The Catholic Priesthood

A New Testament Reflection

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The author, a renowned Johannine scholar, looks at today’s Catholic priesthood through the lens of the Eucharist as this great mystery is presented in the New Testament. His conclusion invites readers to see the Eucharist not simply as cultic action but as a commitment to a sacrificial way of life, and to regard those ordained not as a privileged caste but as those designated to embody this way of life as one given for the sake of others.

A New Testament reflection upon the Catholic priesthood must face complex historical and hermeneutical problems. At the heart of these problems lies the fact that the New Testament authors’ response to the experience of Jesus, his teaching, his death, his resurrection does not directly consider “the Catholic priesthood.” For many, the absence of any reference to the institutionalized priesthood in the New Testament suggests that we Catholics should look elsewhere for the christological and ecclesiological inspiration for our Priesthood. Associating myself with Raymond E. Brown’s seminal work Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections, published thirty-four years ago, I ask what he asked as he embarked on that study: “[G]ranted the existence of these institutions, what light do the Scriptures cast upon what should be expected of them by both Catholics and non-Catholics?” (4).

An author writing on the Catholic priesthood in 2004 must face issues that Brown had no call to consider. Brown’s study, written some thirty years ago, recalls the conflicts that surrounded the search for the identity of the Catholic

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priesthood at that time. The priesthood had to be understood within the context of the radically new vision of the Church, the liturgy, the presence of the Church in the world, its relationship to the other great religions, and the unprecedented teaching on religious freedom that emerged from the Second Vatican Council. There are new problems facing the contemporary priesthood. Young people manifest little interest in the priestly life. This problem is partially balanced by a greater interest from older men who come into priestly formation as a “second career.” Generally (although not always), candidates apply to seminaries after some form of religious experience, or sense of conversion. More recently, priests find themselves serving within a community that has lost the high moral ground it once occupied, a necessary consequence of the numerous sex-scandals that have emerged across all the churches in the Western World. In the U.S.A. the passionate pursuit of a small number of errant priests, and the cover-up tactics of American bishops, driven by the legal profession and the media world, have raised this issue to a level that places all priests “under a shadow.”

An Historical Perspective on the Priesthood

The Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds and cultures that provided the categories, languages, socio-cultural, religious, and political background for earliest Christianity, were familiar with the figure and function of the priest. Israelite religion had a long tradition of priesthood, members of the tribe of Levi who served in the Jerusalem Temple. They were set apart from the people at large, performed cultic functions, acting as intermediaries between God and the people, financially supported by Temple taxes. These functions have been described in Deuteronomy 33:8-10: consult the Urim and Thummim, i.e., sacred lots that had been cast in order to discover God’s response to major questions, teaching, and offering cultic sacrifices. It is more difficult to describe the role and identity of the priests who served the various Greco-Roman religious and cultic traditions. The many mainstream Greek religions had been taken over by the Romans. Rome also developed its own cultic practices. As a result of the campaigns of Alexander the Great and the steady hellenization of the Mediterranean world, eastern religions were gradually influencing mainstream Greco-Roman religions. However, across the widespread and varied search for the divine, there were many “priests” who played an intermediary and representative role between non-priestly members and the divine. The Greek term used to describe these figures, both Jewish and Greco-Roman, was hieréus. The Latin word was sacerdos.

Despite the widespread presence of “priests” in the first century, there is no figure in the New Testament, apart from Jesus Christ, who is described as a priest (hieréus). Even the New Testament’s notion of the priesthood of Jesus Christ must be understood within its literary and historical context. In the Epistle to the
Hebrews, the author compares the priestly action of Jesus, whose death and resurrection led to his entry into heaven, with the action of the Jewish High Priest who went into the Holy of Holies of the Temple once a year to make a blood offering for himself and for the sins of the people (Heb 9:6-7). This makes the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus (see Heb 10:12-14) a priestly act that surpasses the cultic priestly actions of the Jewish High Priest, repeated year by year. New Testament scholars agree that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written after the Jewish War of 66–70 C.E. and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. As both Jews and Christians struggled to work out their identities in the confusion that this loss produced for both religious traditions, Christians readily pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment and perfection of all that had been merely a sign and a shadow of God’s design in the Jewish Institutions (see especially John 5:1–10:39 and the commentary in Moloney, 1996, 1–153).

