seems little doubt that fourth- and fifth-century use of *sacerdos* has primarily in mind the ritual function of the bishop in the Eucharist, secondarily his role in other sacraments. He is the *leitourgos*, and in the post-Constantinian movement of Eucharistic liturgy into larger and more splendid quarters the ceremonial role of the bishop became more observable. Like the high priest of the old Jerusalem Temple he is now offering "the clean oblation" in a new temple situation; it is not surprising to see more and more comparisons of the Old Testament high priests to the bishops (and other Old Testament priests to Christian presbyters).²⁶

Bishop is seen as high priest offering sacrifice. Hippolytus (235)

²³ J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 36.

²⁴ J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 40.

²⁵ Cited in J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 38.

²⁶ Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacraments: History and Theology* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1976), 79.

describes priests as elders who were appointed by Moses to assist him in his leadership. He describes bishops in terms of Jewish priesthood. The consecratory prayer used at the time of the consecration of a bishop clearly indicates the said development.²⁷

The realization that Christianity is the true Israel and in it the prophecies and the promises of the old have already been fulfilled by Christ becomes more and more reinforced in the third and fourth centuries. Therefore, the New Israel with its new temple, sacrifices, priesthood and ritual purity becomes normative during this period. As a consequence synogogue terminology is replaced by that of the temple, elders become priests, and bishops high priests.

As Kenan Osborne rightly observes that "at the end of this period (90-210 A. D.), we begin to hear the connection of *episkopos* and *presbyter* to *hiereus*, *sacerdos*, *pontifex*. In other words a priestly interpretation, i.e., priestly in the sense of the Jewish and Greek world, began to become more dominant. Liturgy began to be the basis for church leadership, rather than church leadership be the basis for liturgical leadership".²⁸ The growing tendency to compare the ministers of the New Testament with those of the Old results in sacerdotalism which becomes more noticeable in the 4th century.²⁹ This process continues in the centuries that followed and in the twelfth century the presbyter who was ordained for the community is now ordained for the Eucharist. The transition from the minister of the Gospel to the cultic servant of the altar reaches its zenith at this stage.³⁰ Speaking of the sacralization of the Christian priesthood Soares Prabhu succinctly presents this development:

The process of sacerdotalism advances a step further in the twelfth century when the term the 'true body of Christ' (*corpus Christi verum*), which till then had stood for the Christian community, began to be applied (in reaction to Berengar's spiritualization of the 'real presence') to the Eucharist, which previously had been called the 'mystical body of Christ' (*corpus*

²⁷ Ref. J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 52.

²⁸ Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A history of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 128.

²⁹ J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 104.

³⁰ J. J. Hughes, "Christian Priesthood," 538.

Christi mysticum). The priest who "according to long standing consensus" was ordained for the "body of Christ" (that is, for the service of the Church), was now seen as ordained for the Eucharist.³¹

This process of culticization of presbyteral ministry was given a solid theological foundation in the scholastic theology which defined priesthood in terms of divine power to consecrate the Eucharist and to absolve sins. This "theory of a eucharistic priesthood", to use the phrase of Kennan Osborne, was canonized, as we will see later, by the Council of Trent.

MINISTERS WITH DIVINE POWER?

The fact that it is scholasticism, which succeeded in defining priesthood in terms of divine power, is proved beyond doubt. The roots of this theological development, in fact, lie in the early periods of ordained ministry where one finds increasing stress on the cultic ministry of the ordained ministers and the consequent association of ordained ministry with cult and sacrifice. It is, however, a significant change in the understanding of the Eucharist which marked a clear departure from the early understanding of the new Testament ordained ministry. The understanding of the Eucharist as the remembrance, reenactment and renewal of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross³² had indeed paved the way for an exclusive association of priesthood with sacrifice and cult. The consequence of this development for the understanding of the priesthood is immense. A priest becomes a person who enjoys and possesses a special, awe-inspiring and divine power, a power by which he is able to renew the sacrifice of Christ in a mystical manner. The possession of this divine power also makes him fundamentally and essentially different from others who do not possess it.

