

Catholic Church. Congregatio pro
Doctrina Fidei.
Letter to --- ADT 7462

**LETTER TO THE
BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON
CERTAIN QUESTIONS
CONCERNING THE MINISTER OF THE
EUCCHARIST**

Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Vatican City 1983

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I - INTRODUCTION

1. In teaching that the priestly or hierarchical ministry differs essentially and not only in degree from the common priesthood of the faithful, the Second Vatican Council expressed the certainty of faith that only Bishops and Priests can confect the Eucharistic mystery. Although all the faithful indeed share in the one and the same priesthood of Christ and participate in the offering of the Eucharist, it is only the ministerial priest who, in virtue of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, can confect the Eucharistic sacrifice in the person of Christ and offer it in the name of all Christian people.¹

2. In recent years, however, certain opinions have come to be promulgated, and at times translated into practice, which deny the above teaching and consequently cause harm to the innermost life of the Church. Such opinions which are widespread in various forms and with different lines of argument have begun to attract some of the faithful themselves, either because they claim to be

¹ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 10, 17, 26, 28; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7; *Christus Dominus*, n. 15; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nn. 2, 3. Cf. also PAUL VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, Sept. 3, 1965: AAS 57 (1965) 761.

based on a scholarly foundation, or because they are presented as responding to the needs of the pastoral care and sacramental life of Christian communities.

3. That is why this Sacred Congregation, prompted by a desire to offer its particular services to the Bishops in a true collegial spirit, wishes to restate here some of the essential points of the Church's doctrine on the minister of the Eucharist, transmitted by her living Tradition and expressed in previous documents of the Magisterium.² The Congregation takes full account of the integral vision of the priestly ministry as presented by the Second Vatican Council, but in the present situation it considers it a matter of urgency to make clear the essential role of the priest.

II - ERRONEOUS OPINIONS

1. The promoters of these new opinions maintain that every Christian community, from the very fact that it is united in the name of Christ and thus enjoys his undivided presence (cf. *Mt* 18:20), is endowed with all the powers which the Lord wished to give to his Church.

It is asserted, moreover, that the Church is apostolic in the sense that all those who have been washed in Baptism and incorporated into her, having been made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ, are also truly successors of the Apostles. From the fact that the whole Church was prefigured

² Cf. Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, Nov. 20, 1947: AAS 39 (1947) 553; PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Quinque iam anni*, Dec. 8, 1970: AAS (1971) 99; Document of the Synod of Bishops in 1971: *De sacerdotio ministeriali*: Part One: AAS 63 (1971) 903-908; SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, June 24, 1973, n. 6: AAS 65 (1973) 405-407; Declaration *De duobus operibus Professoris Joannis Küng*, Feb. 15, 1975: AAS 67 (1975) 204; Declaration *Inter Insigniores*, Oct. 15, 1976, n. V: AAS 69 (1977) 108-113; JOHN PAUL II, Letter *Novo incipiente nostro*, to all the priests of the Church, Apr. 8, 1979, nn. 2-4: AAS 71 (1979) 395-400; Letter *Dominicae Cenaе*, to all the Bishops of the Church, Feb. 24, 1980, nn. I-II: : AAS 72 (1980) 115-134.

in the Apostles it would then follow that the words of institution of the Eucharist addressed to them were intended for everyone.

2. As a consequence, although necessary for the good ordering of the Church, the ministry of Bishops and Priests would not differ from the common priesthood of the faithful with respect to the participation in the priesthood of Christ in the strict sense, but only insofar as its exercise is concerned. The so-called role of moderating the community—including also that of preaching and presiding at the Eucharist—would, therefore, be only a simple mandate conferred for the orderly functioning of the community itself, but it ought not to be “sacralized”. The call to such a ministry would not amount to a new “priestly” capacity—strictly speaking—and for that reason the term “priesthood” is generally avoided—nor would it impart any character with ontological significance for the state of the ministers, but would simply give expression before the community that the original power conferred in the sacrament of Baptism had become effective.

3. In virtue of the apostolicity of the single local communities, in which Christ would be no less present than in an episcopal structure, each community, no matter how small, in the event of its being deprived for some time of such a constituent element as the Eucharist, could “re-appropriate” its original powers. Also it would have the right of designating its own president and animator and conferring on him all the necessary faculties for leading the community itself, including that of presiding at and consecrating the Eucharist. It is moreover asserted that God himself would not refuse, in such circumstances, to grant, even without a sacramental rite, the power he normally gives through sacramental ordination.