This epistle is an important contribution to early Christian thought. But it is the only reference in the New Testament to any individual as a “priest” (apart from references to the Jewish priests), and it is associated with Jesus. It appears in a late document that established the superiority of the mediation between God and humankind through Jesus Christ (see Heb 1:1-2) over the mediation effected by the Jewish High Priest (Heb 9:6-22). The earliest literature that we have from the emerging Christian Church provides no evidence of any individual who functioned as a “priest,” a person set apart by God to preside over the cult of the Christian community, or to act as an intermediary between God and the believers (a hiereus).

However, in the authentic Pauline Letters, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pastorals (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, widely accepted as continuing the Pauline tradition, but written some time after the death of Paul), and the Catholic Epistles (the Letter of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude), one finds reference to overseers, elders, and deacons (Greek: episcopoi, presbyteroi, and diakonoi, respectively). These expressions are sometimes translated as “bishop, priest, and deacon.” It is suggested that we find already in Paul, who was martyred in the mid 60s of the first century, the first indications of the three-tiered sacerdotal hierarchical “order” that became central to the Catholic Church’s later hierarchical structure of its priesthood and its priestly ministry to the community. The

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use of these expressions (see Phil 1:1; Acts 6:1-6; 14:23; 20:17; 20:28; 1 Tim 3:1-7; 5:17-19; Titus 1:5; 7-11; 2 John 1; 3 John 1) indicates an emerging sense of a hierarchy. But no one figure acts as a hiereus, like the priests of the Jewish and the Greco-Roman religions.

A careful reading of these passages indicates that these “offices” within early Christian communities are not associated with a cultic ministry. They are never associated with the celebration of the Eucharist, and are almost always described or instructed in a way that suggests they were the senior administrators of a single community. In the Johannine Letters, there may have been several communities involved, but the Johannine “elder” (2 John 1; 3 John 1: Greek: presbyteros) is above all a teacher, attempting to protect fragile early Christians from understandings of God, Jesus, and the Christian life that he regarded as erroneous. The early use of “bishop and elder” probably had its roots in the Jewish practice, witnessed to in both the synagogue and at Qumran, of supervising or “overseeing” (the meaning of the Greek noun ho episkopos means “the overseer”) the life of the community. The diaconal role was to see to the practical needs of members of the community, especially the poorer members, or those most likely to be neglected. As a priestly ministry emerged in the second century, the performance of hieratic (priestly in the sense of performed by a hiereus) ministry was different from the picture one receives of the activities of the overseers, elders, and deacons described in the New Testament. It is fair to say that a hierarchical structure appears very early in the reflection of the earliest Church. It is beyond the scope of this reflection to take this further, and the figure of Peter is a key to an understanding of this hierarchical structure. However, while there may have been some sense of hierarchy, there does not appear to be any hiereus (“priest”) in the early Church.

On the other hand, there is strong literary evidence for gatherings of early Christian communities to celebrate the Lord's Supper. The three Synoptic Gospels report a final meal, shared by Jesus and the disciples, during which Jesus takes elements from a traditional ritual meal (and possibly a Passover Meal), bread and wine. Instead of looking back to the past to explain the significance of the elements (the bread as a memory of the manna in the desert and the wine as a memory of the opening of the Red Sea), Jesus points forward to his death: the bread is his broken body and the wine is his spilt blood “for” others. All the
records of this meal indicate, by means of the preposition “for/the sake of” (Greek: hyper) that this death is in some way “for others.” This is not only the case for the three Synoptic Gospels (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28; Luke 22:19), but it is also found in words that probably reflect the Johannine Eucharistic tradition (John 6:51c), and the tradition found in Paul (see 1 Cor 11:24; see also Luke 22:19). There are accounts of such meals celebrated in the Jerusalem church in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles (see Acts 2:42-47; 20:7-11; 27:33-36), but these reports were written by Luke some time in the 80s of the first century and reflect an idealized portrait of the Jerusalem community. The situation Paul addresses in Corinth, while not very flattering, is the earliest written evidence we have of the practice of celebrating the Eucharist. It was written some time in the early 50s of the first century, some twenty years after the death of Jesus, and already at that early stage is regarded by Paul as a Jesus tradition: “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread . . .” (1 Cor 11:23).