The mystification of the priestly function in the Eucharist can be

³¹ G. M. Soares Prabhu, "Christian Priesthood in India Today," 234.

³² It is important to note that it is the Eastern church's understanding of the Eucharist which led to the increasing identification of the priesthood with the Eucharist. While the Western church maintained its earlier understanding of the Eucharist as the offering of the faithful under the leadership of the bishop or priest, the Eastern church started conceiving it as the mystical renewal of the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

said to mark a real beginning of a new understanding of the ordained ministry purely from the perspective of divine power. It is one of the important factors which contributed greatly to culticization, sacralization and clericalization. That the priest, because of the possession of this divine power, undergoes a total change and becomes a new man different from others are often stressed in some of the writings of the Fathers of the church. This change is not only seen in the person, but also in the cultic functions done by the priest. The fact that the people are perplexed and simply absorbed into this divine act speaks volume of the significance of the change that has taken place in the person which ultimately affects the actions that he does. The words of John Chrysostom can be cited here to add strength to our argument:

For when you behold the Lord, immolated and lying on the altar, and the priest standing over the sacrifice and praying, and all the people purpled by that precious blood, do you imagine that you are still on earth amongst men, and not rather rapt up into heaven. And casting away all earthly thoughts from your mind, do you not contemplate with a clean heart and a pure mind the things of heaven.³³

Gregory of Nyssa compares the transformation that takes place in the ordination of a priest to that of the Eucharist. Just as by the power of the Spirit water regenerates, ordinary stones are consecrated into an altar, bread becomes the body of Christ and oil and wine are sanctified so also the priest, by the power of the Spirit, is blessed and separated from the multitude of people by the blessing. And he continues to say that this change occurs "without being at all changed in body or in form". The priest "while continuing to be in all appearance the man he was before, (is) being, by some unseen power and grace, transformed in respect to the higher condition."³⁴

The growing association of priesthood with a predominant sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist led to an increased attention to the details of the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist. As a consequence liturgical gestures overshadowed the ministry of the

³³ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 3, 4. As cited in J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 83.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ*. As cited in J. A. Mohler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, 84.

Word. Alongside with this development there was a gradual decrease in catechetical instruction as adult baptism became more common (the increase in adult baptism and the consequent decline in infant baptism was the result of Christianity being declared as the religion of the state). As a consequence the cultic role of the priest in the Eucharist is getting focused very much and the other functions such as preaching the Word, catechetical instruction and so on become less focused and even uncared for. Linking the priestly ministry solely with the sacrifice of the Eucharist has also strengthened and promoted the formation of clerical class. On account of culticization and Sacerdotalization the gulf between the clergy and the laity and the clergy and the world indeed widened.

Already in the early church we do find some voices of protest against the institutional ministry and its growing influence in the church. An example of this prophetic protest against the growing domination of the clerical class can be found in the writings of Tertullian who says: "Are not also we laymen priests? It is written: He made us a kingdom and priests to God and His Father. The difference between the clergy and the people is constructed by the authority of the Church and by the honour which was bestowed by established custom. Thus where there is no established custom, there you offer and anoint, and you are your own priest"³⁵

SECULARIZATION OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

The culticized and sacralized presbyteral ministry becomes more secularized and the presbyters and bishops become secular leaders on account of the declaration of Christianity as the religion of the state. The closely knit and well-organized structure of the church gave the community and, especially, its leaders secular importance. When Origen writes against Celsus (3rd Cent.) he indicates that in Alexandria the Christian community was more stable than the civil body and the council (clergy) was more virtuous than the city government. The implication of his observation is that the organizational structure of the church was much stronger than the secular structures. The powerful structures of the church gave its leaders secular importance.

³⁵ *De Exhortatione Castitatis*, 7.

