

## **Priest, Minister of the Sacraments**

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### **Introduction**

The Holy Father Benedict XVI has declared the period from June 19<sup>th</sup> 2009 to June 11<sup>th</sup> 2010 (the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus) as the 'year of priests'. One may be inclined to ask why a year of priests? For the past few years the Church has been dedicating a special year to different mysteries of Christian faith. Thus there had been a year of Eucharist, a year of the Word of God, a year of St. Paul. Hence, one may think that the year of priests is also one such thing. However, if one reflects over the circumstances that called for dedicating a year for priests, he may understand that this dedication stems out of the concern that the Holy Father has had for priests over the years. The scandal of pedophile of priests has been a cause of great concern of the Holy Father. It is a black mark in the image of the Church. The Holy Father in his letter to Clergy for the year for priests says: "There are also, sad to say, situations which can never be sufficiently deplored where the Church herself suffers as a consequence of infidelity on the part of some of her ministers." He has been looking for ways and means of remedying this situation. The celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> year of the death of St. John Mary Vianney offered the opportunity to invite the priests for "interior renewal and commitment". Hence, the dedication of a year for priests on the

occasion of the sesquicentenary of St. John Marie Vianney's death may be reckoned as an instance of the work of Divine Providence.

### Who is a Priest?

Speaking of the priesthood on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary of priestly ordination late Pope John Paul II said: "At its deepest level, every vocation to the priesthood is *a great mystery*; it is *a gift* (italics added), which infinitely transcends the individual. Every priest experiences this clearly throughout the course of his life. Faced with the greatness of the gift, we sense our own inadequacy."<sup>1</sup>

According to St. Paul, says Pope John Paul II, "it means above all to be a steward of the mysteries of God: 'This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy' (1 Cor 4:1-2). The word 'steward' cannot be replaced by any other. It is deeply rooted in the Gospel: it brings to mind the parable of the faithful steward and the unfaithful one (cf. Lk 12:41-48). The steward is not the owner, but the one to whom the owner entrusts his goods so that he will manage them justly and responsibly. In exactly the same way the priest receives from Christ the treasures of salvation, in order duly to distribute them among the people to whom he is sent. These treasures are those of faith. *The priest is thus a man of the word of God, a man of sacrament, a man of the 'mystery of faith'.*" (italics added).<sup>2</sup> The same idea is mentioned in the Roman document on "*The Priest and the Third Millennium*". It states that the ministry of priest

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination: Gift and Mystery*, Carmel Publishing Centre, Trivandrum: (1997), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67

consists in being a *Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Leader of the Community*.<sup>3</sup>

Priestly vocation is a mystery of 'wondrous exchange' (*admirabile commercium*), says the same Pope, between God and man. "A man offers his humanity to Christ, so that Christ may use him as an instrument of salvation, making him as it were into another Christ. Unless we grasp the mystery of this 'exchange', we will not understand how it can be that a young man, hearing the words 'follow me', can give up everything for Christ, in the certainty that if he follows this path he will find complete personal fulfilment."<sup>4</sup> Hence, the traditional saying that priest is another Christ (*alter Christus*). This needs to be further explained which I shall do below.

"Through the sacred ordination and mission which they receive from the bishops, priests are promoted to the service of Christ, the Teacher, Priest and King; they are given a share in his ministry, through which the church here on earth is being ceaselessly built up in to the People of God." (*PO*, 1). The *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* states that "although the obligation of spreading the faith falls individually on every disciple of Christ, still the Lord Christ has always called from the number of his disciples those whom he has chosen that they might be with him so that he might send them to preach to the nations (cf. Mk. 3:13ff)." (*AG*, 23). Hence it is incumbent upon every priest, does not matter what concrete work he does in a given context, to carry out the missionary command of the risen Lord. "Since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all men.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest and the third Christian Millennium*, Introduction

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, *op.cit.*, p.67.

In this way they carry out the Lord's command 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature' [Mk16:15] and thus set up and increase the People of God. For by the saving Word of God faith is aroused in the heart of unbeliever and is nourished in the heart of believer." (PO, 4).