Such is the conclusion also reached by the fact that the celebration of the Eucharist is often understood simply as the action of the local community, which is gathered together to commemorate in the breaking of bread the Last Supper of the

Lord. It would therefore be more a fraternal celebration in which the community comes together and gives expression to its identity, than the sacramental renewal of the Sacrifice of Christ, whose saving power extends to everyone, be they present or absent, living or dead.

4. Ironically, erroneous opinions regarding the necessity of ordained ministers for the celebration of the Eucharist have even led some to place less and less value upon the sacraments of Orders and the Eucharist in their catechesis.

III - THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

1. Although they may be expressed in various ways with different nuances, all these opinions lead to the same conclusion: that the power to confect the sacrament of the Eucharist is not necessarily connected with sacramental ordination. It is evident that such a conclusion is absolutely incompatible with the faith as it has been handed down, since not only does it deny the power conferred on priests but it undermines the entire apostolic structure of the Church and distorts the sacramental economy of salvation itself.

2. According to the teaching of the Church, the word of the Lord and the divine life which he has given to us have been destined from the very beginning to be lived and shared in a single body, which the Lord builds up for himself throughout the ages. This body, which is the Church of Christ, is continually endowed with the gifts of ministries by him "from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God" (*Col 2:19*).³

³ Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 7, 18, 19, 20; *Christus Dominus*, nn. 1, 3; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* n. 2.

This structure of ministries finds clear expression in Sacred Tradition in the powers entrusted to the Apostles and their successors: to sanctify, to teach and to govern in the name of Christ. The apostolicity of the Church does not mean that all believers are Apostles,⁴ not even in a collective sense, and no community has the power to confer apostolic ministry which is essentially bestowed by the Lord himself. Therefore when the Church in her creeds calls herself apostolic, she expresses, besides the doctrinal identity of her teaching with that of the Apostles, the reality of the continuation of the work of the Apostles by means of the structure of succession in virtue of which the apostolic mission is to endure until the end of time.⁵

This apostolic succession which constitutes the entire Church as apostolic is part of the living tradition which has been for the Church from the beginning, and continues to be, her particular form of life. And so, those who cite isolated texts of Scripture in opposition to this living tradition, in trying to justify new structures, have strayed from the truth.

3. The Catholic Church, which has developed through the ages and continues to grow by the life given to her by the Lord through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, has always maintained her apostolic structure, faithful to the tradition of the Apostles which lives and endures in her.

When she imposes hands on those to be ordained and invokes upon them the Holy Spirit, she is conscious of handing on the power of the Lord who makes the Bishops, as successors of the Apostles, partakers in a special way of his threefold priestly, prophetic and royal mission. In turn, the Bishops impart, in varying degrees, the office of their ministry to various persons in the Church.⁶

⁴ COUNCIL OF TRENT, *Doctrina de sacramento ordinis*, Chap. 4: DS 1767.

⁵ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 20.

⁶ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 28.

And so, even though all the baptized enjoy the same dignity before God, in the Christian community, which was deliberately structured hierarchically by its Divine Founder, there have existed from its earliest days specific apostolic powers deriving from the sacrament of Holy Orders.

4. Included among these powers which Christ entrusted exclusively to the Apostles and their successors is the power of confecting the Eucharist. To the Bishops alone, and to the Priests they have made sharers in their ministry which they themselves have received, is reserved the power of renewing in the mystery of the Eucharist what Christ did at the Last Supper.⁷

In order that they may be able to carry out their work, especially a work so important as confecting the Eucharistic mystery, our Lord marks out in a spiritual manner those whom he calls to the Episcopate and to the Priesthood. He does this with a special sign through the sacrament of Orders, a sign also called a "character" in solemn documents of the Church's Magisterium.⁸ In this way, he so configures them to himself that, when they pronounce the words of consecration, they do not act on a mandate from the community but "*in persona Christi*", which means more than just 'in the name of Christ' or 'in the place of Christ' since the celebrant, by reason of this special sacrament, identifies himself with the Eternal High Priest, who is both author and principal agent of his own sacrifice in which truly no one can take his place".⁹ Since it is of the very nature of the Church that the power to consecrate the Eucharist is imparted only to the Bishops and Priests who are constituted its ministers by the reception of Holy Orders, the Church holds that the Eucharistic mystery cannot

⁷ This is confirmed in the established usage of the Church in calling Bishops and Presbyters *priests* of sacred worship, especially since in them alone has the power to confect the Eucharistic mystery been recognized.