The writings of Origen provide us with sufficient evidences to conclude that the clergy was very much secularized. He warns the bishops to be servants of the people and not of rulers. He exhorts them not to misuse their powers in cutting sinners off from the community. He laments over the ill disposed members of the clergy who are worse than the secular rulers. He blames that the clergy is inaccessible to the poor. He also says that the candidates struggle for ecclesiastical offices, especially, bishoprics, out of worldly motives. Jerome, while speaking about the dignity of the priestly office, condemns the arrogance of the deacons, the vanity and secular ambitions of priests, the high authority and the monarchical attitude of the bishops.

The secular importance of the clergy grew much more in the wake of the declaration of Christianity as state religion. Priests were exempted from some services like service in the municipal councils. They were also given exemption of tax for business. And because of this privilege the business of clerics grew. In 453 Valentinian III forbade clerics to engage in trade. Apart from trade, the landed property of the church increased since the rulers generously donated lands to the church. With the increase of properties, the bishops became administrators of temporal goods than pastors. They were engaged more in temporal administration than in pastoral care. Thus, we see, by the fifth century the presbyters and bishops have become more and more cultic functionaries and secular rulers and less and less religious leaders and servants.

The political influence of the clerics also grew at this period. Bishops in the Roman Empire had the status of senators. As the political power of the Roman Empire dwindled, the influence of the clerics became stronger and greater. When the Roman Empire broke down and the Germanic domination grew in the early middle ages, the church with her firm structures and moral authority was the strongest safeguard of order and justice. One of the consequences of this development is that the church became dependent on the king. Bishops and clergy were under the juridical power of the king. Though bishops were elected according to the accepted canonical norms, the king had great influence in the selection of the candidates. He also played a role in the enthronement of the bishops by giving them the insignia of their temporal power, ring and staff. On account of this dependency

unworthy candidates were raised to the episcopacy.

The condition of priests was no better. Priests, by and large, were poorly educated and their life reflected the roughness of the age. The warnings of the Synods give us an idea of the life of the priests during this time. The Synods exhorted priests not to have weapons; not to enjoy hunting parties; not to go to taverns; not to pawn church property to innkeepers or traders; not to take part in wedding parties; not to get drunk in funeral banquets and to wear clerical dress. These instructions of the Synod are clear manifestations of total degeneration of priesthood as a ministry into a profession. That the priests were preoccupied with the above-mentioned enjoyments and amusements and that they were less concerned about the ministries demanded by their way of life can be understood from the positive exhortations of the Synods. Priests were exhorted to take care of the poor, to be hospitable, to visit the sick, to take the Viaticum personally and not to send it through laypersons.

It is interesting to note that even though the original meaning of priesthood has been distorted and lost there was little effort or no effort to rediscover the original meaning of priesthood. Even at his stage, when the priests were concerned about and primarily occupied with what is not related to their ministry, the bishops were interested in ensuring the right and correct knowledge of rubrics. Therefore, priests were expected to make their yearly exams to the bishop regarding the ritual of Mass and baptism. Moreover, the struggle against simony and investiture brings to light the understanding of priestly office.

The more the bishop became a secular leader and the more his influence in the secular sphere grew, the chair from which he taught the people became the throne from which he ruled. Speaking of this change Power observes:

Along with this transformation in the notion and exercise of episcopacy there was a gradual change in the notion of the eucharist and the ministry which is ordained to its celebration. This is partly due to the fact that in practice the eucharist became much more the action of the celebrant and less that of the community, and partly due to the adoption of the old testament priesthood and sacrifice as the model for the new

testament ministry and ritual.³⁶

Secularization of priesthood during this period led to the increase of ambition and worldliness among the clerics. This way of life was sought after not so much for the sake of serving God and his people as for making livelihood and raising the social status. While most of the bishops were rulers of their territory, others were wealthy landowners. As a result the bishops developed into ecclesiastical princess. One can also observe a shift in the conception of authority. During this period authority is viewed no more as service to the community, rather as power to dominate and to rule the people. The monopoly of power by the clergy results in the separation of hierarchy from the people, which gradually develops into hostility between the two, as one can see culminating in the attitude and violent reactions of the masses during the French Revolution later in the modern period.