Priests are the sacraments; they are icons of the pastoral leadership of Christ. The ministerial priesthood is the sacraments of the headship, the pastoral leadership of Jesus. The grace to be a sacrament of the unifying leadership of Christ and the unique priestly role is given in ordination. In virtue of this sacramental reality, the priest has the power to preside in the person of Christ at the Eucharist; it is in virtue of the sacramentality of the headship of Christ, the High Priest that the priest has the power to absolve sins and to be instrument of paschal reconciliation.<sup>5</sup>

Ratzinger (now Pope) says that "the office of the priest in the Church can only be understood in subordination to the mediatorship of Christ which is at once exclusive and inclusive...The apostolic office is the immediate criterion and starting point for the office of priest. As a continuation of the mission of Jesus Christ, it is first of all the Commission to evangelize (Mk 16:15). This ministry of the word which is here implied is always to be understood against the background of the incarnate and crucified Word. It includes both the command to proclaim (preach) and perform symbolic actions."<sup>6</sup>

### **Situating Ministerial Priesthood**

The priesthood about which we speak here refers to the ministerial priesthood. The proper context for understanding the

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<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Wister, Michael Glazion Edits, *Priests: Identity and Ministry*, Inc, Wilmington, Delaware: (1990), p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> J. Ratzinger, "Mediator and Minister of Christ" in Gerard Meagher edit, *Priest, Person and Ministry*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin: (1970), p. 59.

ministerial priesthood is the mystery of the Church.<sup>7</sup> The ministerial or hierarchical or special priesthood is obviously dependent on the priesthood of Christ. But it would be a mistake to move directly from the latter to the former. The Scriptures do not dwell on the special priesthood. But the teaching of the Fathers introduces between these two types of priesthood the priesthood of the Church, that is, the common priesthood which belongs to all the faithful as a result of the incorporation into Christ in baptism. The priesthood of Christ is established as perfect in itself and absolutely essential for the Church. The Church is a priestly Church, and within it there is an order of men who have a priesthood of a different kind from that of the whole Church. The ministerial priesthood, therefore, does not come between Christ and the Church as an office of mediation.<sup>8</sup> It must rather be considered within priestly Church, as a special service of this priestly Church and not as placed over against it or acting on it from outside. The total structure of the Church comes before the different functions within it and respect for the totality is necessary if the true nature of the ministerial priesthood and of the common priesthood of all the faithful and the relationship between them are to be understood.

Hence, before one begins to speak of the priest as a leader of the worshipping community, one must consider this people assembled for worship with the priest as a part of it. Before one is priest, one is a Christian and as such a member of Christ, one of the faithful, sharing in the common priesthood of all the baptized. This basic unity with all the faithful is more fundamental than what

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<sup>7</sup> For this section I am indebted to Patrick McGoldrick, "Leader of the Sacrificial People" in Gerard Meagher ed., *Priest, Person and Ministry*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin: (1970), pp. 66.

<sup>8</sup> This is not in contradiction with what Ratzinger has said above. What he states is that priest participates in the mediatorship of Christ; he does not say that priest is mediator between Christ and the Church.

differentiates one from them, the special or ministerial priesthood. The ministerial priesthood is a service of the ministry of the common priesthood of the whole Church. The identity of ministerial priesthood is both Christological and ecclesial.<sup>9</sup> That is to say he acts *in persona Christi* and *in persona Ecclesiae*.

### **Minister of the Sacraments**

The priestly ministry is frequently divided into the tasks of teaching, sanctifying and ruling (*docere, sanctificare, regere*). This trio is traditional, it is used by the Second Vatican Council and on the basis of it, the priest is seen as *the minister of the word, the celebrant of the liturgy and the head or leader of the Christian people*. Much the same elements are found by describing the ministry as a share in the offices of Christ, the Prophet, the Priest, the King: the prophet who announces to the people the word of God, the priest who celebrates the liturgy, the King who rules the people.<sup>10</sup>

The ministry of the sacraments on the one hand presupposes the preaching of the word. For, before the Church can come together to celebrate, it must have been called to faith and conversion of heart, which are conditions for the celebration of sacraments (cf. Mk 16:15). Preaching, faith and celebration of sacrament is the basic structure of the ministry of the sacraments. St. Paul considers the ministry of the word a priestly function. "Because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel M. Buechlein, O.S.B., Bishop of Memphis, "The Sacramental Identity of the Ministerial Priesthood" in Robert J. Wister, Michael Glazion, edits, *Priests: Identity and Ministry*, Inc, Wilmington, Delaware: (1990), p.140.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Patrick McGoldrick, "Leader of the Sacrificial People" in Gerard Meagher ed., *op.cit.*, p. 64