Unlike the Gospels, where the report of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples is set within a broader narrative of his life, death, and resurrection, Paul’s only reference to Jesus’ words on that night is: “This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24) and “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (11:25). As well as these explicit “meal contexts,” during which Jesus shares bread and wine with his disciples, there are other scenes in the Gospel traditions that reflect a Eucharistic background. Not all scholars agree, but the multiplication of the loaves and fishes in the Synoptic (Mark 6:31-44; 8:1-9; Matt 14:13-21; 15:32-39; Luke 9:10-17) and the Johannine (John 1:1-15) traditions, as well as Jesus’ gift of the morsel to the disciples, including Judas, in John 13:21-30, reflect the early Church’s easy use of language and symbolism that came from a practice central to their emerging uniqueness: the celebration of the eucharistic meal. Whether or not this early Christian cultic practice had its origins in the life of Jesus, and I suggest that it did, the various forms of Christianity that produced the New Testament took the celebration of the Lord’s Supper for granted.

There is no evidence for a specifically Christian priesthood in the New Testament, but the New Testament communities celebrated the Eucharist. This leads to a final, and crucial, historical note. As long as the Jerusalem Temple and its priesthood existed, Judaism and Christianity lived side by side, no doubt with their difficulties, but the priesthood was linked with the religion of Israel and the cultic practices of the Jerusalem Temple. Once this situation changed with the destruction of the Temple and the disappearance of the priesthood, early Christians necessarily developed an awareness of their uniqueness, as did the Jews of the post-War period (post 70 C.E.). As the latter group turned more and more to the centrality of Torah in their life, given that they could no longer offer cultic sacrifice in the Temple, the former group began to focus upon the Eucharist.
“as an unbloody sacrifice replacing bloody sacrifices no longer offered in the now-destroyed Temple” (Brown, 19).

This developing understanding of the Eucharist can be traced in Christian literature from the second century. The author of the Didache instructs Christians: “Assemble on the Lord’s Day, breaking bread and celebrating the Eucharist; but first confess your sins that your sacrifice (Greek: thusia) may be a pure one . . . for it was of this that the Lord spoke. ‘Everywhere and always offer me a pure sacrifice’” (Mal 1:10-11). As well as speaking of the Eucharist in sacrificial terms, Didache 13:3 says that the charismatic prophets are the Christian “high priests.” This is possibly the earliest indication we have of a link between designated individuals and the celebration of the Eucharist (see also Didache 10:7). About the same time, writing from Rome to Corinth, Clement draws a parallel between the now defunct Old Testament structure of high priest, priest, and levite. A contrast is drawn between the Christian sacrificial practice of the celebration of Eucharist and the rejected cultic practices of the Jerusalem Temple (1 Clement 40). Once the celebration of the Eucharist is seen as the central sacrificial cult of the Christian religion, the emergence of a notion of a Christian priesthood followed. At the turn of the second and third centuries, Tertullian (De Baptismo 17) can speak of the bishop as the “high priest” (summus sacerdos) and Hippolytus of Rome can refer to the “high priestly spirit” of the bishop (Apostolic Tradition 3.5).