A STEP TOWARDS DECULTICIZATION

Sixteenth century is an important period in the development of the theology of the presbyteral ministry since an effort is made during this period to de-link priesthood from the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist, and to rediscover the ministry of the Word. Speaking about this period Bernard Cooke observes that "no period of history is more critical to a study of Christian ministry and priesthood than is the sixteenth century."³⁷ The clarion call of this period was "Reform." The actual condition of the church and the church leaders was so bad that the call to reform was a historical necessity. At the heart of this movement one could find an urgent and obvious need among the faithful for dedicated, authentic and genuine spiritual leaders which clearly suggests that the priests were really cultic specialists and not spiritual leaders in the real sense of the term. Hence one can say that although the immediate occasion for the outbreak of the reformation was the positing of the 95 theses concerning indulgences, and the crucial theological issue was that of justification, the force of the attack (on the part of the Reformers) and the weakness of the resistance (on the part of the church) came from the actual condition of the priesthood.

³⁶ David Power, *The Christian Priest*, 36-37.

³⁷ Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacraments: History and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 591.

in the church.

Luther's position comprises the following points:

The ministry of the church consists in the proclamation of the word of God. Since the ministry consists in the preaching of the word those who do not preach are not real ministers but 'pestilence in the church'. Those who do not preach de facto return to the lay status. Luther's insistence on preaching the Word has to be understood against the background of total negligence of the ministry of the Word and the presbyteral ministry being reduced to a cultic (priestly?) ministry.

The ritual of ordination is of ecclesiastical origin. The conception of this ritual of initiating ministries as a sacrament is an invention of the Pope's church, one of the detestable symptoms of the 'tyranny of the clergy' over the laity. This accusation of Luther and his outright rejection of the ritual of ordination are to be situated in the actual context of the unquestionably accepted clericalism and the consequent widening of the gap between the ministers and the faithful. Another important theological reason for this position of Luther is his rediscovery of the scriptural notion of the priesthood of all the baptized. Since all the baptized are priests those who are designated to perform ministries of the Word and sacrament do what any one else in the community in fact could do. Ordination rite is only a delegation or appointment and not an ordination. Hence the clergy-laity distinction is totally rejected by Luther.³⁸ He also denies the permanent character of the priesthood which provides the strong theological basis for sacerdotalism and clericalism.

He denies the 'sacrificial priesthood', which claims special power to offer masses and to secure God's blessings for the people. His attack on the sacrificial nature of priesthood needs to be viewed from the actual condition in which the divine sacrament of Eucharist had been turned into "an article of trade" upon which priests and monks depended for their livelihood. The reformers and those who followed them saw the daily offering of the sacrifice of the Mass for the sins of the living and the dead, the practice of making payment for the celebration

³⁸ Patrick J. Dunn, *Priesthood*, 89.

of masses, and the use of foreign language as abuses.³⁹

Calvin rejected ordination as a sacrament. Like Luther he also opposed and rejected the ritual of ordination. Moreover, he rejected anointing of hands because, according to him, Christ alone is the anointed one. He admitted only the rite of imposition of hands as a meaningful ritual since this practice has more biblical basis and since it expresses the submission under obedience to Jesus Christ.

CANONIZATION OF CULTICIZATION

The Council of Trent, instead of responding to the issues raised by the reformers, mostly reaffirmed the traditional teachings of the church. Against Luther it affirmed that the New Testament contains a visible priesthood. What is important here is that priesthood according to the Council, has the power to consecrate (a clear affirmation of the power to offer Eucharistic sacrifice), and not simply to perform merely the ministry of the Word. The Council's emphatic stress on the cultic nature of the ordained priesthood has its consequences even to this day. The most important statement of the Council which reaffirmed and strengthened the process of culticization of presbyteral ministry is that the sacrifice and priesthood are conjoined by divine ordinance.⁴⁰ The implication of this statement is that the ordained ministry is tied to and linked with sacrifice not simply by the accidental historical developments but by divine ordinance itself. Consequently the power to consecrate, offer and administer the Eucharist and to absolve sins becomes God-given, divinely willed, absolute and hence not delegated by the community. The community has no role in possessing this power. Added to this because of this sacramental spiritual power an ordained minister is permanently distinguished from the ordinary community of believers.