15:16). Believers too must be called to faith and repentance. Faith always needs to be stimulated; men must constantly be confronted by the demands of Gospel, by the living word of God, which is always seeking a response. The ministry of the word is completed by the ministry of the sacraments. This is particularly clear in the case of adult baptism which is required to complete the work of making a Christian that was begun in the preaching of the word. "The people of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God which is quite rightly sought from the mouth of priests. For since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishop to preach the Gospel of God to all men. In this way they carry out the Lord's command 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature'" (Mk 16:15) and thus set up and increase the People of God. For by the saving Word of God faith is aroused in the heart of unbelievers and is nourished in the heart of believers. By this faith then the congregation of the faithful begins and grows, according to the saying of the apostle: 'Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ' (Rom 10:17)." (PO, 4).<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand the ministry of the sacraments falls under the pastoral ministry of priests, since all of these activities share in the activity of Christ, the head who leads his Church, the pastor who shepherds his flock, guiding it and gathering into unity. The liturgical function of the priest or ministry of the sacraments of the priest is obviously of central importance and merits consideration for its own sake, but it would be a mistake here again to regard it as an activity apart in the Church, one sealed off by its sacredness and its altogether special character from the rest of the Church's

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Patrick McGoldrick, "Leader of the Sacrificial People" in Gerard Meagher ed., *op.cit.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Patrick McGoldrick, *art.cit.*, in Gerard Meagher edit, *op.cit.*, p. 65

activities. <sup>12</sup> “From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ, the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree” (*SC*, 7). It is important, therefore, to recognize an intimate connection between what the Church does in the liturgy and what it does outside.

The ministerial priest is deputed to realize this connection here and now by his ministry of administering the sacraments. The liturgy is the outstanding manifestation of the Church, the action by which the Church most clearly shows forth its nature and purpose of all its activity. The celebration of the sacraments, particularly of the Eucharist, expresses in a sign what the Church is, what it stands for, what it does and in expressing this it realizes it more fully. Hence, the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, can be said to be the source and summit of all the activity of the Church, of every ministry within it and every work of the apostolate. It is a sign - a sacrament in which the Church expresses itself, an action which shows forth through signs the whole direction of the extra-liturgical activity of the Church. It is an effective sign which brings into fuller realization what it is expressing. Hence there is an intimate connection and from one point of view a very close similarity between the liturgy and the rest of the Church's activity.

Thus when the priest exercises his ministry of the sacraments, he is at the same time carrying out the other two ministries of preaching and pastoral task of building the community. Now let us see how in the celebration of different sacraments, this function is meaningfully exercised.

### **Meaningful Celebration of Baptism**

Baptism is said to be the gateway to heaven. It is also the foundation of Christian life. One cannot receive other sacraments

without first having received this basic sacrament. Unfortunately most of our Christian faithful are today baptized in their infancy. Hence, there is no possibility of conversion and believing before they are baptized. At the same time it is very true that baptism cannot be conferred upon any one who has no faith. How to remedy this paradoxical situation?

In the context of the practice of children baptism in the Church from time immemorial, the question whether infants should be baptized or not, or whether it should be postponed till the age of reason when they would be able to profess their faith and ask for baptism, is not a relevant one. The pastoral concern today should be how to continue this practice in a meaningful and fruitful way. That baptism cannot be conferred without faith is unquestionable truth. Hence the practice of children baptism presupposes the faith of the parents and godparents. But in practice, do our Christian faithful who ask baptism for their children have this faith? That most of our people are Christians only for name's sake is more or less a common fact. They may have a habit of faith, but for baptism to become meaningful, it should become an act of faith. That is, the parents and the godparents should here and now profess their faith. How to achieve it?

In the baptismal rite there is a question whether the parents are ready and willing to teach their children the commandments of God, and help their children grow in faith. But in most of our rural parishes our so-called faithful do not know the commandments of God, do not know to recite even the creedal formula. Then how is it possible for them to fulfill this undertaking? One cannot give what one does not possess. Such a situation calls for stimulation of the faith of the parents and godparents, and calls for preparation of parents for the baptism of their children. This would be possible only by restoration of catechumenate for children baptism. This

catechumenal period could be devised in each parish according to the situation and context of the Christian faithful. In urban settings it may be possible to conduct three to four sessions of preparation for the parents and godparents before baptism, in the evening hours. In rural areas where people are daily labourers, the parish priest should find a way out for this preparation. In some places, the team of liturgical committee or the members of the pious association can be sent to villages in the evening hours to collect the parents and godparents to give catechesis on baptism. In other places, it can be done just one or two hours before the baptism mass itself.