Over the centuries the Roman Catholic tradition has looked back to the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper as the moment when Jesus “constituted” the Twelve Apostles “priests of the New Testament” (see Catechism of the Catholic Church #1337, with reference to the Council of Trent). There is no literary or historical evidence for this tradition. Many have struggled to trace ordination behind the words of Jesus in John 17:19: “And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth.” A close reading of John 17 makes this interpretation most unlikely, but even if there were a hint of priesthood in these words, it reflects the situation of a post-War Christian community pondering its uniqueness over emerging post-War Judaism (Moloney, 1998, 116–18). Both communities struggled to cope with the loss of land, Temple, and priesthood. The Catholic tradition has caught the symbolic importance of the relationship between the Eucharist and the priesthood. However a historical link between the Last Supper and priestly
ordination is unlikely. Often Christians, and Christian leadership, find it difficult to accept that central Christian beliefs and practices did not have their origins in the life and teaching of the historical Jesus. Such difficulties are unrealistic—not even Jesus could imagine and establish everything in three brief years!—and reflect an unwillingness to accept the ongoing presence of the Spirit guiding, teaching, and enlightening the Church in an ever-unfolding understanding of God, the Christ, and itself: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12-13). “And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt 28:20). What follows will look through the lens of the Eucharist in the New Testament, to reflect upon the Catholic priesthood.

**A Eucharistic Priesthood?**

I use the question mark in the sub-title above deliberately. The Catholic priesthood, because of its age-old association with the celebration of the Mass, has emerged as a special caste of distinct and much-respected men. This has led to the gradual adoption of distinctive forms of dress, the practice of celibacy, administration of the sacraments (with the exception of baptism and marriage), and a strong association with the hierarchy and governance of the Catholic community. The priesthood has developed into a unique socio-cultural phenomenon. Priests are men, set apart, supported financially by their communities, privileged and powerful intermediaries between human beings and God, between bishops and people, authoritative counselors in matters that run from political decisions to sexual morality. They have become the unique dispensers of the graces that flow from the Church’s sacramental life and the bearers of authoritative teaching. This socially and culturally elite group of men, so long accepted and respected in the Catholic Church and beyond, has fallen upon hard times. A New Testament reflection on the Catholic priesthood, looking back to the presentation of the Eucharist in the New Testament as its source, suggests an alternative paradigm.

The earliest Christian witness to the practice of the Lord’s Supper is found in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Throughout 1 Corinthians Paul addresses problems which have arisen in the community at Corinth. In Paul’s discussion of the Corinthians’ problematic celebration of the Lord’s Supper, he first attacks the nature of their abuse of the eucharistic table in 11:17-22. He then reports his tradition of the eucharistic words (vv. 23-26). More theological conclusions and recommendations close his treatment (vv. 27-34). In vv. 27-28 Paul warns against eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord in an “unworthy manner,” drawing conclusions from the abuses he described in verses 17-22. “I hear that there are divisions among you” (v. 18). These divisions are described as follows: “In eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk.
What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the Church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No I shall not!” (vv. 21-22).

The Lord’s Supper was supposed to be a common meal, but Paul has heard that this has become impossible at Corinth because such divisions between the wealthy and the poor have arisen that no one was concerned about the other. It would be better for the Corinthians to eat in their own houses, rather than pretend a unity in their eucharistic celebration which their behavior belies. In addition to humiliating “those who have nothing,” they show they hold true community in contempt. This is the “unworthy manner” of participating in the Eucharist chastised by Paul in verse 27, and the reason for the request that a person should “examine himself” expressed in verse 28.

Within this context of instruction and warning, Paul inserts his tradition of the eucharistic words of Jesus (vv. 23-26). They are highlighted by the command, repeated over both the bread and the wine, to perform the action of breaking the bread and sharing the cup “in remembrance of me” (vv. 24 and 25). While this twice repeated command may have its origins in the earliest liturgies, it is also a challenge to an appreciation of the eucharistic nature of the Christian life. To celebrate Eucharist is to commit oneself to a discipleship which “remembers” Jesus—not only in the breaking of the ritual bread and sharing the ritual cup—but also in “imitation” of Jesus, in the ongoing breaking of one’s own body and spilling of one’s own blood “in remembrance” of Jesus. For this reason, Paul adds: “You proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (v. 26). It is in the broken body and the spilt blood of a Church of disciples who live the Eucharist which they celebrate that the Lord’s death is proclaimed in the world, until he comes again.