⁸ Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 21; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 2.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Letter *Dominicae Cenaе*, n. 8: AAS 72 (1980) 128-129.

be celebrated in any community except by an ordained Priest, as expressly taught by the Fourth Lateran Council.¹⁰

Individual faithful or communities who, because of persecution or lack of Priests, are deprived of the Holy Eucharist for either a short or longer period of time, do not thereby lack the grace of the Redeemer. If they are intimately animated by a desire for the sacrament and united in prayer with the whole Church, and call upon the Lord and raise their hearts to him, by virtue of the Holy Spirit they live in communion with the whole Church, the living body of Christ, and with the Lord himself. Through their desire for the sacrament in union with the Church, no matter how distant they may be physically, they are intimately and really united to her and therefore receive the fruits of the sacrament; whereas those who would wrongly attempt to take upon themselves the right to confect the Eucharistic mystery end up by having their community closed in on itself.¹¹

None of this derogates from the responsibility of Bishops and Priests and all members of the Church to pray that "the Lord of the harvest" will send workers according to the needs of the people and the times (cf. *Mt* 9:37 ff.), and to work with all their energy to make the Lord's call to the priestly ministry heard and welcomed, with humble and generous heart.

¹⁰ LATERAN COUNCIL IV, Const. de Fide catholica *Firmiter credimus*: "Una vero est fidelium universalis Ecclesia, extra quam nullus omnino salvatur, in qua idem ipse sacerdos est sacrificium Iesus Christus, cuius corpus et sanguis in sacramento altaris sub speciebus panis et vini veraciter continentur, transsubstantiatis pane in corpus et vino in sanguinem potestate divina: ut ad perficiendum mysterium unitatis accipiamus ipsi de suo, quod accepit ipse de nostro. Et hoc utique sacramentum nemo potest conficere, nisi sacerdos, qui rite fuerit ordinatus, secundum claves Ecclesiae, quas ipse concessit Apostolis eorumque successoribus Iesus Christus" (DS 802).

¹¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Letter *Novo incipiente nostro*, n. 10: AAS 71 (1979) 411-415. Concerning the value of the desire for the sacrament, cf. COUNCIL OF TRENT, Decree *De iustificatione*, chap. 4: DS 1524; Decree *De Sacramentis*, can. 4: DS 1604; VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 14; HOLY OFFICE, *Letter to the Archbishop of Boston*, Aug. 8, 1949: DS 3870, 3872.

IV - CALL TO VIGILANCE

In recalling these points to the attention of the Pastors of the Church, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith desires to assist them in the ministry of feeding the flock of the Lord with the food of Truth, of safeguarding the deposit of Faith and of keeping intact the unity of the Church. It is necessary to be strong in faith and to resist error even when it masquerades as piety, so that by professing truth in love, we may embrace in the love of the Lord those who have strayed (cf. *Eph* 4:15).

Catholics who attempt to celebrate the Eucharist outside the sacred bond of apostolic succession established by the sacrament of Orders exclude themselves from participating in the unity of the single body of the Lord: they neither nourish nor build up the community, they tear it apart.

Therefore it is the responsibility of the Bishops to see to it that the erroneous opinions mentioned above do not continue to be spread either in catechetics or in the teaching of theology and, above all, to see to it that such theories are not put into practice. Whenever cases of this sort are discovered, it is their sacred responsibility to denounce them as completely foreign to the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice and offensive to the community of the Church. If they should find that some catechists are even minimizing the central importance for the Church of the sacraments of Holy Orders and the Eucharist, they should likewise do all they can to correct so distorted a teaching. For in fact it is to us that these words were addressed: "Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching ... always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry" (*2 Tim* 4:2-5).

In these circumstances, therefore, let this collegial concern find such a concrete application that the undivided Church, even in the variety of local Churches working together,¹² may keep

¹² Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23.

safe what was entrusted to her by God through the Apostles. Fidelity to the will of Christ and the Christian dignity itself require that the faith handed down remain the same so that it may bring peace to all believers (cf. *Rm* 15:13).

The Supreme Pontiff, John Paul II, in an audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect, gave his approval to this letter, drawn up in the ordinary session of this Sacred Congregation, and ordered its publication.

At Rome, from the offices of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 6 August 1983, Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

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Publication No. 899
Office of Publishing Services
United States Catholic Conference
1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005