The parish in which I am pastor for the past four years, the following practice is carried out. It is a parish consisting predominantly of dalit Christians, about 99 percentage of the Christian population. Most of them are daily labourers in the agricultural field or in the coconut groves. After making number of attempts to gather the people one week before baptism, I have arrived at the following practice: On the first Sunday of every month baptism is conferred to the children during a special Mass. But before the Mass the parents and the godparents are prepared for the celebration. The preparation consists of four stages.

- In the first stage they are asked for what they have come. Very often their answer is that they have come to name their child. Some of them do not answer but keep quiet. On getting such inappropriate answer or no answer, I explain that they need not come to the Church only to give name to their child. They can enroll the name in the Government offices as soon as the child is born. The question in the baptismal rite “What name have you given to the child?” implies this possibility. Then they are told that on the occasion of baptism they are given Christian name. Hence, the question what name you would like to give to the child is asked.

The need and purpose of giving a Christian name, especially giving the name of a saint is explained.

- The second stage consists in catechetical explanation of baptism. As my parish is fully rural and most of the Christian faithful are from dalit agricultural community, they know almost nothing about baptism. Hence, the definition given in the catechism book is explained point by point, namely that baptism forgives both the original and actual sins and makes the child son or daughter of God and thereby he or she becomes a member of the Church. The meaning and implications of original sin and actual sins are explained. They are told that the child is affected only by the original sin and not by the actual sin as they have not reached the age of reasoning.

- The third stage is the most important one. They are told that the risen Lord Jesus Christ commanded the apostles to go to the whole world and preach the Good News and baptize only those who have heard the Word and accepted it in faith. Then I tell them that the child neither hears the Word nor could it accept or believe in it. Therefore a child cannot be baptized. If children baptism is in vogue in the Catholic Church, it is on the presumption that the parents and godparents supply this faith. However, the presumption cannot be fictitious one but actual. Most of the Catholics in my parish belong to the category of those who have lost the living sense of faith. That is, there is a kind of religious and moral indifferentism. Therefore, there is a need of creating a faith atmosphere.

Though the parents and godparents may have received the gift of faith, it is often dormant and it needs to be activated here and now to administer baptism to the children. Hence, they are asked to think of the baptismal vows given by their parents on

their behalf and ask themselves whether at any time of their life they had consciously made them their own. The duties of the parents and the godparents of inculcating into the minds of their children the faith that they had received at baptism and of enabling them to appropriate it and make it an actuality has to be explained to them.

- Finally after giving a running commentary of the baptismal rites, they are requested to make confession. A short preparation for making a good confession takes place and then they make their confessions. Then the Holy Mass starts. During the Holy Mass baptism is conferred to the children.

In this way baptism can be celebrated in a meaningful and fruitful way in our parishes. This is what is pastoral care in its fullest sense and is in a way a re-evangelization. The priests in India are invited to rethink on the way they administer the sacrament of baptism to children without due preparation.

### **Celebration of Confirmation**

The history of the sacrament of confirmation shows that it was part of Christian initiation in the early Church and it was conferred in one and the same celebration of Christian initiation. In this celebration deacon, priest and bishop - all the three were involved each performing rites proper to them. The present anointing after baptism was then done by the bishop. In course of time due to non-availability of the bishop at every celebration of Christian initiation and due to the increased number of children baptism along with adults, this anointing was postponed to a later period and in its place another anointing with different prayer was introduced. It was known as the post-baptismal anointing. Thus the so-called confirmation got separated from the rite of baptism on the one hand and on the other it was recommended to give First Holy

Communion to children when they attained the age of reason.<sup>13</sup> The order of the sacraments of Christian initiation, baptism, confirmation and Holy Communion lost their place and by and large they were conferred in the following order: baptism, Holy Communion and Confirmation. An artificial and an unfounded theology was developed and confirmation was called sacrament of maturity and commitment. Such practice was in vogue till Second Vatican Council and even now after the Council..