The Council also affirmed that there are other orders in the church and this is visible in the divinely instituted hierarchy in the church

³⁹ David Power, *The Sacrifice We Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and its Reinterpretation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 36.

⁴⁰ The Council states that "Sacrificium et sacerdotium ita Dei ordinatione coniuncta sunt..." (S. XXIII, ch. I). Latin Citation is taken from H. J. Schroeder, ed., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1941), 432.

consisting of bishops, priests and deacons. This affirmation is certainly intended to moderate the insistence of Luther on the priesthood of all the faithful. The Council makes it clear that all those who assert the priesthood of all the Christians without distinction derange the ecclesiastical authority.⁴¹

Besides some doctrinal statements, the Council issued some disciplinary decrees. It made it obligatory that the bishops reside in their dioceses. It forbade bishops holding more than one diocese. Attending lectures in Holy Scripture was made obligatory. The duty of the bishops and priests to preach was very much insisted upon. The general discipline of the clergy and mainly celibacy were settled in the Council.

The council of Trent has its importance for the theological development of the doctrine on orders and for the concrete form in which priesthood was lived and exercised in the period of the 'counter-Reformation' and therefore also for the understanding of the actual problems today. Positively, it has the indisputable merit of having defined the catholic doctrine and of having put up a strong defense against forces that threatened to carry away the entire hierarchical structure of the church. It has also laid down the firm principles of the needed reform of hierarchy and the priesthood. Negatively, it had a defensive attitude and lacked creativeness, vision and balance. It was concerned about those doctrinal questions and issues raised by the reformers. Instead of responding to the questions raised, the Council reacted strongly. As a result a comprehensive picture of priestly ministry could not emerge.

The Council understands ministerial priesthood in relation to the Eucharist as a sacrifice. The eucharist-centred understanding of the Council pays little attention or no attention at all to the ministry of the Word. Even the conception of the Eucharist is one-sided and lacks proper prophetic perspective. Thus the Council of Trent legitimizes and canonizes the predominantly cultic conception of the priesthood. Holy Orders are described as an ascending ladder of offices with increasing power, culminating in the power to consecrate and absolve.

⁴¹ H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees*, 161-162.

This entire power oriented conception of Orders is one-sided, unbiblical, and contrary to the mind of Jesus. It fails to realize that Orders are specific forms of ministry (service or *diakonia*) in the church.

Legitimization of culticization led to the increasing segregation of priests and people. Trent provided a theological justification for the segregation which was revealed in the persistent refusal of chalice to the faithful. The Council's concern for the formation of priests was a praiseworthy and commendable act. At the same time, one cannot forget the truth that it contributed to the consolidation and building up of a special class, i.e., clerical class, within the church with its own language (Latin), its own way of thinking (scholasticism) and with its social status as a special and privileged group.

TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE PRESBYTERAL MINISTRY

While the theologies up to the time of the Vatican II repeated and reinforced, almost unanimously, the scholastic approach to priesthood, which defined the priest in terms of his relationship to the Eucharist and his power to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice and to absolve sins, the theology of the Council placed priesthood in a new perspective. The "traditional" doctrine, or scholastic doctrine on priesthood, which dominated the thinking of the Catholic church for centuries, was regarded insufficient, and to a large extent, corrected. The eucharistic approach of the scholastic theology not only influenced and determined the theology of the priesthood, but also became the basis for the spirituality of the priesthood. According to Osborne, this eucharistic approach "was set aside, changed or modified by Vatican II. This does not mean that the scholastic understanding of priesthood was rejected as wrong; rather, it was deemed too narrow and needed to be enriched and enlarged."⁴²