Paul’s call for unity in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 is a summons motivated by the need for the Corinthian community “to remember,” to practice at the level of life what they proclaim at the level of ritual (vv. 23-26). To continue in their present practice would be to eat the bread and drink the cup “unworthily” (v. 27). Thus they must examine themselves carefully on these issues before approaching the eucharistic meal (v. 28). In verse 29 Paul warns the Corinthians: “Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.” Not to discern the body is to fail to recognize the Lord’s presence in the Eucharist in the sense of the Lord who died for us (see v. 24: “This is my body which is for [hyper] you”). But “body” also means the context of the community.
Ignoring the “body” of Christ, present in the “body” of the community in their eucharistic meals, the Corinthians proclaim the presence of the Lord in a lie that offends against the “rhythm” of the offering of Christ which they claim to be “remembering” in their celebration. Christians are called to repeat the self-gift of Christ in his memory both in cult and in life. Not to celebrate Eucharist in this way is to “eat and drink judgment” upon oneself (v. 29). Not recognizing the sacrificed “body” of Jesus in the Eucharist, they offend against the “body” which is the Church, called to repeat that sacrifice in its own life.

The Gospels, written decades after Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (Mark: c. 70; Matthew and Luke: c. 85; John: c. 100), continue to develop a rich understanding of Jesus’ self-gift in love in narratives that presuppose the celebration of the Eucharist. A brief selection from some well-known narratives will illustrate this. (For a fuller study, see Moloney, 1997.)

Mark 14:17-31, the account of the Last Supper in this Gospel, is an example of the practice of framing episodes. Jesus shares a meal with his disciples (14:22-25), but the episodes before and after the meal tell of his disciples’ betrayal, denial, and flight (vv. 17-21; 26-31). In verses 17-21 Jesus “came with the twelve,” a group appointed in 3:14 “to be with him” (v. 17). The setting for Jesus’ prediction of his betrayal is the meal table, a sacred place among friends. Jesus explains that the betrayer will be “one who is eating with me” (v. 18). Intimacy is heightened by the words of Jesus: “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread in the same dish with me.” A similar attention to the closeness that exists between Jesus and his future betrayers is found in verses 26-31. He predicts they “will all fall away” (v. 27). He uses the image of the shepherd and his sheep (v. 27), and his predictions lead to expressions of love and devotion. Peter swears an unfailing loyalty, better than all the others who may fall away (v. 29). He even claims that he is prepared to lay down his life for his master (v. 31). Peter is not alone in swearing loyalty and love: “And they all said the same.”

In the center of the passage, 14:22-26 reports Jesus’ last meal with the disciples, who will betray, deny, and abandon him (14:22-26). The theme of table fellowship with the betrayers opens the passage: “And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them” (v. 22). This theme is continued in the sharing of the cup, where the same recipients are again specified: “And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and
they all drank of it” (v. 23). The words over the bread and the cup point to the Cross: a body given and blood poured out (vv. 22 and 24), but they also point to something beyond the day of crucifixion. The blood is to be a covenant (v. 24), and he comments that he will not “drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (v. 25). The word “until” rings out a message of trust and hope that looks well beyond the events of Good Friday. There is to be a body given and blood poured out which will set up a new covenant reaching beyond the Cross into the definitive establishment of the Kingdom. A covenant with whom? The body broken and the blood poured out sets up a new covenant with the fragile disciples who were the first recipients of that bread and cup. Mark has given us an account of Jesus’ gift of himself unto death to set up a new and lasting kingdom with the characters in the story. Jesus loves his failing disciples with a love which is in no way matched by the love which they bear him.

The theme of a “journey” is important across the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Throughout the Gospel, a journey leads to Jerusalem, where the paschal events take place (see especially Luke 9:51). At the beginning of Acts, the first Christian community is still in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem the Spirit is given to the community, and a second journey begins, reaching out to the ends of the earth. The city of Jerusalem is the center of God’s history. The early Church was founded in that city, the Holy Spirit was given there, and from there a mission began which would reach out to the ends of the earth (see Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). In the opening remarks of the journey to Emmaus (24:13-35), in the midst of the paschal events, two disciples are going to Emmaus, “about sixty stadia away from Jerusalem” (v. 13). They are walking away from Jerusalem, the central point of God’s story, away from God’s design of the journey of the Son of God from Nazareth to Jerusalem, and of the Christian community from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. They tell him of their expectations: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21).