But the Second Vatican Council in the constitution on Divine Liturgy said: "The rite of Confirmation is to be revised also so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of the Christian initiation may more clearly appear" (SC, 71). In conformity with this recommendation the Order of Confirmation was prepared (September 13, 1971). According to this it is very clear that Confirmation has to be conferred after baptism and before Holy Communion (Cf. Introduction, nn, 1, 3, 11). "The adults and the children who are apt to receive religious instruction should be confirmed and receive Holy Communion when they are baptized" (n.11). Further it is stated that "in the Latin Church as far as the children are concerned, the Confirmation is postponed till the age of seven" (Introduction, n. 11). From this it is very clear that Confirmation is to be conferred before the Holy Communion. Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Constitution introducing the Order of Confirmation says that the participation in the divine nature obtained by the grace of Christ is similar to human birth, growth and nourishment of human life. Similarly, in baptism people are born to new life; by Confirmation they become confirmed in the new life and finally in Holy Communion they are nourished and protected.

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<sup>13</sup> The Lateran Council IV in 1215 recommended to give First Holy Communion to children at the age of six. Later Pius X in his Decree "*Quam Singulari*" (1910) made it a regular and common practice to administer Holy Communion to children when they reached the age of reason.

Through these sacraments of Christian initiation, the faithful grow in the divine life and march forward towards the fullness of love.<sup>14</sup>

It is unfortunate that in spite of these clear teachings on the restoration of the sacraments of Confirmation to its proper place, nothing has been done in Tamil Nadu. In this context what role can a priest play to make the celebration a meaningful one and how to prepare the people for the reception of it? First of all he must make attempts to restore Confirmation to its proper place. He has to invite the bishop on the occasion of First Holy Communion and get the children first confirmed and then receive the sacrament of Eucharist. The year of priests should be an opportunity for them to discuss this matter at the diocesan level and find a way out for restoring Confirmation to its proper place.

### **Celebration of Eucharist (Holy Mass)**

The year of priests should offer an opportunity to understand properly the centrality of the Eucharist, the source and summit of the entire Christian life to the faithful. "No Christian community can be built up unless it grows from and hinges on to the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist." (*PO*, n. 6; *SC*, nn. 2, 10).

"The Eucharist is also the object of the pastoral ministry. The faithful must participate in it if they are to draw fruit from it. While it is necessary to inculcate a 'worthy, careful and fruitful' preparation for the liturgy among the laity, it is also necessary to bring them to awareness that they are 'invited and led to offer

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<sup>14</sup> DIVINAE CONSORTIUM NATURE, quo homines per Christi gratiam donantur, similitudinem quandam prae se fert ortus vitae naturalis, ejus incrementi et alimonii. Etenim Baptismo renati fideles Confirmationis Sacramento roborantur ac tandem in Eucharistia cibo vitae aeternae vegetantur, ita ut hisce initiationis christianae Sacramentis thesaurus vitae divinae magis magisque percipiant atque ad perfectionem caritatis progrediantur (Apostolic Constitution of the Sacrament of Confirmation para 1).

themselves, their works and all creation with Christ. For this reason the Eucharist appears as the source and summit of all preaching of the Gospel'. From this truth many consequences follow for the pastoral ministry."<sup>15</sup> Formation of the faithful concerning the essence of the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar is vitally important, as is the need to encourage them to participate fruitfully in the Eucharist (*PO*, n. 5).

In order to grasp fully the meaning of Eucharist we need to understand the meaning of the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Jesus started his earthly life with an act of worship of the Father.<sup>16</sup> "*You did not want what the Law lays down as the things to be offered, that is: the sacrifice, the cereal offerings, the burnt offerings and the sacrifices for sin, and you took no pleasure in them; and then he says: Here I am coming to do your will... And this will was for us to be made holy by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ made once and for all.*" (Heb. 10:8-10). He lived all throughout his life in this act of total surrender to the Father, which reached its climax on Calvary when he said: "Into your hands I commend my spirit". Letter to the Hebrews describes this very beautifully: "During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, with loud cries and with tears, to the one who had the power to save him from death, and winning a hearing by his reverence, he learnt obedience... through his sufferings." (Heb. 5:7-9).

Accepting to be crucified on the Cross, Jesus offered himself as paschal sacrifice. He replaced the paschal lamb of the Old Testament and offered himself in sacrifice. Thus he himself was the priest and the victim. But his sacrifice on the Cross was not

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<sup>15</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest and the Third Millennium*, Ch.3, n.2.