One of the noteworthy contributions of the Council is that it is placing the ministry of the presbyters in the wider perspective of the baptismal priesthood of the people of God. The new understanding of the church as the community of the faithful, which is a significant departure from the pre-Vatican pyramidal conception of the church,

⁴² K. B. Osborne, *Priesthood*, 315.

and the rediscovery of the priestly identity of all the baptized help us to see the basic and fundamental equality of all the baptized whether ordained or not. Within this renewed understanding of the church presbyteral ministry also acquires a new meaning. The ministry of presbyters is not something that sets them apart from the ordinary faithful and thus makes them members of a privileged group. It is rather intended to be at the service of the baptismal priesthood by which every member has a part in the mission of the whole body (cf. PO 2).

Providing christological basis for Christian ministry and so for the ministry of the presbyters is another important contribution of the Council. Accordingly, Jesus himself is the basis of ministry. Therefore, one must begin with the very ministry of Jesus to comprehend the meaning of the ministries within the church. All Christian ministries, especially the ministry of presbyters, are modeled on the ministry of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve and to lay down his life for others. The new meaning of authority as service, as exemplified and authenticated in the Gospels, should become the motivating principle in the ministry and life of the presbyters. Just as Jesus' own mission was one of service, so too the mission of the presbyter has to be motivated by service. This is obvious by the fact that while the Council of Trent had focused more on power, i.e., the power to consecrate the Eucharist, the power to forgive sins, the power to ordain etc., the Second Vatican Council had focused on service. It did this by constant referral to the threefold ministry of Jesus as the very foundation of ordained ministry.⁴³

By placing the ordained ministry in the wider context of the three offices of Christ the council has achieved two things. Firstly, it has corrected the one-sided cultic character of the Catholic priesthood (the term reminds only of priestly office while the other two offices are left out). By placing it in the context of the triple office of Christ, the Council gives equal importance to the prophetic, priestly and kingly aspects of the presbyteral ministry (an inclusive term used in the early church where the prophetic, priestly and kingly dimensions were given equal importance). While the scholastic view of the priestly ministry was

⁴³ K. B. Osborne, *Priesthood*, 338.

one-sided, static and personal, Vatican II's view on presbyteral ministry is multiple (triple), dynamic and ecclesiological (oriented towards the community).

Secondly the Council had ascertained that the presbyters are sharers in the triple office of Christ. The Council documents repeatedly affirm this truth when they say that the presbyters are "living instruments of Christ, the eternal priest" (PO, 12), "ministers of Jesus Christ among the nations" (PO, 2) and "ministers of the head (Jesus Christ)" (PO, 12). They "represent Christ" (AG, 39), "assume the person of Christ himself" (PO, 12), "act in the person of Christ the head" (PO, 2), and "act as Christ's ministers" (PO, 5). That the presbyteral ministry is a participation in the ministry of Jesus Christ had already been (even before the Council) dominant in the Catholic theology cannot be denied. "In the Catholic theology of the first fifty years of the twentieth century, the sacrament of Order is seen as sacrament which re-presents, *represents* in the strongest possible sense of the term, the unique mystery of Jesus Christ himself."⁴⁴

Since the presbyters participate in the triple office of Christ, they are not to be understood in terms of power except that of Jesus whose power consisted not so much in domination and segregation as in serving and self-sacrificing. This is all the more emphasized by the ecclesiological basis of ministry provided by the Council. The Council emphatically pronounces that the mission and ministry of the church is nothing but a reflection of Jesus' own ministry. The church in its totality is called to reflect the very mission and ministry of Jesus. On account of this ecclesiological dimension of Christian ministries, one cannot say that the presbyters are ministers of the church in the strict sense of the term. They are indeed, ministers of Christ acting in the name of the church.⁴⁵

Another contribution is the recovery of the title "presbyter". The usage of the term presbyter in the place of priest is not simply a change in the terminology. It should rather be understood as a conscious effort

⁴⁴ Aidan Nichols, *Holy Order: Apostolic Priesthood from the New Testament to the Second Vatican Council* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1990), 126.