Jesus’ way of responding to the design of God (see vv. 25-27) has not fulfilled their expectations of the one who would redeem Israel. They know of his life: Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in word and deed (v. 19). They know of his death: “Our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him” (v. 20). They know of the events at the tomb: “it is now the
third day” (v. 21), “women have been at the tomb early in the morning, but they did not find his body” (v. 23). They have even heard the Easter proclamation: there has been a vision of angels who said: “He is alive” (v. 23). The two disciples know everything . . . but him they did not see, and thus they have had enough. They continue their walk away from Jerusalem.

Jesus “interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (v. 27). At the meal they recognized him in the breaking of the bread (vv. 30-31). Jesus followed, joined, and journeyed with these failing disciples, as they walked away from God’s design. He has come to meet them, to make himself known to them, and to draw them back to the journey of God through opening the word of God to them and through the breaking of the bread. Touched in their failure, the immediate reaction of the failed disciples is to turn back on their journey: “And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem” (v. 33).

Once they arrive back they are told: “The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon!” (v. 34). They have come back home, but only because the Lord has reached out to them in their brokenness, and made himself known to them in the breaking of the bread. As with Mark, and also with Matthew who has repeated Mark’s story (Matt 26:17-35), the Evangelist Luke has no hesitation in setting the Eucharistic presence of the Lord in the midst of the broken disciples.

In John 13:1-38, Jesus’ unconditional self-gift to fragile broken disciples reaches its most theological expression. The footwashing and its aftermath (vv. 1-17), lead to words from Jesus (vv. 18-20). These words are followed by the gift of the morsel and its aftermath (vv. 21-38). In the footwashing (vv. 1-17) Jesus shows his love for his disciples in his gift of himself for them and in the gift of his example to them (v. 15). The passage highlights his knowledge of the ways of God (v. 3), and his knowledge of all that is about to happen (v. 11). This series of gracious gifts of Jesus to his disciples is contrasted by the themes of the betrayer (vv. 2, 10-11), and the ignorance of the disciples (vv. 6-10). The gift of the morsel (vv. 21-38) reflects the gifts of the Eucharist and the new commandment (vv. 34-35). There is the repeated reference to the betrayer (vv. 21-26a), the theme of the ignorance of the disciples (vv. 26b-29), the exit of Judas for the betrayal (v. 30), and the prophecy of the denial of Peter (vv. 36-38). Repeating the argument of vv. 1-17 in vv. 21-38, we find Jesus’ love for his disciples in the gift of the eucharistic morsel, and the gift of the new commandment of love, set in the midst of the ignorance.

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of the disciples, the denial of Peter, and the betrayal of Judas. To failing disciples Jesus has insisted: “I have given you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you” (v. 15), and “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you” (v. 34).

It is at the center of this context of unconditional love given to failing disciples that we situate the center-piece: vv. 18-20:

I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen: it is that the scripture may be fulfilled, “He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.”

I tell you this now before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I AM.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives anyone whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me.

The Fourth Evangelist has deliberately set verses 18-20 between two flanking passages (vv. 1-17 and vv. 21-38). In verse 18 Jesus speaks of having no illusions about the very ones whom he has chosen. One of the chosen will become the betrayer who has shared in the eucharistic morsel and another will deny him. Nevertheless, in verse 20 Jesus speaks of his intention to send forth his disciples. John 13:1-38 is marked by the extraordinary love of God, revealed in Jesus, who gives himself in the footwashing and the Eucharistic morsel. He knows whom he has chosen; he is aware that one who shares his table will betray him, another will deny him, and that all the others are unable to understand him, yet he loves them and sends them out to proclaim both himself and his Father. The theological significance of this message is summed up in the central statement of the whole of 13:1-38: “I tell you this now before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I AM” (v. 19). Jesus loves his own so much that he chooses them (v. 18a), and sends them out as his presence (v. 20). Yet, these very loved ones are responsible for his death on a Cross (v. 18b). It is precisely in this unconditional gift of himself to people who do not love him that he reveals who he is.