<sup>16</sup> This section mainly taken from my book, *Leadership in Church*, Claretian Publications, Bangalore: (2008), pp.58-61.

terminated. If it had been terminated, it would not be possible for us today to celebrate it on the altar. In the very act of offering himself in sacrifice he leaped into eternity and thus continues his act of offering. He is the immolated lamb described in the book of Revelation. "Then I saw, in the middle of the throne with its four living creatures and the circle of the elders, a Lamb that seemed to have been sacrificed." (Rev. 5: 6). The words "this he did once and for all by offering himself" (Heb. 7:28) refers to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross, which continues forever in heaven.

Wishing to associate his disciples in the work of salvation, he decided to make available to his disciples his sacrifice on the Cross. So, on the eve of his death, he offered himself in anticipation through the symbol of bread and wine. The Last Supper was the sacramental celebration in anticipation of the sacrifice of the Cross.

Today the Eucharistic celebration is nothing but bringing down on earth the heavenly liturgy. In other words, our sacrificial celebration on the altar makes available in space and time the 'once and for all' sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When we celebrate the Eucharist daily, we temporalize the eternalized sacrifice of Jesus Christ. How is it possible? Can we make Jesus to suffer and die once more or many times, since so many Eucharistic celebrations take place in the world every day? The celebration of Christ's heavenly sacrifice on the altar today is possible precisely because he had celebrated at his last Supper his sufferings and death in a sacramental way. Had he not done this, today it would not be possible to celebrate the Eucharist on the altar.

*But today Jesus Christ depends upon the Church for offering himself on the altar to his heavenly Father. In other words, without the action of the Church, that is, without the action of the priest and the faithful, Eucharistic celebration cannot take place on the altar. The community has to bring the*

bread and wine to be offered and priest needs to officiate on behalf of the people and offer what they have brought to the Father in the name of Jesus Christ. The priest is acting in a twofold way: He is offering the gifts on behalf of the people; and once they have been transformed into the body and blood of Christ, he offers them in the person of Christ. The paschal spirituality of the priest is founded on this twofold action. Hence, it is the duty of the priest to prepare the faithful and himself for this action. How can he do this?

Every one has to enter into the spirit of paschal mystery. Bread is made out of wheat. The wheat has to be ground, made into paste and then given a shape of bread (host). In this process perfectly occur the paschal mystery – the death and resurrection. The wheat has to loose its form (death) to be converted into bread (resurrection). Wheat is the fruit of the hard work and sweat of man (farmer) wherein lie the suffering, death and resurrection dimensions of the paschal mystery. That is why when the bread is offered on the altar, the priest says:

Blessed are you, Lord, God of creation.

Through your goodness we have this bread to offer,  
which earth has given and human hands have made.

It will become the bread of Life.

Similarly wine is prepared from grapes, which are squeezed, and their juice is processed and made into wine. Again in this process occur perfectly the paschal mystery – the death and resurrection. The grapes have to loose their shape (death) to become juice and then wine (resurrection). Behind the grapes lie the human labour and hard work, which are symbol of suffering and death. This dimension of the paschal mystery is beautifully expressed in the prayer that is said while offering the wine:

Blessed are you, Lord, God of creation.

Through your goodness we have this wine to offer,  
fruit of the vine and work of human hands.

It will become our spiritual drink.

The priest has to instruct the people about the deeper meaning of their bringing the bread and wine in offertory procession. If they have not really lived the paschal mystery in their lives, the act of bringing bread and wine to the altar has no meaning. Though they might not have involved in the production of bread and wine, they have their own share in the reality of the symbols. Whatever the type of work they do, whether it be in the field, or in the factory, or in the office or in schools, the fulfillment of their work implies efforts, hard labour, attention, tension, fatigue, sometimes exploitation and so on. The bread and wine they bring symbolize all these. The priest must teach them the significance of the offerings they bring and make them realize that without their share being symbolized in the bread and wine, they have not really participated in the Eucharistic sacrifice. They must be taught to ask themselves: "*What is that today that I have brought to offer to God?*"

In the same way the priest who receives the offerings of the faithful and offers them to God, supplicating him to accept and transform them into the body and blood of Christ, needs to associate himself with the faithful in bringing his life offerings. Though he may not be directly involved in bringing the material offerings, he can add to them his personal offerings like tension and fatigue that he experiences while carrying out the pastoral ministry, the conflicts, misunderstandings with the people and with his superiors, failures and success, and even his sins. This is how the priest can live the paschal mystery to the full in his daily life. This is also how he

makes meaningful for him and for the people the celebration of the holy Mass. "Celebrating the Eucharist well is an important form of primary catechesis on the Holy Sacrifice."<sup>17</sup>