⁴⁵ B. Kloppenburg, *The Ecclesiology of Vatican II* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), 276.

to free the presbyteral ministry of its priestly element. Speaking of the recovery of the term presbyter, Dunn observes:

A further indication of the Council's intention to free the priesthood from being too narrowly identified with cult can be seen in the retrieval of the scriptural term of "presbyter" ("elder"). That this was a deliberate decision can be seen from the alterations that were made to the title of the proposed Decree on the Priesthood. It began as "*De Clerics*" (Concerning the Clergy"), was changed to "*De Sacerdotibus*" (Concerning Priests"), and finally ended up as "*De Presbyterorum Ministerio et Vita*" ("Concerning the ministry and Life of Presbyters").⁴⁶

Though the council has brought out the new meaning of the priesthood by situating it in the renewed understanding of the church and by retrieving the biblical term presbyter, it has not succeeded fully in deculticizing, desacerdotalizing and desacralizing the presbyteral ministry. The predominantly eucharistic-centred understanding of this ministry still remains. The Council teaching affirms that the center and root of the priestly life is the Eucharist (cf. PO 14; cf. also PO 2). It is not surprising that the strong eucharistic-centred understanding of the presbyteral ministry in a way tries to interpret the triple office in relation to the Eucharist. The prophetic office (the preaching ministry) is seen as that which flows from the Eucharist ("the Eucharist shows itself to be the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the Gospel" PO 5); the kingly office or the guiding ministry as rooted in the Eucharist ("no Christian community...can be built up unless it has its basis and center in the celebration of the most Holy Eucharist" PO 6). Hence the Council urges priest to celebrate Eucharist everyday

⁴⁶ P. J. Dunn, *Priesthood*, 109. The author also brings to the attention of the readers the fact that the English translation of the Council Documents has effectively concealed the theological precision that was attempted by the Fathers of the Council. "As a general rule the conciliar texts try to follow the Scriptures and to restrict the word "priest" (*sacerdos*) to Jesus himself and to the "common priesthood" of the baptized; and when talking about the ordained they use the word "*presbyteros*." But the English translation uncritically translates both "*sacerdos*" and "*presbyteros*" as "priest." By way of illustration, the word "priest-priestly-priesthood" occurs 14 times in the English version of paragraph 2 of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*; on 10 of these occasions the Latin original has used the word "*presbyteros*"; "*sacerdos*" is used only 4 times twice referring to Jesus, once to all the baptized, and only once with reference to the ordained priesthood." *Ibid.*, 110.

even when the faithful are not able to be present (cf. PO 13).

CONCLUSION

Before we conclude we would make clear to the reader that this paper, in which we have reflected upon those developments that led to the one-sided development of the presbyteral ministry, is not a complete and comprehensive presentation. All those who sincerely reflect on the church and its ministry cannot brush aside the common comment that the church, especially the church in India, is a highly clericalized church. One of the basic reasons for this phenomenon is the domination of the clergy which has impaired the growth of the church by marginalizing the laity. The obvious consequences are that the church has become ecclesio-centric forgetting its call to be the seed, instrument and sacrament of the Kingdom of God. Moreover, this ecclesio-centrism has also resulted in a kind of "ecclesio-introversion". Since the church is very much concerned about safeguarding its own rights (very often its institutional interests) it has failed to take up the issues of justice and human rights which are anti-Kingdom by their very nature.

In this context, there is an urgent need today to recognize the role of the laity in the mission of the church amidst the changing conditions and the consequent challenges and to make it a lay church. Presbyters of today need to realize that their ministry is intended to be of service towards the realization and concretization of the baptismal priesthood of the faithful. This end may always be impossible to achieve unless the presbyters realize their ministry as that which places them more close to the people and more near to them. The one-sided cultic, priestly and sacral understanding of their ministry instead of bringing them closer and nearer will always keep them above and superior to the faithful. We are sure that a deculticized, desacerdotalised and desacralised understanding of the presbyteral ministry will be a right and correct step towards the realization of a lay church.