The Fourth Evangelist uses the expression “I am,” an expression with a long history in the literature of Israel, to refer to the living presence of a God who is made known among the people, and applies it to the person of Jesus. John informs his readers that only when love reveals itself in such an extraordinary fashion, loving “to the end” (13:1) those who do not love him, can one begin to understand the God whom Jesus has come to make known. When these things happen, when his disciples have betrayed, denied, and abandoned him, and he is “lifted up” on the Cross (see 3:13; 8:28; 12:32), then his disciples of all times will know that Jesus is the revelation of God: “I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I AM” (v. 19).
Conclusion

This brief sketch of some New Testament presentations of the Eucharist does not pretend to exhaust all the nuances found there. Even less does it pretend to touch upon the rich theological, liturgical, symbolic, cultural, and ritual developments of the Church’s understanding and celebration of the Eucharist, as it has developed and emerged over two thousand years of Christian history. What has been outlined in Paul, the Synoptic Gospels, and John, however, might serve as a suitable point of departure in our search for the discovery of a genuinely New Testament understanding of the Catholic priesthood. The New Testament’s use of pre-existent eucharistic thought and practice reflects at least the following convictions:

• The Eucharist is a gift of God, given in and through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ (Mark 14:22-24; Matt 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-21; John 6:51; 1 Cor 11:24-25).

• It is never an end in itself. In all New Testament traditions, the Eucharist is “for” (hyper) others.

• The Eucharist provides access to the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus, something that is needed by all who frequent the Lord’s table. All the New Testament narratives insist that the Eucharist is for the fragile and the broken, the unique symbol of Jesus’ manifestation of God’s endless love (John 13:1).

• The celebration of the Eucharist summons participants to break their own bodies and spill their own blood “in memory” of Jesus. “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26).

• It serves as the lived experience of two great gifts: Jesus’ example of self-gift that all who claim to be followers of Jesus are to follow (13:15) and the gift of the new commandment of mutual love (13:34-35).

If the priesthood emerged in the Christian tradition as a eucharistic ministry, perhaps the socio-cultural model that is under such crisis needs to be rethought in those terms. A paradigm emerges, different from the one outlined earlier. The priesthood forms part of the universal call to the perfection of love, to which all the baptized, whatever their socio-cultural and political status, have been called (see Lumen Gentium 40). There is no place within a Eucharistic community for a privileged caste. Priests, like everyone else who prays that God’s will be done and God’s kingdom come, as Jesus taught us (see Luke 11:2; Matt 6:10), are called to recognize their brokenness. They are, as Henri Nouwen once so eloquently argued “wounded healers.” It is as fellow-sinners, on a shared eucharistic journey
toward the Parousia, that priests will respond to their vocation to be ministers of the Eucharist. “I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matt 26:29; see also Mark 14:25; Luke 22:16). Eucharist is not primarily a cultic ritual, but a way of life, breaking one’s body and spilling one’s blood, in memory of Jesus, until he comes again (see 1 Cor 11:26; LG 11).

Priests are called to recognize that their primary mission is to those most in need, those reaching out for God’s goodness, love, and forgiveness. This element in the priest’s vocation can often be hard to grasp, as just who the most poor and needy might be cannot always be determined in social and economic criteria. The hunger for the transcendent is a genuine poverty that crosses all ages and all social, ethnic, religious, and economic boundaries. It is this hunger that a eucharistic ministry must serve, not only in ritual, but above all by the priest’s understanding what he does and imitating what he handles (remember the words in the Roman Catholic Ordination Rite: *Agnoscite quod agitis; imitamini quod tractatis:* “Understand what you do; imitate what you handle”).

The Eucharist is not a prayer wheel that we spin every morning, and more solemnly on Sundays. It is not only cult; but above all a way of life, the grammar of a Christian life. This New Testament truth should serve as a point of departure. No doubt other elements from the eucharistic material found in the New Testament could further enrich the above reflection. Eucharistic developments over the ages, in a Spirit-guided Church, must also play their part for an understanding of the priesthood. However, where one starts a journey, and the road one takes, will shape all that follows. The Catholic priesthood had its beginnings in the eucharistic life of the Church. This study suggests it should be renewed and nourished there.

References