### **Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

"In a world in which the sense of sin has declined, it is most necessary to insist that lack of love for God obscures our perception of the reality of sin and evil."<sup>18</sup> It is very true that more and more our Christian faithful do not go to confession for the reason mentioned above. But it is also equally true that priests seem to lose faith in this sacrament. I know number of cases of priests who make their confession just once a year at the time of annual retreat. Naturally one cannot expect such priests to persuade their flock to frequent the sacrament of reconciliation. Very often priests do not like to sit in the confessional. Naturally people also excuse themselves, because the priests are not available to hear their confession. It is a tragic part of the present day story. This service to the people will be more easily accomplished when priests themselves are the first to approach the Sacrament of Confession. The priests need to read once again the life of St. John Mary Vianney whose hundred and fiftieth year we now celebrate. He is said to have sat at the confessional 14 hours per day and converted the whole of Ars. Even people from far and wide were coming to him to make their confession. Fixed times during which the priest is available in the confessional are warmly to be encouraged.

Children need to be catechized properly at the time of First Communion so that at least 25% of what was taught remains when they become adults. Otherwise in rural areas confession for the

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<sup>17</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests, Tota Ecclesia*, no. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest and the Third Millennium*, Ch.3, n.3, p. 29.

people means nothing but muttering some sins without even being conscious of what exactly they committed or omitted. "New evangelization calls for renewed efforts to bring the faithful to the sacrament of Penance."<sup>19</sup> This is how a priest can be an effective minister of this sacrament. "This pastoral task is absolutely indispensable... We should never fail to encourage and promote the sacrament... This should bring the faithful to that conversion which leads to sincere and contrite recognition of those moral flaws or deficiencies found in everyone's daily life."<sup>20</sup>

In the same way priests have to prepare for the other sacraments and celebrate them in such a way that the recipients of the sacraments get fully what every sacrament gives.

## **Conclusion**

The Holy Father in his letter to clergy for the year for Priests says this: "This year (is) meant to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful incisive witness to the Gospel in today's world." Hence, every priest is expected to introspect over the number of years he has been priest on his life and ministry. Only by doing so, can he achieve the interior renewal and commitment.

By his total commitment to his mission he can avoid the scandal of moral problems. Both the press and electronic Indian media have not yet widely publicized so far the moral scandals of Catholic priests in India. But it does not mean that in India such problems do not exist. May be the victims of such acts do not have the courage to bring it to the fore out of shame and fear. Before it is too late, the priests should take all measures to avoid such pitfalls and the superiors should exercise pastoral prudence to avert the acts of infidelity of their priests.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

Priests should develop a deep devotion to the passion of Jesus Christ. It is deep personal identification with the sacrifice of the Cross that led St. John Mary Vianney to the confessional. *Nemo dat quod non habet.* - 'One cannot give what he does not possess' is a Latin adage. So also, only when a priest is in close intimacy with the crucified Lord, can he be effective witness to his people. Hence, spirituality of the paschal mystery is a must for every priest. The Pope says in the same letter: "In Jesus, person and mission tend to coincide: all Christ's saving activity was, and is, an expression of His 'filial consciousness' which from all eternity stands before the Father in an attitude of loving submission to His will. In a humble yet genuine way, every priest must aim for a similar identification. Certainly this is not to forget that the efficacy of the ministry is independent of the holiness of the minister; but neither can we overlook the extraordinary fruitfulness of the encounter between the ministry's objective holiness and the subjective holiness of the minister. The Curé of Ars immediately set about this patient and humble task of harmonizing his life as a minister with the holiness of the ministry he had received, by deciding to 'live', physically, in his parish Church." From this it is clear that the intimacy with the Lord Jesus brings effectiveness to the ministry.

As a minister of sacraments, he has to ask himself whether he has been performing them with due preparation and catechesis of the people or whether he simply performed some rites when asked for. Preparation for the sacraments implies the ministry of the word which is carried out by evangelization, catechesis, preaching and explanation of the faith. If he properly administers the sacraments, people profit by receiving them and thus he realizes the pastoral ministry of building the community. Then only will he be an effective minister of the sacraments.